

Hunter 711

Chapter 711: Nevermore: Cradle

Soulflames were something Jake had pushed to the back of his mind ever since he first learned about them. Primarily because in learning about them, he learned how screwed he was if Jake wanted a Soulflame that fit him, and since replacing one was incredibly difficult, he had just resigned himself to do without for the foreseeable future.

He was aware that having a Soulflame that fit you was strictly better than not having any. However, having a Soulflame not suited for your Path was worse than none at all. The issue with Jake was his arcane affinity. Soulflames were created from freak accidents where mana of a certain affinity gathered in an area and an elemental was about to be born, but for some reason, this process failed and mutated, resulting in a half-born elemental only retaining a bit of spirituality, effectively making a Soulflame a half-elemental, half-natural treasure.

This meant Jake's only option if he wanted a Soulflame was to artificially create an environment for one to be born... or wait till he got strong enough to influence huge areas passively with his mere presence and Records, resulting in his arcane affinity appearing naturally throughout the multiverse, thus turning it into a true affinity. Even then, the circumstances in which Jake's affinity would appear were probably few and far between, so Jake had just assumed he was fucked if he wanted to get lucky and just ever find a Soulflame.

So for Minaga to offer him a treasure related to Soulflames... Jake truly had no idea what to think as he read the description of the item.

[Cradle of Soul's Kindling (Mythical)] – The Cradle in which a flame may be kindled as it awakens its own spirituality. Nascent Soulflames of hundreds of affinities burn within the internal space of the Cradle, experiencing a cycle of life and death as they struggle and absorb one another while growing in power. Waiting for one of them to ascend to the world outside. Only a single Soulflame can truly be born from the Cradle, the item getting destroyed upon extraction as all others become fuel for the chosen one. The Cradle can be infused with energies to sustain and influence the internal world. The internal world of the

Cradle cannot be entered by any being with a Truesoul, and any Truesouls born within will immediately find themselves destroyed, their energies only nurturing the Cradle further.

Requirements: Soulbound.

"This is..." Jake muttered as he looked at the odd urn that he guessed was made out of some ceramic material, though it was far from fragile, as Jake doubted anyone present, including the peak C-grade Minaga, could even leave a mark on it. Minaga held it out as Jake tentatively accepted it, not exactly sure what he was dealing with even after reading the description. Not because he didn't understand, but because it just felt too... good? Convenient? Jake wasn't sure.

"I noticed you didn't have a Soulflame, which is honestly pretty odd considering you are the C-grade Chosen of the Malefic Viper. At least, I thought so at first. The problem with people like you who are so heavily reliant on the one affinity that cannot be found in the wild is that no Soulflames can be found either. At least not before you get a lot stronger and create a special environment to nurture one... or cheat using an item like the Cradle," Minaga explained in a judgemental tone, the explanation more for the other four than Jake himself.

"Will I be able to create a Soulflame related to my arcane affinity using this?" Jake questioned. "From what I was told, it usually takes a very long time for one to form..."

"Of course you can form one; that is why I gave it to you. Duh," Minaga said, sounding almost offended. "After you bind the Cradle, just send in a lot of mana and keep feeding it once in a while to influence the environment within. You are ultimately still relying on pure chance that a Soulflame with your arcane affinity is born and then manages to rise toward the top, but the more time passes, the more attuned the Cradle should become to you. It isn't a quick and easy guarantee, but it is borderline the best solution you will ever find for a C-grade, and that Cradle is worth more than you can imagine. Not gonna lie, the other stuff I gave out is good, but the Cradle is probably the most valuable if we go by pure resale value, as it is rather unique. Way more unique than the actual unique Soulcore I gave my fellow Unique Lifeform, though I did make up for that by actively empowering that core."

“Huh,” Jake nodded as he inspected the Cradle. He knew that getting a Soulflame couldn’t be that easy, and it seemed he was right, as even the Cradle had a strong element of luck if he wanted to create an arcane Soulflame. However, it would undoubtedly save him a shitload of time. As Minaga mentioned, then he would have had to set up a special environment to nurture one, which Jake did plan on doing at some point, but this Cradle made that unnecessary.

“Ah, also to add, since you can only ever extract one Soulflame from the Cradle, only go for one with good quality, alright? It would be a damn waste if you decided to take out an elementary or even a low-tier Soulflame,” Minaga said in an almost scolding tone.

Jake nodded along to the words. “Yeah, definitely not gonna accept anything below a pinnacle-tier Soulflame.”

Soulflames had the qualities of elementary, low-tier, mid-tier, high-tier, pinnacle-tier, and Supreme Soulflames. Elementary were ones that barely passed as Soulflames but actually did have the good thing about them that they were prime for growth, while Supreme Soulflames was the best that one could get bar-none. The reason why Jake wanted at least a pinnacle-tier one was due to the relative ease of raising a pinnacle Soulflame to a Supreme Soulflame. Relative doing a lot of heavy lifting in this case, as it was still bloody hard while raising a Soulflame of an even lower tier would be borderline impossible and more akin to gambling than anything else.

Getting a good Soulflame right off the bat was incredibly important due to their semi-permanent status. A Soulflame Jake got in C-grade would stick with him for the rest of his life and grow with him forever, so if he got a bad one, he would have to either accept mediocrity or spend way more resources than anyone would find reasonable to upgrade the one he had. In either case, Jake sure as hell wasn’t ever going to fuse with a low-level Soulflame. He was way too much of a spoiled Chosen for that.

Naturally, Soulflames were still more complicated than simply being split into these qualities, but it was a good estimate. The way one decided what quality a Soulflame had was also relatively simple as it was just a question of Records, and Jake knew that one could easily distinguish good and bad Soulflames just using Identity. At least you could become able to. Jake didn't know if he currently could, but maybe with Sagacity...

"Hey... is he totally spacing out right now, or is it just me?" Jake vaguely heard Minaga whisper to the Sword Saint as he threw glances at Jake.

"He is simply stunned by your generosity," the old man smiled.

Minaga nodded. "That makes total sense. I am stunningly generous."

"Sorry for actually thinking about my reward so in-depth," Jake said, faking offense.

"Oh, sorry, just not used to seeing you think, I guess," Minaga shrugged. "Glad to see you unlocked that ability."

"I do wonder about something," Jake began as he did that thinking thing again while completely changing the topic. "Why did you have a cooldown period after each of your combination spell casts? Is it some kind of special application of magic to make it stronger, or do you overload your body or something? I found it odd, especially considering it was the same amount of time every time. Well, there is also one more option why the cooldown was there, but..."

"Last one is correct," Minaga grinned.

“Seriously?” Jake sighed. “Well, fuck me.”

“You would have been utterly fucked indeed,” Minaga said cheerily. “And it was honestly kind of hard to get that five-second timing down every time!”

That’s right... that entire cooldown period was entirely self-imposed.

Jake could already imagine it. A Minaga repeatedly using combination magic spells without any pause in between, potentially even using more than one at once, would be completely impossible for their party – if not any party. Considering he had a self-imposed cooldown, it was entirely feasible he also slowed down the casting speed, and Minaga likely completely avoided his most potent spells altogether.

It only made sense, considering he was a god. If Minaga was not doing free-casting but had used actual skills, Jake guessed many, if not all, of the combination spells would have been at least ancient or legendary rarity, with the strongest ones approaching mythical. That he would also have actual mythical skill-level magic and even beyond was only to be expected.

“Ultimately, one of the reasons the system doesn’t allow anyone to die on this floor is because of the inherent unfairness of the challenge and not just the expected difficulty. If I decided that I didn’t like someone and went all-out to kill them, or I was bribed by some faction to kill other young talents, then things could get bad real fast. The system put in a preemptive measure to avoid that ever happening,” Minaga explained.

Jake slowly nodded. He – and likely most of the others – had already guessed this was the reason for the special rule of no deaths.

"Ah, but I did actually kind of screw up once during the fight," Minaga said, scratching the back of his head. "That last death explosion was a bit over the top and not really a part of the script... I just thought you also cheated, using that weird poison thing on me. That was totally cheating, by the way."

"Wow," Jake said. "I am shaken. Shaken, I tell you! How dare you accuse me of cheating when I am the beacon of honesty and fairness in all of my endeavors!"

"I felt the presence of the Malefic Viper from your damn mouth!" Minaga shot back.

"Done through entirely legitimate and normal means!"

"Based on your track record, cheating is normal to you," Minaga refused to back down.

"Oh, wow, great argument."

"Nothing about me cheating by using my Transcendence?" the Sword Saint raised a hand as he cut in.

"No, that one is okay and not cheating. Maybe if you had fully used it, I would have maybe called you a cheater, but as things are, only this guy with his stupid Bloodline is the cheater," the Unique Lifeform said resolutely.

“You know,” Jake said. “I never thought you would be a sore loser.”

“We literally just discussed how I, the great Minaga, held myself back to not accidentally squash you into paste, with the system even recognizing I am too awesome to be allowed to kill you,” Minaga said with a deadpan face.

“Excuses, excuses,” Jake waved him off.

Minaga glared at Jake but didn’t say anything more as the Dryad in the room also spoke.

“Excuse me... but did you retrieve this reward yourself, or was it generated by the system?” Dina asked as she looked down at her box with the Branch from this Emerald Forest.

“Great question,” Minaga perked up again. “I got everything myself. Well, one of me did. For Nevermore, the system only helps that much as it is ultimately a created and not a natural dungeon, so...”

Casual conversation continued as Minaga stayed and chatted with them for a while, sharing tales of how he had obtained many rewards that he had either already given out or was still saving.

However, in the end, the Unique Lifeform couldn’t stay forever. They had completed Minaga’s Labyrinth, after all, and he was just there to give out loot. All good things had to come to an end, and Minaga appeared kind of sad as he looked at them with melancholy.

“Anyway... ladies and gentlemen, I want you to know that despite our differences when it comes to the definition of cheating, it has been a pleasure having you experience my labyrinth. You are all pretty damn good seeds and have bright futures ahead of you, no matter how infuriating you may be. Either way, I hope you all have a wonderful descent going forward. Who knows, we might even meet again. If not in Nevermore, then the vast world beyond,” Minaga smiled as he stood up and bowed as he threw them all a final snicker. “There are quite a few of me out there, after all.”

With those words, Minaga disappeared in a final flash of light, forever the showman.

Casper hid away and prepared as the two pinnacle beings fought each other, the ground below them utterly torn up from their constant exchange of attacks. Azal, the Ghost King, fought the third-phase Minaga in a nearly equal duel, though he was slowly losing out. Luckily, Maltrax, the beastkin Risen, was also there to provide support by occasionally striking from odd angles and making sure Minaga could not launch any major attacks.

Azal was truly a monster, moving with incredible speed as his large ghostly blade cut through the darkness of space in an eerie pattern as he clashed with Minaga. The blight energy burned on his body, making him look like an avatar of the Blightfather himself, allowing him to even push back Minaga and land blows. He had needed to consume many spirits to reach that state, but it was worth it as long as they won.

The lank abomination and the banshee woman had both been thrown out due to taking lethal damage, leaving only three people left to fight in the final phase. The banshee during the phase where they split up, and the abomination during this third phase to one of Minaga’s major spells after the rest of them had been thrown into mini-labyrinth cubes. Seeing as the banshee had functioned partly as their healer, it wasn’t overly surprising she had been unable to hold on, but the abomination had been a surprise as he had effectively been their tank.

During the phase where they had been split up, it had been pretty difficult for him, too, forcing Casper to use his Blightform and spend the entire time trying not to die. He went through all of his pre-prepared traps to slow down the Minaga clone long enough for Azal to arrive, and together they quickly finished off the clone, as Casper's traps did manage to do some damage. Azal had wanted to help the banshee first but was too late. Maltrax handled her phase herself, making it clear she was the second strongest.

Fighting continued between Azal and Minaga as Casper did all he could to not allow the Minaga to catch him out, as he knew he was the weakest, and Casper did have to admit that the beams from the stars above were quite hard to dodge. It was only due to his link with Lyra he even stood a chance, as he was effectively two beings in one.

One had to remember that Lyra was not a normal Blightwraith but one created personally by the Blightfather himself. She was linked to Casper in a bond that made her something akin to a Guardian, yet her own being. Casper had no idea how it all worked... and frankly, he didn't care.

"Are you ready?" Casper asked Lyra as Minaga unleashed a major spell, making the stars above shimmer as light descended upon Azal, forcing him to pull out a massive shield resembling a skull.

"Let's show him!" Lyra's cheerful voice echoed in his mind.

Casper smiled as his weapon was ready, and Lyra had completed her own preparations. Lifting the large wooden stake that resembled a spear, Casper prepared to throw it as his Blightform began to fade. The ghostly flames that embraced his body moved from him onto the wooden stake as Lyra embedded parts of herself into the weapon, amplifying it further.

Without hesitation, Casper threw. Dark runes of pure curse energy pulsed across the stake as it flew through the air, the greenish blight energy invading it mid-flight, making the cursed runes all glow in an eerie light.

“Heh, you really think I didn’t know you were charging up a big one!?” Minaga yelled as he turned, ready to block the stake.

Right as he did, Maltrax let out a ghastly howl as a massive projection appeared above her, depicting a white and black wolf howling towards the sky. For a brief moment, a rotting moon appeared, and the entire world seemed to be still. Minaga couldn’t move for that brief moment as the wooden stake flew straight by his staves and pierced into his chest just as he could move again.

Before he could do anything more, Azal’s sword slammed into the stake embedding it further as the blight energy and curse energy burst forth, igniting the Unique Lifeform’s entire being. Cursed runes spread all over his form as Azal took advantage of the curse’s restraining effect. Maltrax also soon joined in on the assault, and not long after, Casper saw Minaga stumble back as all magic on him faded, and his aura of life disappeared.

Casper stopped pushing the power of the curse from his hidden position as he sighed, utterly spent, and Lyra not responding as she had passed out from overexertion. Yet he felt like there could have been more to the fight...

“We missed some secret final hidden phase, didn’t we?” Casper questioned as he saw the boss fading away.

“You did,” Minaga’s fading form said. “Wait, now it isn’t a secret hidden phase any mo-“

He disappeared midway through the words as Casper and the others got the kill notification. A moment later, they were teleported to the in-between room, where they reunited with the two party members who had taken lethal blows.

Not long after, they got their notifications from completing the fight, and even if Casper knew it was damn good, he saw Azal look slightly disappointed.

Fortieth floor completed. 400 Nevermore Points earned.

Grand Achievement earned: Complete the True Ending event by defeating a fully empowered Minaga. 7500 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 15% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

His disappointment was helped by Minaga appearing and handing out loot soon after, with Azal getting a mythical rarity natural treasure, while the rest of them got extremely high-quality legendary rewards.

As Casper was admiring his own loot – and mentally getting over the grand revelation that Minaga was actually a god - he couldn't help but wonder why he had never heard of Minaga before... if he was a god, it just felt weird his name wasn't more well-known.

Or... well, Casper could see him being a bit “much,” so... maybe people just didn't like to talk about him?

Chapter 712: Nevermore: A Viper's Assessment

“Were you nervous?” the dragon god in humanoid form asked as he looked at the black-scaled god sitting across from him. “Your Chosen did look to be in trouble quite a few times there. He was lucky his teammates were able to assure their victory.”

Vilastromoz looked at the Wyrmgod, who clearly enjoyed watching the recording. Yes, recording. A live feed was all well and good, but Jake knew when they were watching using that. With a recording, he would only know one person was looking while remaining unaware of all those who saw the recorded footage. It was a great workaround the Viper had noticed and begun taking advantage of a long time ago.

“If he hadn’t won, I would have been disappointed, though I do question if perhaps the difficulty has spiked more than in previous years,” Vilas wondered.

“Hey, I was being totally fair and equal!” the third person chimed in, sounding incredibly offended at the notion that he had upped the difficulty.

It was naturally Minaga, the creator of the floors. Though this version of him was of the divine variety.

“I never said you weren’t fair, just that the difficulty has grown,” the Viper shook his head.

“Maybe a bit,” Minaga admitted. “And, alright, you do have a point that not all challenges are equal, but I have to hold myself back too much that total equality is impossible, and slight variations can happen, you know? Or are you telling me to never have fun and do stuff like my little duel with the swordsman?”

The Viper looked at the Wyrmgod. “Have I complained about anything? Have I proposed any changes?”

“No,” his fellow Primordial shook his head. “You just made an observation.”

Minaga looked a bit between them. “Damn, you old guys teaming up against the poor unpaid dungeon engineer.”

“Do you wish to be employed?” the Wyrmgod asked with a raised eyebrow. “That could be arranged, with a proper contract in pla-“

“Figure of speech, figure of speech,” Minaga waved him off. “But hey, your Chosen is fun, if extremely infuriating. Though I guess you already know the suffering. That guy is just kind of crazy with that Bloodline of his.”

The Viper just smiled as he looked at the Unique Lifeform, not bothering to comment on how Minaga was the crazy one. Because in the eyes of many, himself included, Minaga was one of the craziest existences in the multiverse.

Minaga was a mistake born in the middle parts of the third era. At least Vilastromoz firmly believed he was a mistake, and the system seemed to agree based on no creature like him ever appearing again. Furthermore, the fact that the system had so uniquely limited the abilities of the Unique Lifeform meant that the sheer level of power from that one Unique skill was roughly estimated to be equal or superior to every single skill Minaga would have earned from when he was born in C-grade all the way to godhood. The only skills Minaga ever got were certain “earned” skills that were pretty much required, such as some related to godhood. However, he even lacked many basic skills and had things he couldn’t do, including giving Blessings.

However, he was still a Unique Lifeform. Just due to his sheer stats, he was able to overwhelm most foes at equal levels from birth, and even from birth, he could create clones of himself. About a dozen from what Vilastromoz estimated, with the number steadily growing as Minaga grew. By now, being a powerful god, the Viper had no idea how many clones he could have in total. However, if one included just the divine-level clones, he estimated it to be in the thousands.

And... this led to why the Malefic Viper believed Minaga was a mistake. The entire concept behind his existence was too much.

Vilastromoz had told Jake that Aeon was perhaps the hardest god in the multiverse to kill, and he still stood by that... but if he had to say who was the hardest to get rid of permanently, he would say Minaga. Minaga himself was strong, yes, but he was not a pinnacle god. At least Vilastromoz didn't think so, but it was hard to know how powerful the highest-leveled clone was.

No, the problem was that in order to kill Minaga for good, you had to kill every single clone. There was the benefit that if you killed the currently highest-leveled clone, then Minaga would have to level up to that stage again, but that was in no way a permanent way to get rid of him.

Killing people with cloning abilities or avatar-creation wasn't a new thing, and Vilastromoz had many tools to do so. Eversmile was an example of someone who rarely cared if people had hidden ways to try and survive, even if they killed their main bodies. He could track down any failsafe, any contingencies, and any avatars left behind. But for Minaga, that wasn't an option.

Back when Minaga had just entered B-grade with his highest-leveled clone, he managed to piss off a god and, through that god, an entire pantheon. A late-tier B-grade ended up killing the Minaga clone, and they thought that was that... until a week later when a new clone appeared and wreaked havoc until it, too, was killed. A few days later, another clone appeared on a nearby planet and attacked the faction again. This kept happening with at least one attack every month. A few times, the Minaga clone did come to talk about maybe making peace, but every time he was killed. What exactly the faction believed they would accomplish, not even Vilastromoz in his infinite wisdom knew, but they clearly failed as the "war" continued.

Spanning four galaxies. Nineteen thousand years. More than a million Minaga's killed. Three gods hunting down Minaga for over ten thousand of these years, with their biggest accomplishment being a thousand years of peace after they believed they had killed off the final clone... only for a new Minaga to appear, stronger than ever before.

In the end, the gods had capitulated to a mere A-grade mortal and made peace with their heads bowed. An absolutely ludicrous scenario that had only happened due to the stupidest of reasons. The entire conflict had been due to someone telling Minaga he should bow in the presence of a superior, something the Unique Lifeform had not liked, and told the other guy to stick his staff up his behind. They had attacked due to this comment, and... well, the rest was history.

This was also the first time Vilastromoz had heard of Minaga's existence, as this story sent the rumor machine of the multiverse into overdrive. Many factions approached Minaga, curious gods investigated him, and quite a few even tried to kill him just to see if they could. Vilastromoz had honestly expected Eversmile to try, but the god hadn't and even warned others to perhaps reconsider.

Vilastromoz understood why this warning was given, as after Minaga became a god, he went on quite a revenge spree. He became a menace that ravaged dozens of pantheons for half an era. This was also when he was given quite an interesting moniker: The All-God Legion.

Legion was... fitting. For Minaga was a faction by himself. Fighting a single god was already a nightmare, but they were ultimately limited by only being a single individual, even if they could make armies of avatars and whatnot. The reason why the Automata and True Royals were so feared was due to the armies they could spawn and mobilize.

Minaga was that but as one single creature. Many gods could kill a Minaga... but no god could destroy Minaga. No faction dared make him an enemy, as Minaga had never once in history lost a single conflict. He would be a relentless force of destruction that would bear down on you infinitely, impossible to ever

get rid of. Not that many worked with him, as he was also known to be an actively infuriating character and refusing to ever do what others told him. Most thus chose to merely ignore his existence entirely, never antagonizing but not ever really interacting with him either.

The only hope the Viper could have seen to ever kill Minaga permanently was making sure he never made it to godhood. As he made clones, it meant that the age of the Truesoul was equal in all clones, so age would have still been his end if he failed to ascend. Now that he was a god, truly killing him wasn't something the Viper saw happening. Especially not after he teamed up with the Wyrmgod and picked up dungeon engineering.

Because the Unique Lifeform had one... side-effect of his ability. One that was utterly ridiculous from the Viper's point of view. One of the biggest reasons he firmly believed Minaga was a mistake, even in the eyes of the multiverse. Because his unique cloning skill had led to a "bug" in the system of sorts.

There could only ever be one unique Truesoul of a creature present in the multiverse at once, which meant that one could never bring multiple copies or prior versions of an individual out of a dungeon. However, at the same time, then having a prior version of yourself in a dungeon also didn't have any effects on you.

This turned out to have some seemingly unexpected effects when it came to Minaga. The way Minaga made clones was a bit similar to the energy Hive Queens used to create spawn or perhaps even what Jake expended to bring out Primeval Origins. That is to say, he spent a form of energy separate from anything else but still had a limited pool.

Here is where the issue arose:

Minagas in dungeons don't count towards his maximum number of clones, as they don't affect the other clones.

Minagas in dungeons can leave and remain unique, as their Truesouls are different.

Minaga is aware of all his clones in dungeons, and they are aware of every other Minaga.

If Minaga is already at his clone cap, the clone will die upon exiting a dungeon, but if not, it can simply exist from there as normal.

All of this is to say that Minaga had potentially billions of clones hidden in dungeons throughout the multiverse. No, it was certain he had that many just based on Nevermore. Clones hidden in separate dimensions that no one could ever access.

These things combined were why the Malefic Viper felt certain that Minaga was the most difficult being to kill off for good in the entire multiverse. Not for lack of trying either, as Minaga's personality had made him quite an infamous figure. However, there was one being who had managed to forge a mutually beneficial relationship with this unique Unique Lifeform.

"His Bloodline is indeed exemplary," the Wyrmgod said in a relaxed tone. "I have considered potential methods of limiting the scope of his powers within a given floor, but I find most solutions will have other unintended consequences. Seeing as his skills are mostly based on intuition, there truly are no simple solutions. I would not find myself surprised even if a procedurally generated floor was susceptible to his powers."

"Exactly! It's like trying to address a fundamental bug in a system by introducing more advanced systems to work around it, rather than just removing the bug... or ignoring it, I guess," Minaga said, sounding offended by Jake's mere existence.

“Ignoring it is the solution indeed,” the Wyrmgod nodded as he seemed to switch his mental attention elsewhere for a second.

“So, Vilas, gotta ask, why the deceit about his Bloodline?” Minaga asked the Viper curiously. “That whole aura-resistance thing is a good lie and all, but we both know that the Bloodline is so all-encompassing it can’t be hidden forever and... well, why hide a good thing?”

Vilastromoz smiled a bit to himself, fully aware that even if Minaga and the Wyrmgod had a lot more insight into Jake’s Bloodline than nearly anyone else, they still only knew a bit of it. From what he had gathered, they were still unsure if the Primeval Origins aspects came from the Bloodline or if the Bloodline was just a catalyst allowing him to use some special item.

This wasn’t even getting into the potential effects the Bloodline had on his own evolutions, resulting in him being a higher form of human, nor the most shocking part of it: the fact it included a percentage amplifier to a stat. One that was even growing with every evolution. Even Jake didn’t understand why that portion mattered as much as it did, and luckily it was something no one could easily find out unless his dear Chosen spilled the beans himself.

“Minaga, do you remember the many factions who came to you in the early days when they learned of your ability? The many pantheons who wanted you to join the moment you became a god?” the Viper answered Minaga with a question.

“Well, yeah, they were pretty annoying, but Jake is already part of your social club, so I can’t see that being a problem,” Minaga shrugged.

“True, they may not try to recruit him outright... but that doesn’t mean they can’t become major pains in the ass,” Vilastromoz shook his head.

Minaga still looked like he didn’t get it as the Wyrmgod zoned into the conversation again and sighed. “They seek his Bloodline in the way it can be obtained without having him join them directly: through the act of procreation. Suppose they succeed in getting him sufficiently attached to a member of their faction. In that case, there is also a chance they might eventually recruit him, in which case it would be him voluntarily going over to their side..”

“How is that a pain in the ass?” Minaga questioned further. “Don’t humans like to procreate? Heck, most enlightened races seem to love it based on how they multiply so much, especially those who manage to get even relatively powerful. Based on his meetings with the Runemaiden, it didn’t look like he wasn’t a fan either.”

“It is not that simple and not something that should ever be done without plenty of forethought, especially not when you have a Bloodline like Jake’s,” the Viper shook his head as he looked at Minaga. “I could try to explain to you the nuances, but I fear they may be lost on a Unique Lifeform that, by definition, will be forever alone. No matter how many clones they can make.”

“Low blow,” Minaga grumbled. “But, fine. I guess you know him better than I do...”

“I would sure hope so,” the Viper smiled.

“So... you taking bets on how long it will take for him to create a Soulflame using the Cradle?” Minaga asked in a cheerful voice, changing the topic.

"I am not doing any bets with you after the bullshit you pulled last time," the Viper refused.

"That was eighty-seven eras ago; you can't still hold a grudge!" Minaga complained. "Also, that bet wasn't with me but with another Minaga, so it isn't fair to hold me accountable."

Vllastromoz glared at the Unique Lifeform. "That is the exact excuse you used to not pay up last time."

"Well.... It was also true then?"

The worst part was, due to how Minaga worked, there wasn't even any karmic debt to reap or take advantage of, as Minaga had gotten rid of the clone in question the Viper made the initial bet with.

"What if you make a bet with my highest-leveled clone?" Minaga asked with a smile as he pointed a thumb to his own chest. "In other words, me!"

"That isn't your highest-leveled clone," the Viper shook his head.

The Wyrmgod raised an eyebrow as Minaga looked defensive. "It totally is!"

"No, it isn't," the Viper insisted.

"It is!" the Minaga clone said as he flared his aura. True, it was far beyond the norm, surpassing Godkings by a wide margin, though not quite matching Snappy's, but...

"Odd, because Oras mention-"

"Anyway, Jake sure is overpowered, huh," Minaga cut him off with a smile as the Viper just shook his head. The Wyrmgod also seemed unbothered, knowing that arguing with the Unique Lifeform was an utter waste of time. The Viper did have to consider recent developments, though, some of which were out of his expectations. Primarily what exactly Minaga would do from here on out.

It was clear Minaga had taken an interest in Jake. More of an interest in him than Vilastromoz had expected, at least. He had even gone as far as to plant a clone of his with the swordsman in a covert way. If such developments were a good or a bad thing...

Well, only time would tell. With Minaga, it could truly go either way.

Chapter 713: Nevermore: City Floor Forty

Jake and company spent a bit over two weeks just relaxing in the in-between room, as they all had exerted themselves perhaps a bit too much during the Minaga fight. The fact they had also just all gotten cool new items they wanted to either absorb or experiment a bit with was certainly also a factor.

During this time, the Sword Saint managed to set up the Sword Formation within one of the bedrooms and even had a light spar with the Minaga clone. They also tested and discovered that only the Sword Saint could use the formation, so that was a bit of a bummer but probably a necessary limitation for Minaga to even give it out. If not, it could maybe even have been used as a defensive formation, as it quickly became clear the Minaga clone in the formation could pretty much exert whatever force it deemed necessary.

Dina was enamored with her wooden branch and instantly got to work on a formation that would allow her to properly absorb it, though it didn't seem like that would be a small project. Absorbing any kind of high-value item like that wasn't something to be done haphazardly, according to her. Jake's advice of just throwing it into a cauldron while mixing it with a bunch of high-rarity stuff and just seeing what happens was not taken seriously.

The King was more relaxed with his gift and ate the Soulcore of Minaga the moment he got it and promptly began meditating. The two weeks they waited before continuing was the time it took for the Fallen King to awaken once more. By the time he did, the cracks on the mask were fully healed, but nothing much seemed to have changed, though Jake reckoned he had good gains based on his uncharacteristically jovial mood.

Sylphie was the one who had gained the most precarious treasure, and Jake had to confess he was a bit nervous about her using it. He had insisted on being present the first time Sylphie infused energy into the nest-like treasure. So he had. The bird had just sat in it like a normal nest, and after infusing some energy into it, she seemed to get sleepy and dozed off.

It had taken nearly five hours before she woke up again, only to yawn, say the dream-projection of the Sylph was super weird but kind of nice, before going to sleep again. So, yeah, Sylphie was definitely loved by the wind, putting Jake at ease.

Speaking of Jake... with everyone else playing around with their loot, he naturally also got some alone time in with the Cradle of Soul's Kindling. At first, he had just been infusing some energy into it while – pretty stupidly – testing how durable it was by trying if he could knick the urn. He couldn't, and based on all the things he tried, he doubted any C-grade could even leave a mark. That isn't to say B-grades necessary could either, as Jake honestly had no idea how durable it was.

Ah, but he was also a bit productive.

Jake discovered that not only could he infuse his energy into the urn, but he could also look inside. And what he saw was honestly astonishing. The description of the Cradle had talked about a world inside, but Jake had seen that more as either a metaphor or perhaps just a small space like what could be found inside Sandy's stomach.

What he instead was met with could truly be described as a world. A massive space resided within the Cradle, making it look like a miniature solar system. At first, Jake thought he was looking at a sea of stars until he noticed it instead was actually tens if not hundreds of thousands of Soulflames burning in space like small stars. Some chased each other, some fled, some did nothing, and some simply found themselves consumed by the environment.

The edges of this space weren't just emptiness either, but instead solid walls. These walls were of all kinds of varieties and had entire cave systems within them. Some of the walls were made of rock, others of metal, ice, wood, pure mana, water, lightning, clouds, pure light, pure darkness, and many more. Honestly, the entire place just didn't make any sense based on all the rules Jake knew of affinities. Yet it all seemed to be in balance, and on all of these walls and within all of these tunnel systems, Soulflames were moving about.

As he observed, Jake noticed what he believed was a Soulflame about to be born. He watched with excitement as the energy gathered, but he was soon left with wide eyes as the process didn't stop. The mana kept gathering until a fully formed elemental was just about to appear.

Right then, the entire world of the Cradle seemed to come down on it like heavenly judgment, and the whole elemental dispersed into pure energy once more, never truly born. Having seen it once, Jake looked for more instances of this, and within less than an hour, he saw hundreds of similar cases. Watching this had answered one of Jake's biggest questions. The Cradle wasn't actually doing anything he didn't already know was possible; it just did what was possible damn well.

The process of a Soulflame being born was the same within the Cradle as in the outside world, except for the environment being more primed than usual, and whenever an elemental was about to be born, it would be instantly killed. That way, the Cradle avoided actual elementals ever appearing, as they would be counterproductive. While alchemists loved their Soulflames, elementals loved to consume them even more as they were pretty much considered top-tier natural treasures.

Anyway, Jake felt a lot better after understanding exactly how the Cradle worked, and he infused plenty of his own arcane mana into it. After he had put in nearly his entire mana pool, he saw a pretty large sphere of it appear floating in the middle of space with some kind of protective film around it, keeping all other Soulflames away as it grew. Jake had a good feeling this orb would continue to grow as he poured in energy, and eventually, his arcane affinity would begin to invade other places in the Cradle than just this one orb.

From there, it would still be a matter of chance if a good Soulflame would appear with his arcane affinity. The entire purpose of the Cradle was to play into this chance and, through the sheer number of Soulflames born, create one that was really good.

This was how two weeks quickly passed before it was finally time to head onwards. Truthfully, they weren't all in peak condition yet, but considering they were heading onto a city floor and the fact that they assumed the difficulty of floor forty-one to be lower than the Minaga fight, they moved confidently through the gateway.

Congratulations! You have arrived on the eighth City Floor of Nevermore.

All violence outside of the arenas is strictly prohibited on all city floors. Challenge Dungeon(s) can be found in the central square. If Nevermore is left and reentered, you will automatically be taken to the latest city floor unlocked.

You have successfully completed the first portion of Nevermore, successfully entering the middle floors of the C-grade section. From floor forty-one onwards, all floors will be significantly larger in scope. All basic floor completion bonuses will be increased tenfold to compensate for the increased floor sizes moving forward.

“Did any of you know that Nevermore had portions like this?” Jake questioned after reading the message. He was mainly asking Dina but phrased it as an open question to be polite.

As expected, everyone shook their head except for Dina, who seemed to be in thought for a moment before answering.

“I didn’t know for sure, but I had heard that sections exist... but... I had expected Minaga’s Labyrinth to be viewed like one of these sections, not that there was any kind of official segregation,” she answered, looking a bit apologetic for some reason.

“Aight,” Jake nodded. “Well, can’t say I don’t welcome change as I hoped Nevermore wouldn’t go back to the usual stuff before Minaga’s Labyrinth. Let’s hope the difficulty is also higher on these floors.”

“If they are larger, there may be space for a wider range of difficulty on each floor,” the Sword Saint pitched in.

“Even if that is not the case, simply splitting up to complete the floors faster while facing challenges made for entire parties will naturally result in an increase in difficulty,” the Fallen King also added.

“Ree,” Sylphie contributed with an excellent point too.

“True, true,” Jake nodded as he smiled a bit at the others. “Before we move on...”

He got a few smiles all around as they all knew where they were headed.

Jake and company once more sought out the Leaderboards, curious if they had managed to take the top spot back. Jake had confidence they did, as they had thoroughly cheesed floors thirty-six through thirty-nine and did as well as anyone could on floor forty.

When they saw the Leaderboards, he could only smile at the current top record.

Average Nevermore Points (Floor 1-40): 12521

Current Nevermore Points Record (Floor 1-40): 54373

The top Points Records was the exact score they had, meaning they had indeed reclaimed the top spot once more. The difference was for how long. As mentioned, they had likely been faster than many other parties, and there was a good chance they just hadn’t arrived yet.

Looking at the average, Jake found it so low it was a bit silly, especially considering some people had less than this – it being average and all. Then again, seeing the more than four times higher Points Record that he and his party members held did put things into perspective.

Any party capable of even beating floor forty this early on in the integration and getting on the Leaderboards had to be pretty talented. A regular “elite” party from Earth likely wouldn’t even be able to beat the average, at least not yet. They would likely also take far longer than Jake and company. There were many floors before Minaga’s Labyrinth where one could just stay and grind levels for a while if they so desired.

This would also not be done while beating many of the events, skipping a few bonus objectives, limited achievements, and things like the Demon Lord or Minaga fights were entirely out of the question.

“We reached the top spot again,” Dina smiled as she looked at the Leaderboards.

“For now,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“It is no excuse to-“

“Yeah, yeah, no complacency, but keep going hard. You gave that speech the last time,” Jake smiled at the Fallen King.

“Words that should not be forgotten,” the Unique Lifeform still insisted.

Jake couldn’t really argue against that as he looked at the Leaderboards for a while while the others chatted. He did also take note of how few people were on this floor. Compared to Minaga’s city floor, this one was practically deserted. A few curious people had thrown glances their way, all of them far

above their levels. Considering they were scouts from different factions, Jake reckoned they also knew who Jake and the others were and thus left them alone.

As he stood there looking at the Leaderboards, Jake did get curious about who else had passed them. Closing his eyes, he released a Pulse of Perception, scanning his surroundings and the people observing them. One of them wore a familiar robe and was located within a large building in the middle of the city with several deserted houses around it.

“Say, wanna go check in with someone who might know a bit more about everything going on?” Jake asked.

“Oh, the Order of the Malefic Viper has someone here?” Dina asked, instantly picking up on what Jake was asking.

“That, or some creep stole a robe from the Order and is impersonating a member,” Jake smiled in response.

“I see no harm in that,”

the Fallen King answered non-committedly.

“May as well,” the Sword Saint also nodded.

Thus Jake began to lead them toward the building with the scout inside. Not that it was needed, as Jake saw the scout already make her way over to Jake the moment he began walking toward the house. A bit before, even, showing she had decided to make contact already.

A few minutes later, a scalekin in a cloak with a familiar motif imprinted on it jumped down from a roof and landed in front of them, already on her knees. "This one greets the Chosen of the Malefic One and his comrades."

"Hey there," Jake nodded as he identified the female scalekin.

[Acidfall Wyvern – lvl 294]

Jake was a bit surprised at seeing a wyvern in humanoid form having taken up the job as scout and informant within Nevermore rather than just practicing themselves. He wasn't going to ask thou-

"Why is a wyvern with decent talent wasting their time playing attendant on a city floor like this?" the Fallen King questioned.

Before Jake could even throw the Fallen King a glare, she responded.

"I am not competing on any Leaderboards and have no need to hurry. I have only stayed here for a year while nurturing a natural treasure and will continue my own descent in a few months. Thank you for your concern," the scalekin smiled with that kind of smile that wasn't really a smile.

Jake just threw the Fallen King a glance as he turned his attention back to the attendant from the Order. "Ignoring that annoying interrupting Unique Lifeform, do you have somewhere we can discuss privately?"

“Would right here be acceptable? My current base of operations is under a protective circle due to an ongoing experiment,” she questioned.

“Sure, go ahead,” Jake shrugged as he whipped out a set of chairs and a table he totally hadn’t stolen from one of Minaga’s in-between rooms. Totally not. And if he had, then it was the furniture’s own fault for being too comfortable.

After they all took a seat, Jake began questioning the attendant about the event as he made sure no outsiders were listening in.

“We don’t know exactly how many parties have passed the True Ending event of Minaga’s Labyrinth, much less how many have done it without suffering any losses, but it is estimated that the number will rise to at least in the dozens over the coming period as more elites make it to floor forty. The event is only doable by parties who are competing on the Leaderboards, and even then, it has other requirements we are not entirely certain of,” the attendant said in a careful tone.

“I also believe there are other requirements that are purposefully obscured. We also need to consider that not all parties manage to have every member make it through the entire fight. In fact, there is often at least one weaker link that is eliminated or just someone who finds themselves ill-fit in the fight, particularly during the period where each combatant is separated into individual fights. If they are unable to hold on long enough themselves, that is an easy spot to lose a comrade,” the Sword Saint nodded as he spoke curtly.

“That is true, but we have no good way of determining either case, and we can only make educated guesses on who passed the True Ending event unless they outright state if they did or not,” the attendant nodded.

It quickly became clear that while the attendant would happily give out information, she truly didn't know much, and she wasn't even overly aware of the other big parties. Jake kept calling her an attendant, but in truth, she too was just doing Nevermore herself and had been asked to stay on this floor in case anyone from the Order came by with questions, as she could work on her project on any city floor. That was also why she had been hidden when they arrived.

Jake and the others left the city floor soon after, seeing no reason to stay there. A few Pulses from Jake also confirmed no one else they knew was there. The lack of reason to stick around was probably also why it was so deserted. Especially not for the stronger parties, as there was an assumption that the following floors would be easier than the Minaga battle or even whatever fight one would have if they didn't face Minaga himself. An assumption that was probably correct.

Alas, there was only one way to find out as Jake and company continued onwards with the hope that the following floors wouldn't be too boring.

Who knows, maybe they could even be fun?

Or horrible...

But hopefully fun.

Chapter 714: Nevermore: Floor Forty-One

Jake stepped through the gateway to the forty-first floor and instantly felt the sunlight upon his skin and the light breeze of the wind. Immediately, he knew he had come to a massive space, which honestly felt damn refreshing after Minaga's Labyrinth.

Greenish soil was beneath his feet as he opened his eyes and saw that they found themselves standing on a vast desolate plain of nothing but barren ground. The soil felt dead and bereft of energy, and looking around, Jake noted they were standing atop a small hill with a very slight incline, giving them a good look at their surroundings.

“A planet of some sort,” the Sword Saint noted.

“Ree!” Sylphie added, saying that there was a lot of wind there, indicating it was a larger planet. Jake still remembered the planet they had been on during the very first floor, though he was unsure if that had even counted as a real planet or if it had just been a big meteor or something. Planets after the system just all seemed so damn big, though Jake had to admit he hadn’t seen that many, and using Primordial-4 as any kind of frame of reference seemed like a horrible idea.

He also had to remember the message about these floors all being a lot bigger. As Jake was having these thoughts, the notification welcoming them to the floor appeared.

Welcome to the forty-first floor of Nevermore: Tri-World

You have arrived on Tri-World, a planet occupied by three major factions vying for control. First is the Beastfolk Alliance, a faction consisting of beastfolk and beasts alike that have united after finding themselves suppressed by the two other factions for years.

Second is the Enlightened Republic, the most powerful faction of the three. Elves, humans, and dwarves used to be in conflict, but many years ago formed a republic to battle the two other factions, thus becoming the most powerful.

Finally, the Risen Kingdom is an offshoot of undead who have long lost contact with the true Risen Empire, yet they still retain much of the heritage from their faction. Despite being the smallest faction in both population and area controlled, they are considered second only to the Enlightened Republic.

These three factions have been at odds for millennia with no signs of stopping. As new arrivals on this world, you belong to no faction. Your actions from here on out shall be entirely up to you as you can explore and find all there is to Tri-World. Including the deep secrets of this planet. In this quest, you have only one objective:

Determine the fate Tri-World.

Main objective: Determine the fate of Tri-World

Bonus objectives: N/A

Current progress: Fate Determined (0/1)

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

Current Nevermore Points: 54373

They all rapidly read it over as Jake was left with a feeling of uncertainty.

“What exactly are we supposed to do?” he questioned out loud, half to himself and half to the others.

“It does strike me as very open-ended,” the Sword Saint nodded.

“Grandpa did mention that some trials like this exist in some dungeons, so it being present in Nevermore isn’t too odd,” Dina nodded as she seemed to be in thought. “In these instances, there usually isn’t a wrong or a right thing to do, as long as you finish whatever objective the dungeon gives, and I heard from Grandpa that many just use dungeons like these to experiment in. However, seeing as it is Nevermore and we earn Nevermore Points... I am not sure. I would guess some things would give more points than others.”

“Three factions all competing in a large world. I tentatively see a few approaches, but none of them are feasible before we know more. In either case, I would assume the most basic solution would be to assist one faction in completely taking over the planet, with another one being to wipe out every faction. All it says is that we must determine the fate of the world, not that the fate has to be good,” the Fallen King theorized.

“Those do seem like the most obvious scenarios we can choose,” the Sword Saint concurred.

“There... is one more,” Dina said. “We are on a planet, right?”

She asked that last part to Jake, who gave his surroundings a good look. “Definitely seems like there is some curvature to the place, yep. The place is quite a bit smaller than Earth, though, but still pretty big.”

"I don't know how big Earth is, but all planets have one thing in common: their core," Dina said.

Hearing her say this, Jake instantly knew what she was getting at. Villy had mentioned this more than once when they were drinking, every time in relation to planetary sacrificial rituals. "Are you sure we wanna destroy the planet?"

Jake knew that rather than destroy a planet's surface, then one could doom a world by going straight for the core, bu-

"What?" Dina asked, looking horrified. "No! No, I was thinking we could take control of the Planetary Pylon in the core, if there is one, and then have one faction take control of the planet through that. Why... why would we just destroy a planet?"

"I do believe destroying the planet would qualify as determining its fate," the Fallen King chimed in.

"We are not destroying the planet," Dina said resolutely, staring daggers at Jake.

"You were the one who suggested it first..." Jake muttered.

"I didn't!" Dina protested loudly.

“Pretty sure you did,” Jake smirked as he looked to the side. “Oh look, people.”

“I am not falling for that,” Dina said, still looking at him with piercing eyes.

“No, Jake is right; there are people,” the Sword Saint said as he followed Jake’s gaze.

In the distance, a caravan of sorts appeared, moving rapidly towards them. More than a dozen large wooden barges flew a few meters off the ground, with people standing atop each of them. The one in the front looked bulkier than the others, and from a distance, Jake could identify the figure at the helm, along with those standing with him.

[Caravan Guard Captain – lvl 215]

[Caravan Guard – lvl 204]

Jake was a bit taken aback at the results, as they all looked humanoid yet identified not as humans. If not human, then at most elves or some other race that closely resembled humans. It wasn’t entirely clear as they were all hooded or wore armor covering their heads, but they struck Jake as part of the enlightened races for sure. Ultimately, he wrote it off as system-fuckery, or more accurately, a sub-section of system-fuckery known as dungeon-fuckery.

Their levels were also disappointingly low, as in way too low for them to ever be supposed to fight them.

"I would assume that caravan is here to serve as an introduction to the floor in addition to the initial welcome message," the Sword Saint said.

"Very likely. We should interrogate-"

"Talk to," the Sword Saint interrupted.

"- talk to them and learn more about the different factions and decide if any is worth supporting. The fact that the welcome message clarified where each faction is in the power hierarchy makes it obvious that more points will be earned should we support a weaker faction. Though, ultimately, I feel that simply supporting one faction or another would be too simple of a solution," the Fallen King said.

Jake had to tentatively agree as the caravan got closer and closer. By now, they had also spotted Jake and company and decided to slightly change their course to move straight to them. It was a bit surprising they didn't decide to avoid the five strangers with higher levels than anyone in their caravan, but Jake wasn't their boss.

A few moments later, they got close enough for them to hear each other, and the Guard Captain at the helm of the caravan yelled out loudly.

"Be careful! You shouldn't just be standing there!"

"Is that a threat?" the Fallen King's voice echoed out in an offended tone. However, the other party didn't seem affected in the slightest, as he responded.

“No such thing! Some nasty Tunellers are found in this area, so I just wanted to warn you that standing on the ground can be dangerous. They react to vibrations and such,” the Guard Captain shared. “Wait, how did you even get here? Where is your ship, or did you fly by yourselves?”

“Freak-accident teleportation,” Jake responded.

“Oh...” the Guard Captain said. “Where from?”

Jake briefly shared a glance with the others and saw their unbothered expression as he just answered. “From another universe entirely, we think. Or at least another planet.”

“Ah, alright, I got it,” the Guard Captain said as he laughed, the other guards also chuckling along after he made a hand motion. “You should just have said you got isekai’d.”

“I... what?” Jake stood with an open mouth.

“You teleported here from another world, right? Yeah, we call that getting Isekai’d around here,” the Caravan Guard Captain explained casually. “Happens quite frequently. Heck, that is why we have so many different races on this planet. I myself was teleported here quite a few years ago.”

“What kind of dungeon is this?” Jake questioned out loud.

“This planet is a bit peculiar indeed,” the Guard Captain laughed.

“You do know we are in a dungeon, right?” Jake tried to ask, seeing as the guy seemed to have some level of intelligence.

“The planet is called Tri-World, though I think that name is still semi-recent as a few still referred to it as Quad-World when I first got here, but the fourth faction was eliminated a century and a half ago,” the man answered, confirming something to Jake.

“Yep, dungeon-fuckery makes them not know they are in a dungeon,” Jake communicated through the Golden Mark.

“An odd word that these Tri-World denizens have come up with to describe people getting teleported here,” Dina commented.

“Yeah... you know what, I am just going to assume that the word I hear is not the same one you do, as that would be very weird,” Jake said, blaming everything on the translation skill.

“If it is any comfort, then I hear the same word, I believe,”

the Sword Saint said. “Takes me back to before the system. You know, one of my great-grandchildren was really into that sort of thing.”

“Let’s please just move on and learn about this damn place and continue,” Jake insisted. He felt like the system was trolling him with the kind of words it used sometimes, but... fuck, it fits in this situation, so what the hell could he do.

“Where do you folk plan on heading anyway?” the Guard Captain said. “Seeing as you got two humans with you, the Enlightened Republic seems pertinent, but as you are Otherworlders, you are pretty free to go wherever, though things may get a bit tougher there.”

“Enlightened Republic? What is that?” Jake asked, trying to be smart and get information from the guy. He also thought it would be weird if they knew about the factions on a planet they had just been teleported t-

“System sure screwed up not even giving you the basic information package, eh? People usually get a notification,” the Guard Captain said, looking a bit confused. “Oh well, I guess mistakes happen. Hey, kid, do we have an extra map somewhere?”

He said the last part to one of the other guards, who promptly saluted him. “Yes, sir!”

A few seconds passed before the Guard Captain spoke again in an impatient tone. “Then give it to me?”

“Yes, sir!” the guard said as he took out a map and handed it to the Guard Captain. The Captain proceeded to throw it down to Jake as he sighed.

“This world’s natives are all a bit... odd. They don’t really do much unless prompted and just move through their routines, so it is a safe bet that anyone who approaches you and speaks first with semi-normal conversational skills is Otherworlders like us,” the Guard Captain explained. “This odd trait of the world’s denizens has its ups and downs, but... overall, you get used to it.”

He didn't sound entirely like he believed the last part himself.

"Where are you headed to?" Jake asked.

"The Enlightened Republic's capital, which was also why I proposed going there first, but we will make stops in the other faction's territories on the way if you five wanna tag along," the Guard Captain said in an enthusiastic tone.

Jake checked with his party and got agreements all around. Seeing as they needed to gather information, sticking with the Caravan guy for a while seemed like a good idea. Plus, the floating boat was actually pretty damn fast, making it not a horrible mode of transportation, especially considering the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Dina were not in absolutely peak condition yet after the Minaga fight.

"Sounds like a fine idea," Jake smiled.

"Then welcome aboard!" the guy smiled and laughed. "I am not going to complain about having five people stronger than myself along. Man, now I nearly hope we get attacked on the way so I can harvest some materials to sell to the Beastfolk Alliance. Having actual people to talk to isn't too bad either."

"Can't even say I would complain if we got into some fun fights, and we are more than interested in learning more about this world," Jake grinned as the boat began to move just as they all got on it, making them skirt across the landscape at impressive speeds.

The Caravan Guard Captain spoke casually to them all for a while before he adopted a serious expression. "I do have one warning, though. Make sure to follow local laws and customs in any territory ruled by a faction. These small villages are rather normal, but when we enter the bigger cities, and especially the capital, things change. The culture here may seem odd and different to you as new arrivals, but the nobles are set in their ways. Be careful, some powerful people are lurking about."

"Oh, what kind of differences are we talking about?" Jake asked curiously.

The Guard Captain sighed as he clenched his fists. "You'll see when we get there."

Three weeks later.

The large tower crumbled behind him as a massive pit opened up, consuming the streets below. Even now, the remnants of Jake's destructive arcane mana still ravaged what had once been a city as Jake stood there floating in mid-air.

Far in the distance, a golden pillar descended as the landscape lit up from the power unleashed by the Fallen King. Elsewhere, a massive tornado ravaged the terrain, leaving a wake of pure destruction as entire villages were sucked up and shredded to pieces.

In another direction, massive rainclouds hung far up in the sky as a drizzle turned the world below into Swiss cheese. Finally, an entire forest had overgrown and seemingly turned against any beings who lived too close or were unfortunate enough to have been present within upon their arrival.

Jake looked at the destruction with a steely look, not even bothering to look at the thousands upon thousands of notifications his actions had brought him.

“So everyone’s in agreement?” Jake asked through the Golden Mark.

“Yes... this seems like the only way to stop this... this... place,” Dina said in an angry tone.

“And if your idea doesn’t work?” Jake asked.

“Then perhaps getting rid of the planet altogether is for the best,” Dina answered, not a shred of mercy in her voice.

Chapter 715: Nevermore: Karmic Plague

One had to skip back a few weeks to find out why Jake and company chose violence.

They had traveled with the Caravan Guard Captain and the caravan for around a week by then and had learned a lot more about the world. They had even entered the territories of two factions and traded with small local villages. The caravan they were on transported primarily people, but it also had foodstuff, herbs, and metals. All in all, everything seemed pretty normal. At least when they were on the road.

Sure, every other person than the Guard Captain didn’t ever say anything of substance and generally gave off powerful NPC energy. They just made small talk with each other, with the Guard Captain more than happy to only talk to the five of them, as clearly, he didn’t even view the people he traveled with as people worth interacting with.

One thing they did discover was that teleportation circles did not work on the planet. One Step worked as normal, and none of the others noticed anything either, but upon further inspection, Jake did find that the spatial mana in the environment felt slightly distorted. He reckoned it had something to do with the entire “isekai” thing.

Anyway, the truly odd things began to appear when they interacted with the Otherworlders.

Throughout this all, Jake thought things felt... off. He observed the natives quite a lot, and he did even question if they were slaves or something at one point, but the Guard Captain shot that down, saying there weren't any slaves on the planet as far as he knew, and the nobles had strictly outlawed any kind of slavery.

Again, this just felt weird for a planet with a medieval style, but it wasn't something Jake wanted to question. So he and the others just continued their travels.

In the first village they had arrived in, not a single person had gone to meet them. They just ignored the massive caravan with nearly a dozen C-grades and hundreds of D-grades on it. It was only when they had fully entered the village there was some recognition of their presence outside of a few random stares when the biggest building in the village had its doors open.

Out walked a large man together with a woman, both of them showing intelligent eyes beyond the natives, making Jake instantly recognize them as Otherworlders.

“Captain! Good to see you come by!” the large man said as he laughed.

“Oh my, I see you brought friends?” the woman at his side spoke, looking curiously at Jake and company.

“Yeah, Otherworlders I met on the way here. They just got isekai’d to Tri-World before I arrived,” the Caravan Guard Captain answered with a light smile.

“Pretty rare for five people to come together like this, but I guess it happens,” the man shrugged as he greeted Jake and the others. “We are the Village Chiefs of this little place. Welcome to Tri-World; I hope you all enjoy your stay, even if it does take a bit to adapt to the planet.”

Jake nodded as the Sword Saint took charge and responded with courtesies. Jake was too busy using Identify and trying to figure out where this odd feeling of wrongness came from.

[Village Chief – lvl 230]

[Village Chief – lvl 232]

Their levels were a bit higher, but they were still low. Far too low to be any threats, which made Jake question why the Wyrmgod found it a good idea to guide them to this place using the caravan. Sure, they could just start blasting, but for now, Jake kept calm.

He looked as the female Village Chief kept chatting with the Sword Saint as the man walked over to one of the barges.

“So, people on barge three. You should all get down and settle down here,” the male Village Chief said.

Jake looked on with a frown, thinking that was the worst sales pitch ever to make someone move the-

“Oh, that sounds like a wonderful idea,” the elderly man on the barge said with a nod as every single person there stood up and began jumping off. No one else spoke but just followed the elderly man down onto the ground as the Village Chief yelled for some of the villagers there to carry over large pieces of timber to load onto the barge.

Do they... just follow orders? And the Village Chief knew, considering he had already planned for that timber to take its place, Jake concluded.

Soon after, they bid farewell to the Village Chiefs and headed onward toward their next destination. The Sword Saint questioned the Caravan Captain on the way about the odd interaction there, but the Captain didn't really answer but just said that was how things were on Tri-World.

The next village was the same, and by the time they made it to the third, Jake and company were honestly pretty freaked out. At this time, right as they all agreed something was seriously wrong on the planet, they all got a notification.

Bonus objective gained: Discover the true nature of Tri-World's peculiarity.

It didn't seem like much, but the fact it had given them an objective meant it was something worth looking into and not just the natural setting of the floor. The “people” in Minaga's Labyrinth had also been one-hundred percent fake, but that was clearly done in a semi-jokingly manner, and it was so

damn obvious and comical at times. This planet just felt weird. Different. Jake's intuition told him something far more insidious was going on.

After two weeks and several more villages later, they split up with the Caravan Guard Captain when he told them that they would stay in a small village for a few days as a shipment of ores was delayed. They didn't really complain as this was a good excuse to scout out the planet a bit by themselves and head towards one of the major cities marked on the map they had gotten.

Speaking of the map, it had given them an okay understanding of the planet's geography. The three factions controlled roughly seventy percent of the landmass on the entire planet, with the rest remaining unclaimed. The unclaimed area were due to there being too many monsters to make it worth trying to control, or simply land with little to no value. Of these seventy percent, thirty-five percent was controlled by the Enlightened Republic, twenty-five by the Beastfolk, and the final ten percent by the Risen.

Only about five percent of the planet was covered in water, with nothing that could be called oceans. From what they gathered, the most powerful beings on the planet were also only mid-tier C-grades, which should be more than manageable. Of course, it was possible that the people they questioned didn't know the true peak of power for the planet.

Their party of five continued their exploration for a while, and it was only when separated from the Caravan Guard Captain they could truly understand how fucked-up the natives were.

Jake and the Sword Saint had visited a small village by themselves and tried to talk to the people there, and while they had reacted, they only ever answered questions and never asked anything themselves. They also answered incredibly truthfully, as if lying wasn't even a concept to them. Moreover, they discovered one extremely odd thing.

They didn't seem capable of saying no.

Regrouping, Jake and company sat down to discuss what the hell was up with Tri-World.

"These people... they are practically not even alive. They are more like puppets than actual people. Calling them slaves wouldn't even be accurate..." Dina said in a slightly horrified tone. "I... I don't know what it is, but something is seriously wrong. Something magical in nature."

"It is subtle, but I do feel a stark difference between the natives and Otherworlders. The natives have souls that seem almost incomplete. As if a part is taken out, or perhaps blacked out," the Fallen King said. "Why or how that is, I cannot say, but I do estimate it to be from outside interference. Though it is odd that it affects everyone equally, including children. Perhaps it is a soul curse?"

"This interference seems to have almost conditioned them somewhat," the Sword Saint muttered.

Jake sat deep in thought for a while, thinking until suddenly, a light bulb went off.

"I think I know.... No, I know, I know," Jake said with a deep frown as he shared his thoughts.

It was something he had only read about briefly after chatting with Villy about Eversmile once and getting referred to a book. It was a book that the snake god described as "very much not common reading material," even if a lot of what it said wasn't exactly secret. It was a book about a special kind of karmic magic that was outlawed in the multiverse and that even Eversmile no longer used, despite being the original creator.

It was something called a Karmic Plague. Others also called it a Lineage Curse due to its effects. A Karmic Plague was – as the name implied – a type of karmic magic that spread like a plague once a person was “infected.”

The Lineage Curse name came due to the effect this ultimately ended up having. The biggest direct transfer of Records and karma came from parents to children, so if someone infected with a Karmic Plague ever reproduced, the child would inherit the Plague. In summary, it would spread from a source to something created.

In fact, it was possible to infect entire planets...

Most types of magic would expire once they ran out of energy, but if someone or something kept feeding the original power source of this magic? Moreover, each infected person became their own power source.

Jake was still explaining as they all got a notification.

Objective Completed: Discover the true nature of Tri-World’s peculiarity. 400 Nevermore Points Earned.

“I guess that confirms it,” the Sword Saint said, looking at the notifications. “But how was anyone supposed to figure this out?”

“Karmic Plagues and plague magic, in general, has not been used in any official capacity for many eras...” Dina muttered. “And if they are used, it will be hidden. I did know about them, but I never imagined we would encounter one.”

“Ree?” Sylphie also chipped in, usually not the most active in these kinds of discussions. She questioned why anyone would even make this kind of magic.

“I think this variant of a Karmic Plague was originally made in an attempt to create more loyal soldiers,” Dina answered, shaking her head. “But I am not entirely sure. A lot of these things aren’t made with an express purpose but just to see if the creator could. Also, I don’t think we needed to figure out it was a Karmic Plague, just that it was some kind of soul affliction or karmic affliction.”

“It’s also possible we would encounter some Otherworlder who knew,” the Sword Saint added.

On a side note, Jake did not share the part about Eversmile having originally made it. Nor that Villy had admitted to maybe being an advisor on the project.

Jake was about to talk again when another prompt came up.

Bonus objective gained: Locate the source of the Karmic Plague.

“Well, I guess we know what we are doing, then,” Jake said.

Luckily, they were pretty close to a major city. Not the capital of the Enlightened Republic, but a pretty major city that, according to the map, had around fifty-thousand living there. Yeah, populations in this world weren't overly large, and even the capital only had around a million living there.

Soon after, they arrived at the city, and after only a bit of exploration...

Well...

This was where they would encounter the impetus for Jake ripping apart an entire city, with the others spreading out and annihilating surrounding villages and towns. On the way, they had already discussed that there likely only was one way to "cure" the natives of the Karmic Plague, but they were still not entirely sure.

That changed with one of their first encounters after entering the city.

From a distance, they had observed to try and find some more Otherworlders. They soon spotted two walking together, a man and a woman. They were walking down the street, chatting, when three natives walked toward them. It was a man, a woman, and a small kid. All five in the encounter were humans.

The parents and daughter walked down the street as the kid walked into the leg of the Otherworlder woman. It was obvious that the woman had, on purpose, walked into the kid, and Jake already thought she was an asshole for that... but what followed exceeded his expectations for horribleness.

"How dare you walk into me? Apologize right now," the woman said with a smile, clearly enjoying the scenario she herself had created.

“We are sorry for any inconvenience we have caused the noble and will do anything to make up for it,” the father said promptly as he bowed, the woman Jake assumed to be his wife following suit.

The noblewoman still looked smug as the man leaned over and whispered something in her ear, making the woman grin even more.

“In that case, slap each other and the kid.”

Without any hesitation, the two natives slapped each other hard enough to spill blood before also hitting the kid, making her fall to the ground; the slap being so hard that the skin on her cheeks was ripped up, spewing out blood. Instantly, the girl started crying as the noblewoman rolled her eyes.

“Make her shut up right now,” she said in an annoyed tone.

What happened next nearly caused Dina to kill the noblewoman right then and there.

Once more, without even a second of hesitation, the father of the girl walked over and stomped on her head twice, killing her. He then turned to the noblewoman as if waiting for her to approve, with the mother just standing there with empty eyes.

“I... Wow, you didn’t have to kill her, just shut her up,” the noblewoman said, sounding surprised.

“I apologize. Is there anything we can-“

“No, it’s fine,” the noblewoman waved him off before suddenly giggling. “That sure was something.”

“I told you that you need to be more direct with your orders as they can still interpret your words somewhat, and the immediate nature of your order made him choose the most extreme, yet fastest, option,” the nobleman laughed before looking at the father, who stood with a bloody boot next to his daughter’s corpse. “Clean your spawn up and get out of here. Oh, and everyone around, stop staring and get a move on.”

The father nodded as he began cleaning up as ordered, the mother joining too, with the nobleman and noblewoman strolling away, all the native onlookers also continuing their day like nothing had happened. No one around had really reacted to the fucked-up thing that had just happened outside of stopping up and staring.

Seeing this left all of them just silently sitting there until the Fallen King spoke.

“There is no cure to this kind of soul mutation,” he said, Jake, nodding along. He already knew that.

The problem was that the people were fully one with the Plague by now. Fully infected. It wasn’t really something one could fix, at least not a bunch of C-grades. A plague could be cured, but no fucking way they or any other C-grade could do it, as Jake had never heard of anyone below A-grade ever creating a plague. Much less a Karmic Plague. The way the Karmic Plague worked was akin to Jake’s own soul mutation in the form of Anomalous Soul, but rather than give extra mana, theirs made them unable to reject carrying out anything asked of them or to truly ever question anything in general.

"I... why would the Wyrmgod even create a floor like this?" Dina questioned.

"I don't know, but I have an idea," Jake sighed. He did agree it was bloody weird, and he wondered if the Primordial wanted to teach them some lesson or something. Perhaps it was a fucked-up social experiment. At least for the usual party. The thing is, he and Dina knew a bit more about the multiverse than the average Joe.

They had initially discussed that this floor would turn into some political situation where they had to find a faction to support or maybe even start their own. That was likely still an option if they wanted to just complete the floor and move on... but... no. That would be the "wrong" choice.

This planet was fucked. Something had to seriously change, and if their party was to decide...

Well, Jake's "idea" of a planetary sacrificial ritual was legitimately back on the menu.

Because while they had been unsure of what their objective was on this floor originally, they knew for sure now. Plagues were outlawed in the multiverse for a reason, but that didn't mean some didn't still create them. And the course of action, once one encountered a plague, was pretty damn clear.

The way to get rid of a plague was to remove the source. That wouldn't help those already infected, as they would still be able to spread it, even if the plague would begin to slowly weaken with the source gone, being slightly weaker every time it spread.

Even if this floor seemed open-ended, Jake knew there was only one “right” decision, and he didn’t doubt it would be the one that gave the most points, seeing as the Wyrmgod had been one of the people involved in outlawing the creation of plagues. Ultimately, even if they removed the source of the Karmic Plague, for those already infected, there was only one reasonable cure:

Extermination.

Chapter 716: Nevermore: The Only Cure

Jake had never been a big fan of killing humans, or any humanoid beings for that matter. However, he also wasn’t directly averse to it. It was more that if he had to choose between fighting a giant bear or a human to get levels, he would prefer the bear, even if both had the same level of intelligence.

What he definitely didn’t like and did feel averse to was killing low-level humans. That just felt wrong on a fundamental level... but... Jake did so anyway. The four others did too. Dina was reluctant, the Sword Saint seemed neutral, like it was just something that had to be done, and the Fallen King and Sylphie honestly didn’t sound like they gave two shits about doing a massacre.

Their reason for this purge of life was an experiment of sorts. A grisly one. They wanted to see the response of the Enlightened Republic and the rest of the world. Hopefully, they could even bait out some of the Otherworlders in charge. Because it was clear that only Otherworlders had anything to say in this world and that “noble” was just a synonym for Otherworlder.

The killing proceeded smoothly as the big city didn’t have anyone above level 240, making it a quick and easy endeavor to wipe out, and their group met up once they were done. They proceeded to wait in the area for nearly half a day, with not a single person showing up, before they decided to travel more toward the capital as it became clear there would be no response. Throughout everything, the natives didn’t even fight back either but just stood there like mindless drones. Jake had the feeling that if he had just yelled for them to lay down and die, they would have done so without question.

To repeat, the place was fucked up.

Ultimately, one also had to remember that they were in a dungeon, and nothing was truly real. All the people there didn't have any future, and their only fates were to be challenges on a Nevermore dungeon floor while potentially teaching the people doing the floor some kind of lesson. Which, if Jake had to be honest, was probably a very good thing, as he very much wouldn't like this kind of place to exist in the multiverse outside, fully aware that such a place probably did exist somewhere. He just really hoped to not encounter it.

Flying toward the capital, Dina wasn't in the best mood as she spoke.

"Will... will we need to kill everyone there too?"

"The Karmic Plague is so ingrained within their souls that getting rid of it would mean death. The choice we stand before is to either leave them be to their meaningless lives or end their existences. I care neither way," the Fallen King said.

Dina already seemed to know, but Jake understood she wasn't happy about it.

"We should scout out the place a bit first," Jake said. "Maybe even talk to some of the Otherworlders to discover what the hell is going on from people who display some level of independent thought. But I do think that our course of action will ultimately not be a peaceful one. No matter how friendly they are... well, you already know."

On a side note, Jake hadn't bothered speaking to the two nobles he saw in the other city after the shit they pulled with the native parents and kid. They had died without even knowing what had hit them.

"There is likely some kind of leader there," the Sword Saint said. "That it is called a Republic does strike me as odd, considering that usually indicates some kind of democratic process or elections, which makes no sense considering the state of the natives."

"It is only the Otherworlders who can decide anything. It can also be because it is a merged faction of different races, each then having a representative, but who knows, it's just a name," Jake answered. "Either way, we will have answers when we get there."

Two weeks passed before they arrived at the Enlightened Capital, showing the sheer size of the planet. They passed by dozens of large settlements on the way, and while they did scout some of them out, it was just the same shit everywhere.

Every single place had one or more Otherworlders in charge of everything, and in many of the small towns, the one Otherworlder lived like a king surrounded by slaves. They did talk about it but decided not to wipe out these places immediately.

They did also see a lot of the natives and how they lived. For the most part, they seemed normal. They talked with each other, they lived their lives, and if not for the fact they couldn't really decide things themselves, Jake couldn't spot any differences. He even saw a party C-grades hunting down a large beast within a valley, working together, using skills, and being normal.

The mere fact they had even reached C-grade was astonishing, considering their shortcomings due to the Karmic Plague. But it did also show why experiments like this were performed. Making someone a slave would always harm their Path and limit any and all potential they had significantly. The Karmic Plague did too, but in a far less severe manner, plus it removed any need for contracts and such. It didn't make it any less fucked up and insidious, but Jake could see how someone who didn't care about other living beings outside of how useful they could be would perform this kind of experiment.

As the capital appeared in the distance, still a few hundred kilometers away, Jake scouted it out visually by squinting his eyes a bit. It was a large settlement with tall walls surrounding it, most of the buildings inside of the walls, but some outside. In the center of the city, a large tower soared higher than anything else, though he did spot a lot of large impressive buildings behind the walls. Especially this official-looking building with really impressive carvings on the pillars. The place was definitely bigger than any other settlement they had seen, but to confirm and get some information, they made use of the rules of Tri-World, even if it felt wrong.

Rather than enter the capital right away, they sought out a farm outside of the walls where a man was working the fields. He was only E-grade and instantly turned and looked when Jake and the others landed only a few meters from him.

"Who is the most powerful person in the Enlightened Capital?" Jake asked, knowing small talk was a waste of time.

"The Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic," the man answered with a smile.

"Are they also the most powerful person in the Enlightened Republic?" Jake followed up.

"Yes, I believe he is."

"Where does this Lord Protector live?" Jake continued to question, not wanting to talk to the robot more than necessary.

"In the Grand Spire at the center of the capital. You can't miss it," the man explained.

"What level is he?" the Sword Saint asked curiously.

"I apologize, sir. I do not know. However, I can go ask others if they know, and if not, go see for myself."

"No, you can just continue on with your day as if you never even spoke to us," the Sword Saint interrupted him, knowing Jake was also very much done with the "conversation."

Jake was already looking at the capital wall as Sylphie let out a small screech, the farmer back at work, acting like they didn't exist.

"Ree?"

"Yeah, no way in without being discovered," Jake nodded. A large formation covered the entire city before them, and based on Jake's quick scan, it was a dual-purpose defensive and detection formation. The defensive part was not active at all times, but the detection was.

As things were, they didn't really care about being detected as they had gone there to talk with the most powerful person present anyway. Entering the city, Jake instantly felt a presence lock onto them as a voice echoed out from the spire towering over the capital.

"Newcomers, huh? I guess I can entertain you a bit," a male voice said as a small opening appeared in the spire, giving Jake and the others access. Jake had already released a pulse and found a single man waiting for them inside the spatially expanded building. He looked humanoid but had longer ears than normal, making Jake guess he was a half-elf.

Entering the tower through the small portal, Jake and company found themselves in a large spacious living room with fancy decor. Sitting on a large couch was a middle-aged half-elf, and Jake naturally identified him, finding his level impressive.

[Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 291]

"Not very polite of you to come barging in like this... I take you five were also the ones who caused a ruckus in the outer regions of the Republic?" the man asked, looking relaxed.

"We were," Jake answered, having already gone over the game plan with his party before coming. "Hard not to after seeing the disgusting state of the place, and we knew purging them was the only cure."

"Oh?" the Lord Protector smiled. "You speak as if you know what the cause of this planet's peculiarity is?"

"We do," Jake confirmed. "A Karmic Plague."

"I did get the feeling you five were rather extraordinary the moment I felt you enter the city... you truly have proved me correct. Few have any knowledge of Karmic Plagues," the Lord Protector said as he summoned a wine glass and took a drink.

Jake just looked at the man for a while before he sighed.

"I have lived here for more than two thousand years already... nothing has changed during all this time. For so long, I had no idea why Tri-World was so unique, and I, too, struggled with the thoughts I see you have now. Let me just clarify... there truly is no cure, as you say. But that doesn't mean killing them is the only choice."

"Do you know the origin of the Karmic Plague? Who caused it? Or... maybe how to get rid of it?" Jake questioned. He knew the last one wasn't very likely unless there was some dungeon-fuckery going on, which was one of the reasons they wanted to check out a major faction.

"Hah, there are some theories, most of which stem from one person. A couple of centuries ago, an Otherworlder arrived who wasn't a fan of how things were run and created her own faction. She was the very same one who informed us all that a Karmic Plague was the cause of Tri-Worlds peculiar nature. She was insistent that the Karmic Plague placed upon Tri-World could be stopped as long as we sought out the core of the planet. That we should unite and create an expedition down there, risking our own lives fighting monsters all the way down on some vain hope that we could change the status quo," the middle-aged man said, shaking his head.

"Was she right? That the key to getting rid of the Karmic Plague lies at the planet's core?" Dina asked.

"Who knows?" the Lord Protector shrugged. "And who cares? Tri-World isn't broken. No, this place has its perks and downsides both, but overall I would say the benefits outweigh the negatives."

"Could you elaborate?" the Sword Saint asked diplomatically.

"The Karmic Plague has resulted in the populace indeed just being drones, but they still retain proper Truesouls and whatnot, making them prime subjects for experimentation. It also doesn't mean they are less competent, at least not by much, and finding new assistants isn't too difficult. As for downsides... well, it can get a bit lonely here. The natives are not exactly interesting conversational partners, and trying to settle down for a family is out of the question. The Karmic Plague means that even if two Otherworlders reproduce, the child will also be fully affected."

"So it is the planet that is the source," Dina said with certainty as she nodded thoughtfully.

"We will have to confirm that," Jake sighed before turning back to the half-elf. "I am curious... you didn't mention being stuck here and the forced teleportation that brings the Otherworlders here as a downside?"

"True, that is a problem for some," the Lord Protector smiled. "At least it used to be. Having been stuck here for a while, we figured out a method to leave the same way we came in. Of course, things aren't that simple, and I am one of the only ones who know the spell..."

The Lord Protector continued with what Jake felt pretty damn sure was, if not a practiced speech, then at least something scripted by the system, as he explained what they would have to do in order to pass the floor.

Bonus Objective Gained: Retrieve ten Beastcores from the mysterious space beasts. Then use them to create a portal, allowing you to travel to the next floor and any Otherworlder to leave Tri-World.

WARNING: This will complete floor forty-one and forfeit any additional rewards.

The Bonus Objective that appeared very clearly outlined all they had to do, and Jake and company quickly understood that the other factions likely had similar objectives available. In fact, this was probably the way to speedrun the floor if you just wanted to pass it quickly. Of course... it wasn't that simple with the plague.

"What happened to the woman who wanted to cure this world of the Karmic Plague?" Jake asked.

"Well, what do you think happened? We got rid of that damn witch. Things aren't perfect here, but we make them work and use Tri-World's nature to our advantage. I myself have had quite good progress while living here, and so have many others. Even if you want to leave, I would at least advise sticking around a bit," the Lord Protector smiled. "There are many things you can enjoy here not available elsewhere. You know, have some fun."

Jake nodded slowly as he looked at his party members. He especially looked at the Fallen King, who had been busy scanning the Lord Protector during all this time. The Unique Lifeform made it clear one of their suspicions was confirmed as Jake looked at the Lord Protector.

"Do you know why it is called a Karmic Plague?" Jake questioned.

"Due to it spreading through karma. At least, that is how that witch explained it. That is also why we Otherworlders are unaffected, as we are not connected to the planet like the natives. Such is its design, which makes sense if you want it to create subservient citizens while maintaining a powerful ruling class," the Lord Protector shook his head. "Why the trivia?"

"It does spread through karma indeed," Jake nodded. "But, did you know it was a failed experiment? That it was too hard to control for anyone not with enough experience in both poisons and karma to handle. Too complicated. Too prone to freak mutations as it went through being after being. So, do you truly think you can escape from it? Whatever caused the Karmic Plague to take hold on this planet was the same thing that brought you here... because it needed you. You don't see, and you don't feel it, but you are a carrier. As long as any strain of the plague remains, there is no way to fully address it."

The Lord Protector stared at Jake with confusion for a while before scoffing. "What an absolutely ridiculous notion. I will have you know that I researched the effects of the Karmic Plague for over a thousand years before I even knew what it was called. It directly affects the Soul's perception of choice and critical thinking. The mere fact I am able to tell you how ridiculous your accusation that we Otherworlders are affected is, should be proof enough it doesn't work on us."

Jake just sighed as he looked at the man. "You say that you researched the Karmic Plague for so long... how many natives did you kill during this time?"

"I don't keep count, but probably a few thousand only. I didn't research it all the time," the Lord Protector answered.

Dina looked angry as Jake raised a hand before she could say anything. "By the way, I can't see your level... which level are you?"

"291," he said, a bit proudly. "Which makes me one of the most powerful people on this planet, in case you were wondering."

"Curious," Jake said. "Why would you just answer that?"

"Why would I have any need to not answer such a simple question?" the man questioned.

"Why would you?" Jake pressed.

"I saw no reason not to," the Lord Protector kept arguing.

Jake sighed as he threw the Fallen King a glance. The Unique Lifeform confirmed what he already knew.

"Then tell me how to destroy the Karmic Plague. Tell me the method that witch had made up," Jake questioned.

"Hmph, she thought that as long as the core was addressed, it would be possible to... to..." the Lord Protector's words trailed off as he suddenly frowned deeply. "Do you truly seek to get rid of the Karmic Plague?"

"Yes," Jake merely answered.

"Can't you just simply leave? I gave you a path. One you and any other Otherworlder who wishes to leave Tri-World can make use of. With the portal I can make, you would be able to go home and act like you never came here," the Lord Protector said.

"I think we both know that isn't going to happen," Jake sighed, already knowing what was about to happen based on the nature of the Karmic Plague. "The Karmic Plague must not be allowed to spread, so would you help us destroy it?"

"I would.... Wouldn't.... I..." the Lord Protector said as he looked confused for a moment before suddenly sneering.

Bonus Objective failed: the Lord Protector has turned hostile.

"I will not allow you to disturb the balance of Tri-World!" the man yelled as he stood up, the entire space imploding as he collapsed the spatially expanded room in a fit of rage.

Chapter 717: Nevermore: To Raze a Republic

Jake was pushed back by a wave of dense space mana as he quickly stabilized himself. The entire tower had erupted, sending stones falling to the ground below as the Lord Protector imploded the entire expanded space they had been sitting within, throwing them out.

The Lord Protector had an oddly empty, yet enraged, look in his eyes. His body was burning with power as a sword appeared in his hand. Yet he seemed to hesitate as if the gravity of his situation only hit him now that he had actually gone and attacked. His mind was clearly still a mess, and he genuinely looked confused, as if unsure why he had such an emotional outburst.

"Alright... it is confirmed now," Jake communicated through their mark. "The Otherworlders are quite heavily affected, too, though the effect is slightly different. I guess this settles it."

Rather than make them lose all ability to question anything, it just made them, what was the word... accepting of the status quo. They didn't see the need to say no. Like with the natives, it was an insidious kind of magic. The kind Jake really hated to think about even existing.

Karmic Plagues didn't always look like this... in fact, most plagues in general, didn't. Most just killed people or made them weaker; the Karmic part was only related to how something would spread. A plague could be anything, and this Karmic Plague on Tri-World was just of the mental-magic variant. It fucked up your head.

He remembered all the way back when he had fought the Minotaur Mindchief when he was only in E-grade. Jake still remembered the slimy feeling that the mental magic of the Minotaur had given him. He remembered feeling like he was the friend of the Minotaur and questioned himself why they were even fighting. This Karmic Plague was like that, except people never snapped back to reality.

Mental magic did have the weakness that it had limited energy and wouldn't work forever. If you made someone think they were your friend, that illusion of the mind would pretty quickly begin to unravel even if you kept applying the magic. The target would build resistance, and the illusion would break, making long-term mind control not really a thing... unless it was something like this Karmic Plague.

The natives had been infected from their birth. What made it worse was that the source of the mental magic was not viewed as coming from another entity. It was coming from your own soul as if they had tried to influence themselves. The closest thing Jake had was comparing it to getting possessed by Eternal Hunger. That curse also wouldn't just wear off. Of course, with Jake, the effect wouldn't be permanent as he would just have been sealed away in his own Soulspace and eventually break out and regain control, but there were plenty of instances where people fell to curses or the alike in the history of the multiverse, never breaking out and changing their entire being permanently.

These Otherworlders were in a similar state to someone possessed by a curse. They could potentially be cured. Potentially being a strong word here. Jake guessed that someone at least at A-grade made this strain of Karmic Plague. Probably even higher. That is to say, he had no way of curing people already infected. Considering they were in a dungeon, there was no way to bring them out and have someone

actually able to find a cure look at them, either. Well, the right way would be to bring that powerful person to the planet, but that obviously wasn't an option either.

Moreover... the Karmic Plague made them heavily resistant to anything that would "hurt" the plague. Another potential nasty as fuck trait of a Karmic Curse. The ones infected felt protective of it. Happy they had it. Close to it, like family, and any mention of a "cure" was like telling them to kill their best friend. The ones infected didn't even notice this unless directly put in a scenario where they had to choose if they wanted to be cured. Which is what Jake had done with the Lord Protector to confirm.

That entire thing about a teleportation gate to leave the planet was also just bait. Jake reckoned they could even have been punished with a point penalty if they made it, considering they had just broken one of the few multiversally approved laws in existence, dictating the isolation of any plague-infested areas.

"We all know our objectives, then?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Yes," Dina said with determination. "Sylphie and I shall head towards the marked spot on the map where the fourth faction once resided."

"Ree," Sylphie confirmed.

The Fallen King merely made a noise as the Sword Saint sent a mental nod. Without any further warning, the swordsman took off in one direction, the Fallen King going in another, each towards one of the other two factions on Tri-World. Sylphie and Dina hesitated for a moment as they stared at the enraged, yet conflicted, space mage calling himself a Lord Protector.

“He is mine,” Jake just spoke out loud.

Sylphie didn’t need any more prompting as she took off, Dina following after.

The Lord Protector seemed very surprised as he looked at Jake.

“Do you truly believe you can defeat the entire Enlightened Republic alone? There is still time to reconsider... fighting like this is useless. We are both Otherworlders. If you want to end the Karmic Plague, doesn’t that mean you would also have to end yourself? You, too, are infected now that you have set foot on Tri-World,” the Lord Protector tried to argue.

Jake just shook his head. “It takes more than fifty years before it begins to infect people. That is the incubation period where it slowly builds up, and as long as you leave within that time, you are good.”

After they had discovered the nature of the Karmic Plague, Jake noticed that all five of them had indeed been infected. At least, kind of. It was so non-existent that Jake hadn’t even noticed before he did a thorough scan of his body. He had then promptly removed it using Palate of the Malefic Viper, which is also why he knew of the fifty-year incubation period. That fifty years was also the maximum time you could be in Nevermore while at C-grade certainly wasn’t a coincidence.

“I... even so,” the Lord Protector tried, Jake’s party members already long gone. “Tri-World is fine as it is. Why... why do you need to ruin it? Why not just accept that life is good here? With time, you will come to understand that-“

Jake sighed loudly, not seeing any sense in talking. It was just the plague talking. If Jake had to guess, then the Isekai-function was likely there to make up for population-decline while also introducing

people who knew about the wider multiverse and could potentially leave at some point, thus spreading the Karmic Plague further. While a planet could infect people, so could people infect a planet if there were enough of them... so a single individual could end up dooming an entire planet over a very long period.

Pulling out his bow, he looked at the Lord Protector in the eye. "You either kill me here and chase after my party members, or we will end the Tri-World as you know it."

The Lord Protector's mouth was still halfway through a word arguing that they didn't have to fight the plague as Jake said his piece. The man just froze as his face turned cold, the conversation truly over.

"Then you must die."

An edge of highly condensed space mana coated the edge of the Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic's sword. There was no hesitation in his movements as he slashed toward Jake, releasing a massive crescent wave that cut through the air, making everything vibrate.

Jake looked at the more than a kilometer-wide blade heading toward him as wings sprung from his back, making him fly backward as he shot an arrow toward the space mage. A barrier blocked it instantly, but Jake easily dodged the large opening strike. A few more attacks followed, only confirming Jake's first thoughts. Through that first attack only, he had already gotten a good idea of what he was dealing with. It wasn't simply overconfidence that had made Jake choose to face this Lord Protector alone.

He's a fucking houseplant.

He was someone who had leveled not through fighting but by sitting indoors and doing his own experiments. His moves were big and flashy, not at all efficient, but made more to look cool than actually be useful. Sure, those kinds of attacks would still work against other people who sucked at fighting or people far weaker than himself... but Jake was neither of those.

A dozen of slashes went past him as Jake released a barrage of arrows that curved around the space mage. The Lord Protector struggled to erect barriers that could block them all and failed to react when an Arcane Powershot blasted his passive barrier apart, sending him tumbling back through several buildings before he hit the ground, structures tumbling down upon him.

Jake did not let up but continued with a barrage of arrows as the entire capital city of the Enlightened Republic rapidly became aware they were under attack. Many presences appeared all over the city as figures began rising into the air.

Jake glanced around and rapidly noticed four individuals of note, all of them Otherworlders.

[General of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 271]

[Elf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 266]

[Human-Queen of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 268]

[Dwarf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 264]

“How dare you declare war against the Enlightened Republic!” the only elf among them yelled. “For this transgression, you will-“

Jake spun around, an arrow already nocked and ready to go. His Perception of time slowed as he pulled back the string, and Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated, freezing all the figures surrounding the elven king, along with the king himself. An Arcane Powershot sent an explosion of arcane energy blasting out of him as the arrow hit the Elf-King right in the chest, blasting him back. Jake gave chase as he used One Step several times, making distance from the Lord Protector, who was already emerging from the rubble, and any of the other notable figures.

The Elf-King ended up landing on the outskirts of the capital, leaving a giant crater. Yet before he could even properly stand up, Jake was upon him. From above, an arrow pierced down, hitting the unprepared nobleman in the head and blasting it straight off.

You have slain [Elf-King of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 266] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Weak, Jake semi-complained as he turned to the other figures of interest. They had all given chase but stopped the moment they saw the Elf-King slain. Looking at them, Jake scoffed as the General yelled:

“To arms, soldiers of the Enlightened Republic!” he proclaimed loudly as hundreds of small groups began floating into the air. They were all C-grade, but most of them were low-tier... and none of them were impressive.

These squads all yelled as the General released some group buff. Jake knew there were several Otherworlders mixed into these squads just from a cursory glance. In fact, it seemed like all the “leaders” of these groups were Otherworlders.

The many large groups flew toward him at unimpressive speed as Jake looked their way and opened his mouth while infusing his voice with Willpower. "All soldiers, kill the closest Otherworlder."

It took a second for them all to process what he had said. Some of them were faster than others. The Otherworlders mixed in were taken by surprise as they were attacked by the ones right next to them, as they screamed for them to stop, something the natives also promptly did.

More orders were barked at them, but before they had any time to even turn toward Jake, he yelled again.

"Kill any Otherworlder that is not me."

Once more, they attacked, and once more, they were told to stop. The entire situation was funny if you didn't think too long about it. This repeated several times as the natives in the Enlightened Republic only became a source of chaos. Something that was clearly noticed.

The Lord Protector, who had reemerged, looked on with anger as he screamed loudly:

"Anyone part of the army: kill yourselves."

What followed was them doing just that. An eerie sight played out as thousands began falling out of the sky, their eyes glazed over as they had extinguished their own souls. There had not been a single moment of hesitation, no trace of doubt or questioning. No survival instinct.

Jake only felt reaffirmed in what they were doing as he looked at the Lord Protector with killing intent. His job was to wipe out the powerful people in the Enlightened Republic, and he planned on doing just that. They had also clearly realized that it was either him or them, as the Lord Protector and General attacked as the remaining King and Queen began using some kind of magic. Neither seemed like a threat, and the Lord Protector seemed annoying to kill fast, so he went for the General. He was a dwarf wearing heavy armor, and while that did make him durable, it also made him slow.

Space mana warped in his surroundings as he knew the Lord Protector was trying to trap him, but Jake had seen better before. Compared to Minaga, the Lord Protector was an amateur, and Jake easily used One Step to break through and continue toward his target as he released several potshots.

The General responded by taking out a large axe to block, as his body began burning with some red energy. Jake didn't particularly care much about what he did, as the dwarf wasn't even good enough to block all of the arrows he shot, getting hit in the shoulder and arm. What made it worse, Jake felt something he rarely felt from his opponent when fighting these days.

Fear.

An emotion far too easily exploitable.

Pride of the Malefic Viper was unleashed as Jake attacked the psyche of the dwarf, making him temporarily hesitate as he closed in. He entered melee due to the three others fighting him and how they all sucked at using magic offensively. They had no confidence in not hitting their comrade, and if they still tried... well, dwarf-shields were totally viable.

While everyone hesitated, Jake managed to attack. Eternal Hunger struck the dwarf in the chest as he used Penetrating Fang, blowing the aesthetically pleasing but not very functional armor of the General apart.

Blood spewed out from his strike - the General's eyes wide open as Jake used his other katar to stab through the opening in the dwarf's helmet. Pulling out Eternal Hunger, he got ready to strike again as he prepared another Penetrating Fang.

Before Jake could finish off the General, his danger sense warned him of an incoming attack. A fast one. He barely managed to twist his body as an arrow flew by him, the wind warping and cutting in its wake, leaving several tears in his armor. It was some evolved form of Powershot, no doubt.

Turning his gaze, he spotted a figure a few dozen kilometers away, standing outside of the city borders. An elven woman wearing a cloak and holding a bow while already halfway through nocking another arrow.

[Ranger Commander of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 278]

Jake also felt something else from her. He had become quite attuned to the Karmic Plague after learning about it, and Sense Poison was constantly detecting it. Yet when he looked at the elven Ranger Commander, he didn't feel any trace of the plague at all. No... did feel it like he had felt it within himself and his party members. Still in incubation.

Still saveable, Jake concluded. Another curveball by the Wyrmgod, no doubt.

Jake looked her way as he made eye contact and projected his voice. "Stand down. You are new on Tri-World, I can feel it, and the Karmic Plague has yet to fully take root. You do not need to-"

He had to stop talking as another arrow was fired after him. Jake dodged as a massive pillar of pure space mana descended upon him, slamming him into the ground. With a groan, Jake dug himself out of the pit created by the massive pillar as a rain of arrows fell on him.

"Relax, for fuck sake!" Jake yelled very diplomatically as he used One Step to get away. He also had to keep an eye on the Lord Protector and dodge another attack as he tried one more time. "Do you get what is going on with this planet? The Karmic Plague is-"

"I fucking know you self-righteous piece of shit," the Ranger Commander yelled back. "And while these pathetic natives aren't as good as the slaves I used to have, they are sure as fuck better than not having any slaves at all. Now shut the fuck up and die already."

He realized he had misunderstood. Rather than a moral curveball... perhaps the Ranger Commander was instead a lesson that some people did just suck.

Jake sighed loudly as he looked toward the sky and the second massive pillar of space mana gathering. "Well, okay then."

The pillar of space mana stuck down as Jake pulled out his bow and let loose, Arcane Awakening fully activating as his body exploded with energy. He was confident he had drawn out all the powerful people of note. Now, it was just cleanup time.

An arrow of arcane mana shot upwards as the entire pillar of space mana exploded like a tower of glass. The purple-colored fragments from Jake's arcane mana were flying everywhere as the fallen shards fell upon the broken capital as Jake finally got serious.

Chapter 718: Nevermore: An Inspirational Experience

"There was much debate if we should include this example of a Karmic Plague within the dungeon, but ultimately we agreed it would be for the best," the Wyrmgod explained to the Viper as they observed the slaughter going on in the Enlightened Republic. "Many mortals don't even know about them these days, so this can serve as... what did you call it? A public service?"

"Yeah, definitely a good idea to teach the masses. I can attest to how horrible those things are," Minaga shuddered. "I lost quite a few clones to plagues throughout the ages. I insisted we got the most insidious kind while also allowing it to serve as a nice mental screening of anyone who does the floor."

"You are still doing all that, huh," the Malefic Viper said. "I take it Umbra continues to pay well?"

"We can't reveal privileged information about what we do with the data of Nevermore attendees," Minaga waved him off with a smile.

The Viper shook his head, not bothering to argue. Combat information was usually difficult to come by, and it was a bit of an open secret that you could obtain some intel and potential recordings from Nevermore if you were in good enough standing and had the funds. Two criteria the Court of Shadows easily met.

"Oh?" the Wyrmgod said after a few hours of silence as he turned his gaze to Minaga. "Another flawless completion of floor forty?"

"I don't wanna talk about it," Minaga grumbled.

"Ah... I see... quite a group indeed. One of them appears to be from the same planet as your Chosen, too," the Wyrmgod noted as he threw a glance at the Viper.

Seeing that Minaga looked annoyed and the timing of it all, Vilastromoz had a very good idea of what party it was. He also understood Minaga's annoyance... for those who had embraced the powers of the void were truly annoying.

The Wyrmgod waved his hand, and another screen appeared, showing some clips from the battle. An impressive showing if Vilas said so himself. Beings who were blessed by Void Gods were always interesting and powerful creatures – at least those that managed to stay sapient. This party was definite proof of that.

A corrupted elf that could heal by removing the very concept of the person having even taken damage. A cyclops with chains that appeared unbreakable as it managed to seal away even Minaga's magic for several seconds at a time while landing incredibly powerful physical blows.

The corrupted Shapeshifter, with its many faces in flux, was incredibly unique, too, somehow seeming to contain far more souls than a single being. All bound together by the void into one Truesoul, which allowed it to fill its vessel anchored to reality with one soul at a time, effectively changing stats and likely even skills, making it an incredibly versatile creature.

When it came to the Void Shade – the most "normal" creature in the group – this one was still quite a specimen. An incredibly powerful caster and assassin both, able to merge into the gap between space itself. This was the kind of creature that came to be when something truly became stuck between a state of life and death and only embraced the emptiness of the void. Void Shades were creatures that

would cease to be if they ever lost their Blessings, hence why Void Shades were regular agents of the Void Gods.

Finally, there was the human scientist. All of the others were beings made for combat and personal survival. Apex creatures of slaughter and destruction that could strike fear into nearly any being around their own level. This human was quite the opposite. His body was weaker than any of the others, not even reaching the level of other low-tiers of similar levels. In fact, when it came to any combat situation, he seemed relatively useless. He was a craftsman and a creator, but such skills would not save someone when in a direct confrontation. His mind would not save him from a descending blade.

Yet one had to remember... he was blessed by Oras. Not all Void Gods were equal, and the reason the others seemed to view him as their leader was precisely due to the one who blessed him. Oras the All-Seeing, Oras the Eyes of the Void. Out of all the Void Gods, he had the strongest connection to the world outside of the void due to his gaze being able to pierce through the veil separating the void and reality, making him an incredibly respected figure. For someone recognized by Oras, excellence was the baseline, and the human did not disappoint.

The moment he appeared on the fortieth floor and the fight was about to begin, the Viper saw what the human planned to do. Vilas could only flash a small smile as the scientist summoned a golem before his entire body flashed out of existence.

Vilastromoz saw it clearly. His entire soul became one with the machine in a fashion that reminded the Viper of how the automata gods operated. His soul was primed to be hidden within a pre-prepared core of the golem as the human himself resided elsewhere: within the nothingness of the void.

His weak body was entirely hidden, and the only way to force him out was to destroy the core of the golem that had a design reminiscent of the Altmar golem designs. To make matters more extreme, when Minaga was about to finish his speech, two more golems appeared. The Malefic Viper saw they were all linked through one mind controlling all three like puppets at once, and when the fight truly began, he did not doubt more mechanical constructions would appear.

What is more... this link the human had created was extended. It did not just link together the scientist's machines but all of his party members, allowing them to nearly operate as one being, independent yet guided. There even appeared to be some level of resource-sharing with his party members. When the fight began, Minaga was instantly pressed, and while the party did face trouble... they ended up doing the entire event more cleanly than Jake and his group had, if only by a little. It was also significantly less flashy, which wasn't surprising considering void magic wasn't exactly synonymous with colorful.

"Impressive," the Malefic Viper said, seeing the recording. "Definitely contenders for some of the top ten spots. I guess quite a few figures are."

"In the end, it shall come down to the Challenge Dungeons for the very peak. As always," the Wyrmgod said.

Somewhere the Viper had great confidence in Jake doing extremely well.

"So... to talk about something more fun, do you think Jake will do a planetary sacrificial ritual?" Minaga asked with genuine curiosity, clearly also more than happy to change the subject away from the void-touched. Again, understandable. Based on the clips of the fight, it had been an infuriating experience for the Unique Lifeform.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Vilastromoz smiled, liking to see Minaga not have his curiosity satisfied.

"Manually slaying every single infected being is not feasible unless they want to spend the next many years on floor forty-one," the Wyrmgod chimed in. "I do reckon that a planetary sacrificial ritual is on the table if your Chosen is well-practiced in the art and dependent on how they wish to approach the

end of the floor. I believe we will have to see if they perhaps want to make use of the other methods provided by the floor they wish to make use of. These floors are very much open to creative solutions.”

“Are you insinuating my labyrinth didn’t have a lot of creative solutions?” Minaga questioned.

“Yes, naturally, it was very limited,” the Wyrmgod answered. “Your desire for control over scenarios and the inability of the system to offer assistance through skills make any and all floors you create inherently limited. Moreover, you made a labyrinth. Labyrinths having too many creative solutions at once would be bad design.”

“Wow, just calling me out like that in front of our mutual friend,” Minaga grumbled. “Look at Jake; he is a way better friend. He knows about the Viper’s relationship with this little plague thing, right?”

“He does indeed,” the Viper nodded. The books he had given Jake were very much restricted knowledge, after all, and had things in them that only a few gods were even aware of.

“And yet he hasn’t shared it with everyone. How nice of him,” Minaga said, shaking his head as he turned his attention back to the screen showing what was going on in Jake’s dungeon instance of Tri-World.

Vilastromoz smiled wryly. Yeah, that was pretty nice of Jake, as it would be problematic if that knowledge spread too much. In hindsight, he maybe shouldn’t have given Jake access to restricted knowledge so freely, but... eh, it was probably fine.

Jake had definitely also figured out by now that the Karmic Plague seen on Tri-World was originally a strain created by Eversmile as part of an experiment... and that the Malefic Viper had been a consultant on that project, Eversmile cashing in a favor to make him help.

But who could blame him for asking the Viper? Who was a better consultant than the original creator of plagues?

Jake wasn't sure how to feel when he stood far up in the sky and looked at the ruins beneath him. Not a single other living being was anywhere in sight, with every single powerful person in the Enlightened Republic dead. Most hadn't even been a threat... but this was a purge. Be they Lord Protectors, military personnel, or random squad leaders, all had been wiped out. Even the citizens who had survived becoming collateral damage were gone.

Is this my first time doing a full-on massacre like this? he questioned himself.

Sure, there had been the Deepdwellers in the dungeon near Haven and probably a few other instances of Jake killing a lot of creatures of the same race in a limited area, but destroying an entire capital city like this still felt different.

What's more... it had been so effortless, to a disturbing degree.

He sighed as he condensed an orb of destructive arcane mana and sent it flying downward to clean away the rubble to prepare for what he had to do later. The second it hit the ground, it created a massive explosion that consumed most of the city below him that hadn't already been destroyed in the earlier fight. It continued to expand as the destructive arcane energies annihilated anything it got close to, creating a massive crater.

It was an odd feeling he rarely reflected on, but being able to casually create an orb of mana with more destructive potential than a nuclear bomb was just something he and other C-grades around his level could do. Jake rarely, if ever, did it because there was truly no need to under normal circumstances. Large-scale attacks were a waste of energy and often far less potent as the intensity of the energy that hit your enemy would be wasted by just destroying the environment. Yet he had to remember that he could. Sure, an attack like the orb he just did wouldn't even injure anyone he considered worth fighting, even if he hit them point-blank, but if he wanted to wipe out a lot of weaker people... it was incredibly effective.

For a long time, Jake had wondered exactly how the Malefic Viper managed to wipe out all life on a planet while still in C-grade, but honestly, Jake understood why. Given enough time and a lack of foes capable of challenging you, it was just a matter of spending enough time on the task.

Jake tried to shake the thought out of his head as he turned to his notifications and saw the expected flood of notifications. Hundreds of thousands. The majority he really didn't wanna see, so he filtered out all but three.

You have slain [Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 291] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [General of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 271] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

You have slain [Ranger Commander of the Enlightened Republic – lvl 278] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 226 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Class: [Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge] has reached level 227 - Stat points allocated, +50 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 227 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake read them through as he flew a good distance away from the capital, away from all the destruction, as he looked for a nice place to take a breather. He soon came across a forest, where he promptly landed and found a nice clearing to relax in. After a quick Pulse to confirm there were no threats, Jake sat down and deactivated his Arcane Awakening, feeling the wave of weakness wash over him.

The fight with the Lord Protector and Ranger Commander hadn't been incredibly difficult, but not overly easy either. Both were a lot higher level than him, and their pure stats were nothing to scoff at. The power of their attacks had been more than enough to severely threaten him, but it was clear they had severely limited experience fighting life-and-death battles with people of near-equal power.

If they actually knew how to fight properly, Jake would have had a far harder time and probably just fought them all with the party, but... they had sucked. Well, the Ranger Commander had actually been kind of okay, and Jake did get some inspiration from some of her skills, which also made him realize something else.

He seriously hadn't fought a lot of archers, had he? Were archers rare in the multiverse or something? He had faced so damn many with other weapons – even the bloody space mage using a sword - which had helped him a bit with his melee skills and learning from the fights, but, yeah, not really any archers.

As he sat there thinking to himself, he also quickly checked in with his four party members to see how things were going on their ends. To the surprise of no one, they were all just traveling to their destinations with likely weeks, if not months, to go before they would reach their designated targets. The planet was ultimately pretty damn huge, and they had to travel from deep within the Enlightened Republic. Well, former Enlightened Republic.

That left him with some time to recover fully, ponder a bit on archery stuff, and look through the capital for anything of value. Maybe even clues about the Karmic Plague. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but it was his current plan for now. The Sword Saint would handle the Risen while the Fallen King took on the Beastfolk, with Sylphie and Dina going to where the fourth faction had once been located.

The territory of the witch's faction was marked on the map, making them all certain that the place held some meaning or clues to handling the Karmic Plague. Jake didn't believe that wiping out the entire population manually was the go-to method for this floor, nor did he believe that a sacrificial ritual was the only way to go. No, the floor had to have some methods built in.

Sitting in meditation, Jake pondered a bit more on potential solutions to the floor before switching to replaying the fight with the Ranger Commander in his head. That she was the last of his kill notifications was no coincidence, as Jake had fought her for longer than he needed to in order to bait out all of her skills.

Jake was the kind of person to not really learn much combat-related from reading books or getting taught but instead did best with some live demonstrations. The only other archer he had really ever seen fighting was Maria, but her Path was far too intertwined with using fire magic in everything that it didn't help Jake much.

The Ranger Commander had been a lot more standard. She did use wind magic – probably the most common form of magic to combine with archery – but otherwise just stuck to the basics. Both of them

had Splitting Arrow skills, and both of them had variants of Powershot, but the elf did also have some interesting skills he didn't.

One of them was a skill he had seen but skipped that allowed her to blast herself all over the place by amplifying the energy that pushed herself back after every shot, which turned out to be quite a nice way of dodging when combined with wind magic. She also had bouncing arrows that could redirect themselves mid-air, which was another skill Jake had skipped, but he felt pretty confident he could somehow bake that functionality into his archery skill with time.

But the skill she had used that interested Jake the most initially wasn't really any of her "flashy" attacks. It was the normal arrows she fired. Jake reckoned it was her archery skill, but every single arrow she fired spun around with impressive speed and appeared to have small whirlwinds around them, increasing their stability in flight, and wind mana also seemed to increase its penetrative power. He noticed how the wind magic would strike first before the physical arrow would make contact, which got him thinking.

However, it was only when he saw her big finisher he truly got an idea.

Jake knew that her method wasn't the way for him, considering he didn't really do wind magic, but the idea of packing mana around it was interesting. All of Jake's other attempts of infusing an arrow with magic had always been difficult due to the arrows often being poisoned, but also due to the arrows already being arcane arrows.

So, seeing as Jake had some time, he began working on an idea he had. Honestly, he had been thinking about this for a while and worked on the idea a bit prior. Seeing that Ranger Commander had convinced him to try and bring it to fruition as he aimed to improve a skill that he should probably have improved a long time ago:

Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Chapter 719: Nevermore: An Upgrade With Layers

Jake still remembered the day he got the skill. It was the signature skill of his first proper class and had been damn awesome when he initially got it. He got a bit nostalgic when he remembered bombarding that massive Storm Elemental atop the cloud continent with Hawkie. The orb from that kill had even helped give birth to Sylphie. To say that the skill had been important would be an understatement... which is why it was just a shame to see the sorry state it was in these days.

[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] - The signature skill of the Ambitious Hunter: An arrow to strike down a fated foe in a single shot. Grants the skill to summon a powerful arrow designed to strike down a specific foe. The Hunter must envision his foe and, with great focus, channel all of his desire to slay it to summon the arrow. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target while ineffective on anything else. Damage increased further based on level disparity. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, and Perception when using Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter

Yeah, looking at it, the fact he hadn't upgraded it yet was just downright shameful. Even at rare after the downgrade from the evolution, the skill was still pretty powerful, but it also had some severe drawbacks. First of all, it only worked against the designated target, and while he didn't think he could or necessarily even wanted to get rid of this level of specialization, it did suck that it was also ineffective against barriers or someone just throwing a big rock at it. He had gotten around the barrier problem by always shooting it with Arcane Powershot and having the destructive arcane energy sticking to the arrow break the barrier before the arrow could physically strike it, but that wasn't exactly optimal.

This was naturally only the start of the improvements he made.

He meditated as he pondered on the issue and began to form a proper plan in his head. After about a day and a few potions, Jake was back in peak condition and sadly had to delay his arrow-improvement plans a little bit. Before he could focus his attention solely on upgrading the skill, he had to be done with his other obligations, which included looting. That way he could work on the skill without feeling guilty. Thus he began to scour the ruined capital of the Enlightened Republic for anything useful he or his party members could potentially use.

Jake was pretty sure there would be, considering his Pulse of Perception revealed several hidden underground chambers throughout the once-large city. He even found people within some of them, all acting like the entire city above them hadn't just been razed to the ground a day earlier. Having to begin somewhere, he started out with these occupied chambers first. He quickly discovered all of them were quite nicely sealed and blocked out pretty much everything going on above ground, including sound.

Within half a day, he went through all of them and found only natives within every single one besides one that had served as a bunker for Otherworlders to seek refuge. There were eleven of them in there, and, well, their fates didn't really have to be described. Neither did the fates of the natives, many of whom had been down there as experimental subjects. Subjects who – based on the journals and recordings he stumbled upon – were often tortured and involved in fucked-up experiments, yet never had any reactions. They didn't even need to keep them trapped, as they just followed the order of not leaving without permission.

None of these rooms with what was effectively just a bunch of slaves interested him, and the records on how they had experimented on the natives there less so. Turning his attention to the other rooms without people in them, he finally found an interesting one directly below where the Lord Protector's spire had been. It was pretty obvious in hindsight, and once he broke in, he found a large archive. Looking through it briefly, he quickly noticed a small safe with magical locks placed on it.

After a bit of tinkering, he thanked his beloved Puzzle Box for the practice before he unraveled the locks and opened the safe. Within, he found just a single journal simply named Dark Witch. He took out the journal and began flipping through the pages as he quickly got a good idea of what he was dealing with.

The Dark Witch was apparently the official name they had decided for the former leader of the fourth faction. Probably because she used dark magic based on the descriptions in the book, but also because she aimed to spread "corruption and chaos" throughout Tri-World, and thus had to be purged.

Most of the content of the journal was just boring history about the fourth faction and how a bunch of Otherworlders who also wanted to get rid of the Karmic Plague had gathered there. The truly interesting part came toward the end after a far too self-gratifying section about how awesome the Lord Protector had been during this entire conflict.

“Defeating the Dark Witch proved a strenuous task, but with the unification of those who saw her corrupted ideology, we managed to end her evil reign and burned the capital of her fledgling faction to the ground. However, even if we defeated her, ending her life proved difficult, but we firmly believe that the fight left her crippled as she fled underground. May the monsters down there consume her, so she can at least give something back to the now-renamed Tri-World. Note: Do keep the area under observation, especially the entrance to the cavern system she fled into.

Update: Recent data suggest the witch still lives even a decade after the fall of her faction. Designate area as a no-go zone.

Update two: The influence of the witch has spread more than we hoped. Diving into the cavern system is an option, but too risky. Erecting countermeasures using other means is heavily advised. I will bring it up at the next summit.

Update three: Countermeasures successfully deployed. We decided to enter the cave system and discovered what she was trying to do, but we managed to stop her by sealing away a treasure of corruption she had brought with her when she arrived on Tri-World. Unless the three Living Seals are destroyed, that damn witch shall never be able to ruin Tri-World.”

Jake read the journal and was about to contact his party when suddenly a notification appeared.

Bonus Objective Gained: Find and deactivate the three Living Seals to unseal the “treasure of corruption” brought to Tri-World by the Dark Witch. Warning: doing this will make it impossible to escape Tri-World with the assistance of the three major factions.

Current Progress: Living Seals (1/3)

Well, turns out the system wanted to tell them before he could. Moreover, they had apparently already unlocked one of the Living Seals. Jake was unsure what exactly a Living Seal was, but the journal provided a few more snippets of information. Living Seals were honestly pretty self-explanatory, as they were seals rooted within living beings. The journal even included the fact that the Elf-King of all people had been the Living Seal from the Enlightened Empire, with the two other Living Seals placed within individuals from the two other factions.

“An unexpected but welcome bonus,” the Fallen King communicated through the Golden Mark after Jake was done explaining the rest of the content in the journal.

“Considering we already planned on purging the entire power structure of these factions, this extra objective is indeed of little consequence and only benefits us,” the Sword Saint agreed.

“So, she was indeed still alive and is called the Dark Witch. Did you find more information on her, and do you think she will prove hostile or amicable when we make contact?” Dina asked. As she and Sylphie were heading toward the Dark Witch, this information was obviously quite a lot more pertinent for the two of them than the two guys.

“Hard to say,”

Jake honestly answered. "It has been more than two hundred years since they defeated her, and chances are the Karmic Plague has quite the hold on her now. I think it is more likely that this treasure was left behind before she was fully infected by the plague, with her maybe being a boss guarding it or something. Either way, proceed with caution. If the Dark Witch was strong enough to require all the factions to work together, then she is likely the most powerful opponent on the floor."

"We shall keep that in mind," Dina assured him. "And, to clarify, you remain confident in meeting up with us on short notice if required?"

"As long as Sylphie stays with you, yes," Jake confirmed.

"Ree!"

"Yep, take good care of Dina for the rest of us," Jake chuckled a bit to himself. The other four continued talking a bit, primarily out of boredom, as they were all just traveling. Not exactly the most entertaining pastime.

Jake, on the other hand, did a final scan of the ruined capital city before flying back to the forest, where he could finally get back to what was truly important:

Improving Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Something it would hopefully not be called much longer.

He had already mentally gone over many of the downsides of the skill, but for now, he didn't actually bother to try and address any of those directly. No, instead, he wanted to solely focus on adding onto the basic properties of the skill while only ridding it of the negative aspects that there were absolutely necessary to remove for his new arrow idea to work.

Without further delay, he got started, and he began with the most straightforward improvement. Jake was an arcane hunter, through and through, yet his Ambitious Arrow didn't have a hint of arcane energy to it. That was definitely something he wanted to touch upon and improve. However, he didn't just want to do it in a basic way but in a way that would assist him in what he wanted to do later.

There were also some other aspects he wanted to improve upon right away for his idea to even work, and one of those was the rule of how the arrow couldn't hit anything that wasn't the target. He didn't need it to be an arrow that would hit everyone equally, but just the option for it still to harm targets it wasn't specifically made for. Even if it wasn't more than just a packet of harmful energy that dealt pretty shit damage, it would still be enough, as all he needed was the conceptual change.

In the forest, Jake began to look around for any beasts and quickly found a few D-grades lurking about. They were good enough, and Jake got practicing. He started experimenting by summoning arrow after arrow while he focused on them while moving towards the improvements he wanted. This also quickly revealed another of the "bad" things about the skill now only being rare: it was too cheap. When he first got it, the skill had taken a lot out of him, but that was no longer the case. That he also just needed to up all the specs of the skill was a given.

His practice continued uninterrupted for five more days as he had rapidly moved from choosing different targets to constantly summoning arrows for the same D-grade – a goat of some kind - repeatedly while feeling for slight changes. On the third day, he managed to create an arrow that he then promptly used to kill another D-grade than his initial target, proving that the strict requirement for only working on the targeted foe was gone. The only reason it had only taken so long was that he wanted to ensure the skill wouldn't lose any efficiency in the process, and luckily it hadn't. In fact, it had overall gotten slightly more power from other minor improvements he had added.

Towards the eve of day five, Jake was done.

He held out his hand as an arrow appeared. Its design was that of a simple bolt that looked straight off a small ballista, with runic carvings covering the shaft. This was all pretty standard, and one only truly saw the changes when looking at the arrowhead. It was slightly larger than normal and had the hue of Jake's arcane mana. If one looked really closely, one could see what looked like small lighting bolts bouncing within the arrowhead from the intense infusion of destructive arcane energies. The runes covering the body also now carried slight hints of arcane energy, making the entire arrow slightly more powerful. This was not necessarily due to it getting inherently stronger but now being a better fit for his Path.

Jake nodded, satisfied as he got a notification. For now, he ignored it as he shot the arrow toward his designated target. It flew true as the far lower-leveled monster naturally didn't stand a chance to dodge. He carefully observed its effect when it hit. The stable arcane energy covering the tip of the arrowhead pierced into the goat like a true physical arrow – something Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter usually didn't – and a flood of destructive arcane energy came out. However, rather than simply exploding, it rode the curtains of the true Ambitious Arrow beneath that hit right as the stable arcane barrier shattered.

The arrow sank into the body of the monster as Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter usually did, releasing a flood of pure damage into the goat. Some of the destructive arcane energy snuck its way in, too, directly impacting the soul of the goat along with the inherent energy of the Ambitious Arrow for a substantial increase in overall damage. The goat's soul was instantly extinguished just as he saw the destructive arcane energy that couldn't enter through the "hole" created by the Ambitious Arrow continue onward like normal, blasting a hole in the goat's physical body.

It was complete overkill, but good data. Jake also finally checked his notifications and saw the upgraded skill.

Skill Upgraded: [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Rare)] --> [Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)]

The name had gotten super long to the level of it being kind of dumb, but nevertheless, he read the full description to see what he had changed.

[Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] – An upgraded version of the signature skill of the Ambitious Hunter. Grants the ability to summon a powerful double-layered arrow to strike down a specific foe. The Hunter must envision his foe and, with great focus, channel his Willpower to slay it into the creation process. The arrowhead will possess two layers, allowing the Hunter to inject destructive arcane energy into a stable arcane layer surrounding the true arrowhead. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target. Damage increased further based on level disparity. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, Intelligence, and Perception when using Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter.

So, it now also had arcane energy infused into it, resulting in it scaling with Intelligence. It had changed the wording when creating the arrow to include Willpower, indicating some scaling with that too. Additionally, the strict target requirement was indeed gone, and it included the description of the layers with destructive arcane energy within.

Jake nodded, satisfied as he sat down and took a breather. It was a good upgrade, and the only downsides from the upgrade were the increased energy cost and slightly longer time to summon. The upsides were pretty much all the changes to the skill, along with significantly increased damage to all aspects of the skill, even the pure Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter part. Yet Perhaps most importantly, the skill was now far more aligned with his Path.

However... Jake wasn't done with this upgrade session yet.

One of the things he had never liked much about the former nor current skill was his lack of input on how the arrow would end up looking and its overall design. Sure, the skill tried to design the arrow to be better against a specific target, but in all honestly, as long as the end was pointy enough, the actual effect of this system-assisted customization tended to be negligible. What customization the system did assist with was also dependent on his own insights into the target, so who's to say he couldn't just do that customization himself? No, he definitely didn't need that part of the skill... so if he could replace it with him designing the arrow himself, that would be swell.

If he could do this, that meant he could make use of the larger form factor of the arrow compared to his normal arrows. Considering he often conjured an arrow and kept it hidden in his quiver until he needed it, he could even have the entire creation process be a bit more involved. When he first got the skill, Jake needed to spend well over a minute focusing all he could to make one arrow without being able to do anything else, while now he could create it pretty fast within his quiver without affecting him. He was fine with it taking longer for a better effect, and with his C-grade mind and soul, he could easily split his attention between a pretty involved summoning process and fighting.

There was also the downside of him even needing a high level of insight related to his target for the skill to even activate. He could always summon arrows for humans or other beings that he was already familiar with, but he often faced unique opponents he had never seen before. So unless he wanted to spend a good week stalking his target to analyze it, he was shit out of luck. This was particularly a problem when one factored in how it was pretty much anti-synergy with Stealth Attack that Jake couldn't make his strongest arrow from the get-go.

To summarize, the primary thing he truly wanted out of the skill was more control. Back when he got it, the level of automatization in the skill was great. He only had to focus on a specific target the system ruled he knew enough about, and bam, the arrow would be summoned.

Now he wanted to truly be the master of his own skill. Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter was a fine upgrade... but it was just the first part of his plan. Because if he had to upgrade it, he wanted to upgrade it properly.

In all honesty, Jake had long wanted to do a lot of things with Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. However, he always hesitated. One of the reasons he hadn't upgraded it before was definitely because he didn't know what direction he wanted to take it. He knew that opening one door would close another, and while just infusing the arrow with arcane energy was an easy solution to instantly upgrade it, Jake wasn't certain if that was what he wanted. He was pretty confident it would be part of the upgrade, but he feared making his arcane affinity too prominent and creating a skill that no longer made use of the quite frankly awesome innate concepts within the original Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Now he felt more confident, and he believed he had found a good solution.

Because if he couldn't decide which direction to take the skill... why not all of them at once?

Chapter 720: Nevermore: Better Arrow = Better Person

Upgrading skills was indeed something one had to do with a lot of forethought and consideration. Well, that didn't really count for most Legacy skills as, ultimately, they all led toward the same Origin, so even if you misstepped once, it was easy to realign. However, with skills like Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter that had no set progression path, it was easy to fuck up the skill's future potential.

While it was true that entirely removing a concept from a skill was difficult, what was even more difficult was adding it back again, especially if it was a concept you didn't truly comprehend. As an example, then adding dark mana to something or taking it away again wasn't overly hard for Jake, but what if he, let's say, tried to upgrade Big Game Hunter? What if he fucked up and removed the passive ability that straight-up gave him stats when fighting stronger opponents? If that happened, he would be shit out of luck with a skill that was likely just worse than what he had before.

Jake was certain that something like Big Game Hunter relied on some concepts Jake could eventually learn to manipulate himself – just look at Yip of Yore, who somehow manipulated insane concepts to make himself stronger to a ridiculous degree - but for the current Jake, there was no way in hell.

That means if he lost that conceptual aspect, he had no way to add it back. That had been Jake's biggest fear with upgrading Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, as his arcane affinity tended to be somewhat overpowering whenever he applied it to anything. Thus he had decided to avoid messing with the true core of the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter by adding an arcane layer all around it to keep all influences from other concepts away from it. He would still affect these concepts a little, as not doing so was impossible if he wanted to improve the overall capabilities of the skill, but he did so with a steady hand.

The upgrade to epic rarity had been easy enough, but going beyond that would be quite a challenge. One once more had to remember that this was all Jake working on improving the skill. There was no pre-defined way to upgrade the skill; he was going purely by feel and what he wanted to do.

Jake didn't know how much time he would have before he was needed elsewhere, so he got to work right away. He informed the Fallen King that they shouldn't contact him through the Golden Mark unless it was an emergency or they needed to ask something vital. The Unique Lifeform naturally didn't argue but understood that Jake was working on something important, leaving him wholly alone to improve the skill.

Well, he was not entirely alone as he was surrounded by a bunch of innocent beasts that would become test subjects. There were also a few nearby villages of natives if that became relevant... Jake would have no shame using those as test subjects either, considering they planned on cleansing the planet anyway.

After meditating a bit on the subject, Jake began to draw a mental map of what he wanted to do. The very first thing was to deconstruct the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter-part of his newly upgraded skill. More accurately, he wanted to isolate the concept responsible for the skill dealing more damage to more powerful foes. After that was done, he would work on improving. Jake already knew that one potential direct improvement of the Ambitious concept was the Avaricious one, so that was an obvious contender. The Horizon-Chasing concept from his new class was also an option as that seemed even higher-tier... but Jake did sometimes know when to limit himself.

The reason he needed to isolate this concept was to make sure he would place it at the very center of the skill. Right now, Jake didn't need to "place" it anywhere as the skill had an automatic summoning process, but if his improvements worked as he desired, then he would have to design the entire arrow by himself with minimum system assistance. There would still be some system assistance – if not, it wouldn't be a skill – but it would be far from an automatic process.

In addition to this Ambitious or Avaricious concept, there was whatever made him deal more damage to foes he was more familiar with. That one was equally confusing and difficult to understand, so he also had to make sure he isolated that. Honestly, he wasn't sure how much he would touch it; he just hoped to successfully retain the concept with everything else he planned. If things did work out, it would change from being a requirement to something that would allow him to make a better arrow if he knew more about his opponent.

Essentially, these two concepts were ones he would isolate but not really touch much besides just trying to give them some overall improvements. Those improvements would likely come naturally from him just infusing more energy into the skill and the system coming in with an assist when the skill upgraded in rarity, but he still had to keep an eye out.

Now, when it came to the arrow itself... well, the idea of having a layered arrowhead was useful, and Jake did consider going forward with this same concept but ultimately decided against it. The reason he had even made the Double-Layered arrow upgrade was to confirm that this next part of the plan would work. And it had. Also, if Jake wanted to design and summon the entire arrow from scratch, what could he possibly create it from, if not his own arcane affinity?

If he did this, he would also have more leeway when it came to what he would add with this upgrade. The reason he was so insistent on being able to design the arrow himself in such detail wasn't just due to his desire for control but due to what he would add to this creation process. What he would mash into the arrow during its creation.

As for what he wanted to add? Well, this was where his desire to make the arrow go in all directions at once came in.

Jake could have chosen to go an upgrade path where he would infuse the arrow with a shitload of destructive arcane energy attuned to the inherent concepts in the skill, and he didn't doubt that would be very powerful. He could also have chosen to instead lean into his poisons... or dark mana. Maybe even curses.

He had considered getting a skill using curse energy as an example, but it was hard to dedicate a skill for just that, especially if the skill could only be used in limited circumstances. Of course, skills being hard to use could also lean into also making them stronger, Touch of the Malefic Viper being a prime example of a skill that was limited by design in its current grade to optimize power. This wasn't exactly what Jake

wanted, but he did purposefully add complexity to the skill, making the summoning process longer in trade for a better final product – and a more customizable product.

In fact, part of Jake’s inspiration for this upgrade path he had chosen was a way to shore up a potential weakness: what if he faced an opponent he knew was weak to something but didn’t have a good way to deliver the super-effective attack?

Well, that is what he hoped this new skill could become: a way to deliver whatever kind of arrow he thought suitable for the specific situation he found himself in.

In summary, Jake wanted to create an arrow he would build from its very core.

A core would be created, consisting of stable arcane mana locking in conceptual energy related to the Avaricious, with the arrowhead containing the “better against an enemy I know” concept. Around it would be a second layer of arcane barriers housing energy Jake could choose entirely on his own. Blood from the Malefic Viper, poison mist from Wings of the Malefic Viper, curse energy from Eternal Hunger, destructive arcane mana, dark mana, or even just fire mana or whatever else he decided to toss in there. The point was he wanted it to be customizable.

It seemed simple enough in principle, but Jake liked to keep it that way. Of course, he knew that, in reality, it was far from easy to accomplish what he wanted. So he did the only thing he knew how to do:

Repeatedly try shit until suddenly everything somehow works out.

Jake wasn’t the kind of guy to sit down with a notebook and sketch out different hypotheses while scratching them off one by one as he slowly found the right solution. He was instead the kind to fail

spectacularly while leaning into his absolutely massive Perception stat to spot what was wrong while relying on his intuition to decide his next course of action.

Thus Jake got started as he quickly found a target and held out his hand. He fought back as the skill began to activate as he tried to get a good read of what exactly was happening when he summoned it. With some effort, a single string of arcane mana formed, followed by a few more that began to create an outline. He then tried to infuse a bit of-

And it broke.

He went again and tried to-

Broke again.

Alright, what if he-

Shards of arcane energy fell all over the ground.

Ah, but-

Energy feedback was a bitch, and now Jake had quite a few burn-like marks across his hand as it got frayed. Luckily, he had two hands!

Okay, a few hours later, he was down to one hand, but in his defense, he had tried something new that could have totally worked. Nothing a potion couldn't fix!

Given enough time, things were sure to turn out just like he had imagined, right? He should have sufficient time with his party members traveling to their respective destinations, so he just had to keep on keeping on. Sure, it could get a little dangerous at times, but hands could always be regrown, so was it really that dangerous?.

Besides, he had confidence. It wouldn't take that long, right?

A long time later.

Jake held out his hand as the air just above his palm seemed to shimmer as a film of extremely thin arcane mana appeared, showing the outline of a shaft. Stamina, health points, and mana left his body as this shimmer condensed into barely visible energy within this fine film. Once it had reached a certain threshold, Jake sent out thousands of strings with a mental command. They all wrapped around the arrow like he was weaving something, spinning around what would become the arrow's body.

Quickly, a solid purple-ish shaft was created as Jake turned his attention toward the tip of the would-be arrow. Another fine barrier of arcane mana appeared as Jake focused on the native Tri-Worlder in the distance. An odd energy Jake could not truly describe gathered within the arrowhead as Jake summoned a ball of stable arcane mana around it to make sure it couldn't escape.

Once he felt certain the energy was properly sealed within, faint destructive arcane energies licked across this ball as it sheared off parts until, finally, a broadhead tip was formed. Jake nodded, satisfied as he moved on with the next part. Another firm fill covered the entire arrow at once as Jake focused.

Pink-purple destructive arcane energy crackled to life within the thin barrier of arcane energy, entirely locked away from the energies sealed in the shaft's core and arrowhead. He kept pouring in destructive arcane mana as it became denser and denser until he stopped just before it would explode. He had a lot of experience with the entire thing exploding at this point.

Another web of arcane strings appeared, spinning around the entire arrow as it was nicely wrapped up and strengthened. Studying the arrow, he checked for any imperfections and saw nothing outrageous. He had to constantly focus on all of the different energies and keep them stable throughout this process while not letting any of the conceptual power leak out.

So far, so good, Jake told himself.

Jake reached out with his hand and touched what he had just summoned, barely able to fit his hand around it. It was more than two and a half meters long and quite thick, with a large broadhead that didn't look especially sharp, but Jake knew looks could be deceiving. Giving the shaft a good squeeze, he felt for its constructional integrity, and seeing that his hand didn't get blown up, he nodded in satisfaction.

Now it was down to the final part.

With careful hands – but not too careful, as he wanted to make sure the entire thing wasn't too unstable – Jake nocked the frankly too-large arrow, the size so stupidly big he had to use some light telekinesis to keep it level. As he stood there with it nocked, he took a deep breath and felt for the final concept he

wanted to introduce. One that he hadn't really thought he would add, but when he had reached this point before, it had just felt right.

Focusing, fletchings began to slowly grow out of the arrow. They were subtle and looked plastic, but Jake knew they were far from simple as they practically radiated with a familiar energy. It was true that Jake didn't have confidence in infusing the concept from his class into it... but he still had confidence in using some of the concepts from his archery skill.

Jake did a final lookover at the frankly massive arrow he was barely holding up. This was far from his first time getting to this point, and he took a deep breath as he prepared for the final part of the process.

Here goes nothing.

Focusing all his will, Jake exerted pressure on the arrow from all sides as he willed it to condense. A loud crack sounded out as, in an instant, the entire arrow was smashed from a two-and-a-half meter long arrow down into one just a bit over a meter and twenty. Jake stood frozen with bated breath as he carefully observed every part of the arrow.

A few seconds passed, as nothing happened.'

Nothing happened was good.

Fuck yeah, Jake grinned as he knew he had succeeded, a notification confirming it right after.

Skill Upgraded: [Double-Layered Arrow of the Ambitious Arcane Hunter (Epic)] --> [Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)]

Smiling, Jake read the notification and was honestly surprised at seeing an all-new word used in the skill name. Protean. That was not one Jake had run into before, but it was one of those words that sounded powerful. As far as he recalled, it was pretty much a synonym for versatile but probably considered a level higher. It also tended to mean something with being the “first” or something... which gave Jake pause. Arcane was not mentioned anywhere in the skill name, so what if that was mixed into that Protean word? Or was he just overthinking things, and the reason it didn’t mention his arcane affinity in the name was because it was a less-significant building block than the other parts?

He was unsure and exited his thoughts.

Jake looked at the random native in the distance he had designated his desired target when creating the arrow. He stared for a few seconds before he sighed, shaking his head. He lowered his bow and, with a simple mental command, dispelled the arrow. It had been difficult to make, but he knew that with the skill upgraded, it would be far easier the next time. Plus, he found no joy or satisfaction in slaying a random E-grade farmer.

What he did find joy in was reading the description of his new skill.

[Protean Arrow of Avaricious Horizons (Ancient)] – An arrow born not of a single desire but to create something that could encompass all of them. Grants the skill to design and summon a powerful layered arrow to strike down a targeted foe. The Hunter may envision his foe and channel his Willpower into the creation process. The arrow will possess extra layers, and the Hunter can inject desired energy into these stable arcane layers surrounding the true arrow. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target dependent on Willpower and your familiarity with the target. Damage increased further based on level disparity, Perception, and distance traveled. Due to the Hunter’s

powerful connection to the arrow, he can influence its flight path. Stat bonuses are applied depending on the nature of the summoned arrow.

There was a lot to unpack, but all in all, Jake had gotten exactly what he wanted. Plus, there was clearly room for growth. The description mentioned he could do multiple layers of energies, but Jake was pretty sure he could only do a single one right now. He also kept all the things he wanted and added some nice extra scaling to the arrow with the Horizon concepts. It even mentioned he could influence its flight path, something Jake hadn't explicitly aimed at becoming able to do but something he was excited to test out.

All in all, this arrow truly was an amalgamation of so many different concepts, and he was all for it.

Seeing as he was done with the upgrade, Jake decided to return to the real world and contact his party members, which he had neglected for... he wasn't sure how long.

"I am done with the skill upgrade," Jake communicated through the Golden Mark, quite happy with himself.

"About time," the Fallen King sent back in a slightly judgemental tone.

"I wasn't that long... was I?" Jake questioned. He had a tendency to lose track of time when really focusing on stuff like this, but he couldn't have been that long if his party members never contacted him during his training, right?

"You should check your notifications," the Sword Saint just sent.

“What? Have you guys managed to... oh...”

Yeah, alright. Looking at the missed notifications, Jake could see he had mayhaps taken a bit longer than expected.