

Hunter 721

Chapter 721: Nevermore: Dark Witch

When Jake said he was good at zoning everything out when he focused on something, he meant he was really good at zoning everything out. Even the notifications he had gained during this time had gone unregistered. Luckily he hadn't pissed off this party by missing some crucial messages, as the Fallen King had honored his wish of not contacting him outside of emergencies. Something that the Unique Lifeform hadn't found necessary to do a single time.

Still... Jake could see why the Unique Lifeform was a bit unsatisfied when he finally checked his notifications.

Opening them up, the first thing he saw was that they had apparently gotten another bonus objective without him even noticing.

Bonus Objective Gained: Find a way to unlock the seal obscuring your path into the Dark Descent created by the Dark Witch leading toward the core of the planet.

Current Progress: Dark Descent unlocked (0/1)

So this one confirmed the theory that the Dark Witch had indeed gone toward the core and even created a way to get down there. Of course, they likely had to also get rid of all three Living Seals before-

Bonus Objective Completed: Destroy all three Living Seals. 1000 Nevermore Points earned.

Right, they had also gotten that done, but hopefully, Jake could at least help with that seal on the-

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Descent unlocked. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

Okay, Jake was beginning to realize he had indeed taken a bit longer than he probably should have, but it seemed like things were going well!

Though there was still much to be done if one looked at the remaining bonus objectives they had gained during Jake's minor mental absence.

Bonus Objective Gained: Discover the fate of the Dark Witch.

Current Progress: Dark Witch's fate discovered (0/1)

Along with:

Bonus Objective Gained: Assist the New Beast Alliance in taking over the faction formerly known as the Beastfolk Alliance by helping to eliminate all enlightened beings remaining in their territory.

Current Progress: Enlightened Beings Remaining (2.093.778/9.421.400)

His party had clearly been up to quite a lot, with the Fallen King seemingly mid-genocide in the area formerly controlled by the Beastfolk Alliance.

“So... I apologize? Anyway, where are we? What is the status of things?” Jake questioned. “I am especially interested in what is up with this New Beast Alliance.”

“The two other factions are entirely destroyed. Well, mostly destroyed. We found out that beasts are actually entirely unaffected by the Karmic Plague. It only works on those considered enlightened, so the Fallen King formed an alliance with the beasts there to wipe out all the enlightened, especially the Otherworlders,” Dina explained.

“Are you sure they are unaffected? The Fallen King and Sylphie were both affected when we first got here, as far as I could feel,” Jake asked, a bit confused.

“Only in its inactive form. The Karmic Plague cannot properly affect anyone not considered enlightened, so once it exits hibernation, it will just fizzle out. The Fallen King already confirmed the beasts that were part of the Beast Alliance were not affected,” Dina continued explaining as the Fallen King jumped into the conversation.

“Beasts that were all suppressed by the beastkin otherworlders summoned here. They did manage to reach some level of balance with the otherworlders but never liked them. My arrival became their impetus to claim power and wipe out the enlightened. To reject such a purely beneficial objective seemed foolish, so we naturally accepted it. Should we fail, it is doubtful the Wyrmgod would penalize us, and should we succeed, it is merely bonus points,” the Fallen King explained.

“And the Risen Kingdom?” Jake questioned.

“They had an unexpected case of heavy downpour. Sadly, the maniacs there who sought to find a way to corrupt the Karmic Plague into something that would effectively mind control every enlightened being into desiring to be Risen did not survive such unfortunate weather,” the Sword Saint answered. “As for a status on current events, the Fallen King and I are both on our way to Dina and Sylphie right now.”

“Got it,” Jake sighed. Seemed like he had missed a lot. “How long was I unreachable?”

“Seven weeks and three days,” the Fallen King answered.

“See, honestly, from my point of view, this is as much on you as me for flying so slow you didn’t need me during all this time for anything,” Jake argued.

“That isn’t how things work,” the Sword Saint just stated.

“Fair enough, I zoned out a bit too hard... so, Sylphie, how are things?”

“Ree, ree, ree,” Sylphie explained, making Jake nod. Seems like they had done quite well too. Found the old faction the Dark Witch had created and killed a bunch of beasts that had taken over the area, including a mini-boss monster that guarded the former capital. From there, they gathered a bunch of intel, discovering a bit about the Dark Witch’s plan, including the location of the dig site she had created to reach the core.

From there, they found the Dark Descent and discovered it had been sealed off by someone – likely the Dark Witch herself. They had then spent some time finding a way to unseal the barrier by researching what the Dark Witch had left behind and were now making their way down the long winding tunnels leading into the core of Tri-World. A task made quite a bit harder by the hordes of monsters in the way they had to fight through, but Dina had at least left clues along the way, so once the Fallen King and Sword Saint arrived, they should be able to follow quite easily.

“So, considering even I can see the finale of this floor will play out down at or around the core, I guess you all figured it out too?” Jake surmised.

“Naturally,” the Fallen King stated. “And based on our estimates, I shall arrive at the entrance to the caverns in roughly a week, while the Sword Saint will be four days.”

“Aight,” Jake nodded to himself. “Want me to join Sylphie and Dina as soon as possible?”

“Was that not your original intentions?” the Sword Saint asked. “Or do you need some more time to practice? Perhaps familiarize yourself with your new skill? I wouldn’t want to rush you.”

“No, I am fine with testing it out properly in real combat, so I will make my way to Sylphie,”

Jake answered, not responding to the slight tone of sass in the old man’s voice.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked, just wanting to make sure.

“Yep, it shouldn’t take that long... but can you find a kind of open area? I get you are underground, but if there are any big caverns or anything, it would be great. Not entirely sure how accurate I will be,” Jake said with a light smile.

“Ree.”

Jake nodded as he began to prepare himself, waiting for Sylphie to give the signal.

Now, one of the reasons his party had been fine with leaving Jake behind was because of what he was about to do.

When it came to long-distance travel, the best in their party was, surprisingly, the Sword Saint. Well, he was the best circumstantially. Through his profession, he could paint an area and “save” a moment in space that he could then travel to. This meant he was the fastest at returning somewhere he had been before as long as you gave him a dozen or so hours to create a painting first.

Second-best was Jake. However, his means of travel were not as restricted as the Sword Saint’s, though his means also came with downsides. Accuracy was one of those downsides, especially considering Jake didn’t have a lot of practice with this method of travel, and the method wasn’t really designed as a long-distance travel skill anyway. Instead, it focused on distance, speed, and ability to just get the hell away from where he currently was.

He was naturally talking about the special ability of his Wings of the Malefic Viper. An often-ignored aspect of the skill but one incredibly useful. Usually, Jake wouldn’t use it as a means of travel, but the circumstances of floor forty-one made it seem like a good idea. Plus, he could reduce many of the skill’s downsides by using a certain little hawk as a direction marker.

Jake and Sylphie still had a powerful connection through their Union Oath, allowing Jake to easily zone in on her. Over long distances, things like the Golden Mark or even his Hunter's Mark sometimes got a bit fuzzy, but the Oath had no such problems – something that shouldn't be surprising considering its Primordial origin.

After a while, Jake got the signal from Sylphie and a slightly worried comment from Dina if he was sure things would work out as he planned.

"Relax, even if things go slightly sideways, what's the worst thing that can happen? That I get stuck in a wall or something? I'll be fine," Jake said, trying to calm her down as he got to work.

Wings sprung from his back as he also summoned scales all over his body. Taking a deep breath, he began to charge them with energy as he activated the escape method of Wings of the Malefic Viper. Mist poured out and began to stick to his body as his entire form turned greenish.

The entire world seemed to distort as Jake flapped his wings once. Everything warped as Jake allowed his instinct to guide him. Sylphie's location felt so close, yet so far away, as Jake flapped his wings several more times as he went through a distorted world where even the concept of space was subverted and eroded.

Jake's mana dropped by just over ten thousand points every single time he flapped his wings, his two-hundred and thirty-thousand large mana pool rapidly depleting. Luckily, it took less than ten seconds before Jake stopped the skill at the behest of his gut, telling him now was the time.

Unluckily, he had waited a fraction of a second too long to disengage the skill. The entire world turned dark as Jake felt a deep pressure all over his body the second he faded back into reality. Jake kept his cool, having expected this to potentially happen.

Didn't miss by too much, Jake sighed in relief. Sylphie was only about a kilometer above him, and from a quick Pulse, he saw that there was even a small cave on his path upwards.

"Ree?" Sylphie asked, having felt Jake nearby.

"Yeah, just a little stuck. Gotta take a second to--"

Before he was even done talking, he felt a thick vine wrap around his body as he was dragged upward through the path it had created. He did still have to deal with rock and soil scraping him all the way up, but such was a minor sacrifice for quick travel.

"How did you miss and end up within the earth like that?" Dina asked the moment she dragged him out of the ground. "It was like you just appeared, yet I feel a distorted path..."

"I flew there, duh," Jake smiled, having not really gone into detail about how Wings worked.

She just looked at him for a moment before looking back at the vine she had dragged him up with and the signs of it rotting from the remnant poison left after the use of Wings. "Fine, a Legacy skill from the Malefic One. Are you ready to go, or did the skill take a lot out of you?"

Jake was down to just a bit above a quarter, but after popping a potion, he was all good to go. He wouldn't be able to summon his Wings of the Malefic Viper for a few days, but that should be fine, considering he was underground. The slight feeling of weakness after using such an escape skill also

wasn't that big of a deal either, as Jake had joined them more as a guide than a fighter, Sylphie and Dina more than capable of defeating all the beasts on the way down.

From there, the trek towards the center of Tri-World continued. Sylphie and Dina had already gotten pretty damn deep by the time Jake arrived, nearly thirty percent of the way already, but that still meant there was a lot to go. Luckily for them, Jake was a good guide when leading them through the elaborate tunnel system created by the Dark Witch.

Rather than natural tunnels, it was clear these ones had been dug. Magical reinforcements could be found here and there, and waymarkers were placed at certain intervals, with there even being a few sealed-off rooms hidden away off to the side of the cavern at times.

However, it was also clear the tunnel was heavily neglected. No one had been there for a few hundred years, so the beasts had taken over again. Most of them were worm-like beasts called Tunnelers – the same creatures the Caravan Guard Captain they met upon first arriving on Tri-World had warned them about. These Tunnelers came in many variants and sizes, and they could be threats if one was taken by surprise or got swarmed, especially in an environment that was so beneficial to them. Being stuck in a cavern surrounded by earth while fighting creatures using earth magic was always problematic.

Ultimately, these damn Tunnelers did little more than slow down their descent, especially when they decided that trying to collapse a part of the tunnel on them was a good idea. Even when mini-boss versions appeared, the three of them easily handled it. It was kind of monotonous, but at least the beasts they met got stronger the deeper they got.

They even began encountering other things deeper down. Elementals of the earth and lava variety, some insectoid monsters, and even a few fucking mushroom bastards that Jake called dibs on as he utterly annihilated them. The only bad thing during all this was that using his new and improved Protean Arrow wasn't ever necessary.

Days turned to weeks as they kept getting deeper and deeper, and Jake hoped that they would soon face enemies worth fighting.

Sadly, before that could happen, the Sword Saint joined them, having been able to reach them a lot faster by following the path they created. With him there, the fights naturally only got easier. A few weeks later, the Fallen King also rejoined the party proper, as the entire gang was back together for what would hopefully be the final trek of floor forty-one.

Picking up their pace now that they didn't fear getting surrounded by the constantly lurking monsters, they rapidly made progress, and only about a month later, they finally reached their destination. Through a Pulse of Perception, Jake saw a trapdoor of sorts leading into a giant expansive space. Rushing down, they soon made it to the trap door. He had kept the huge space below scouted with Pulse all throughout, but only after they dismantled the pretty simplistic seal on the trap door and opened it could he truly appreciate the sight.

This was the first time for them all – even Dina – to see the core of a planet. Jake stared as he saw a giant red molten orb floating in the middle of the chamber, more than five kilometers across, absolutely pulsing with power and pure energy. Surprisingly, it only gave off a little bit of heat, despite looking like a miniature sun.

The cavern that housed this massive core was even more enormous. It was nearly entirely spherical and about five hundred kilometers in diameter, no matter where one decided to measure it.

Jake and the others stared for a while... but Jake also felt like something was wrong as he looked at the orb floating there right in the middle. Looking closely, he saw what looked like small runes flashing on the orb for a few seconds at a time, and from within it, he got an incredibly intense response from some of his skills.

Sense of the Malefic Viper, along with Palate, were both practically going insane. Something was hidden within the core... no, it was merged with the core. It had become one with it. For a moment, Jake had hoped that maybe the core was just corrupted by some item... but no.

Tri-World was fucked; no two ways about it. The core itself was completely filled to the brim with the Karmic Plague of such intensity that Jake didn't doubt that the people involved in infecting the planet had been at least A-grade.

As Jake and the others stared at the core, there was movement somewhere down below. There, Jake saw a creature wandering. A hunched-over hooded being walked, seemingly without any aim, as it mulled about, something staring up at the core. Jake used Identify while still at an angle where she seemingly hadn't spotted them.

[Dark Witch – lvl 300]

"Level 300, I think the theory of her being the strongest on the planet is entirely correct," Jake communicated to his party.

"So what is the plan?" the Sword Saint asked.

Before anyone could respond, a system message popped up in front of them.

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Witch's fate discovered. 500 Nevermore Points earned.

"I... I see a path..." the Dark Witch muttered. "Heart unsealed... there is... a path..."

"My gut is telling me a fight is unavoidable here," Jake spoke through the mark.

"You can't know that..." Dina said, unsure. Right then, another message popped up.

Bonus Objective Gained: The Dark Witch has been corrupted by the Karmic Plague, and her mind is lost, yet a part of her seems to still hold onto her sanity and original goal. Now choose her final fate and, through that choice, the fate of Tri-World.

Current Progress: Dark Witch killed (0/1) OR Dark Witch defeated (0/1)

A dark pulse of energy suddenly went through the entire massive cavern sealing in the core. The moment it passed through him, Jake felt the attention of the Dark Witch below lock onto him. Him and the four others with him.

"NO! More plague bearers! No!" the Dark Witch's screeching voice rang throughout the massive core room. "Infected... but, monster not... also... human not? He... no, no, risky, risky. Only one choice acceptable..."

Behind them, the trap door leading into the core room slammed shut as a massive dark seal appeared on it. At the same time, the color scheme of the entire core room turned a shade darker as tens of thousands of black runes lit up over the walls. The only area not covered in darkness was the red core at the center.

Jake threw Dina a look. "Told you."

"I will save you! I will cure you! I will kill you!" a mad screech came, the Dark Witch's body erupting with energy down below.

Dina just sighed. "Restrain, not kill."

"Sure thing," Jake nodded, pulling out his bow. He had to admit, he was a bit excited about this opponent.

This was his first time fighting a witch, after all. Could be fun.

Chapter 722: Nevermore: A Witch's Plan

Jake could admit when he was wrong. Sometimes, at least. This was one of those times.

Witches aren't fun to fight.

Dark tendrils lined the walls, all of them semi-ethereal as they sought not to physically attack people but leave them with some odd dark affliction that wasn't a curse but seemed a lot like a curse. This particular affliction did damage and fucked with your senses, throwing them for a loop. Jake could definitely feel the roots of the magic in the dark affinity, but outside of that, he had no idea what he was dealing with.

“Hexes, try to avoid them. They are difficult to dispel,” Dina warned after Sylphie was hit and proceeded to smash into a wall as she became unable to tell up from down.

Okay, so they were dealing with hexes. Great.

Jake tried to claim the upper hand right off the bat when the fight had begun and activated Arcane Awakening at the stable 30%. The Sword Saint and Fallen King had also joined him – with Sylphie trying but getting hit by another few tendrils.

The first barrage of arrows released from Jake got blocked by a black disc of pure energy that popped into existence not close to the witch, but only five or so meters in front of Jake, making him nearly blow himself up if he hadn’t reacted fast enough to make all the arrows stable.

It wasn’t like the old man or Fallen King did much better. Rainclouds began to condense all around the room, but dark magic instantly influenced them, and the rainclouds became clouds of black smoke that flew toward the swordsman and encircled him.

Out of all of them, the Fallen King did have the greatest success as he released a golden wave of force that the Dark Witch seemingly couldn’t do much to influence. Yet the moment it was about to strike, the witch seemed to just disappear into nothingness, leaving nothing more than a pile of black smudge behind that absorbed the Fallen King’s golden wave.

Within the first ten seconds, it was established this fight would be annoying, and in the following minute, it was made extremely clear it would be very annoying. They were caught within the domain of a witch, one she had spent more than a century in. And it showed as their party found themselves bombarded by magic from all sides. Magic of varying kinds, from simple black bolts to odd hexes that did nothing but try and mess with you in some way. The Sword Saint even ended up getting hit by one that just made everything smell like absolute shit.

However, it wasn't all bad.

"She is running out of energy or at least spells," Dina said through their Golden Mark. "Look, the runes on the wall are fading with every second."

"And her mind clearly isn't all there," the Sword Saint added.

Jake had to agree. The spellcasting was complicated due to its inherent nature, and yet it felt sloppy and clearly not performed by someone with a plan. Usually, the most annoying opponent was someone who could string attacks together and claim momentum. This Dark Witch just threw everything and the kitchen sink at them, hoping something would hit them in the head. What was kind of weird was how her focus obviously shifted from Jake, Sylphie, and the Fallen King throughout the fight, instead focusing nearly all of her offensive magic on the Sword Saint and Dina.

This did confuse them initially until Jake realized why.

"You two are the only ones affected by the Karmic Plague."

Sylphie and the Fallen King were considered monsters and thus immune, while Jake had Palate of the Malefic Viper, which he had already used to remove any semblance of the plague from his body.

"Great, good to know," the Sword Saint grumbled as he found himself surrounded by odd eye-shaped objects that didn't look like they were doing anything except just staring at him menacingly.

The old man sent out an omnidirectional cut, making everything warp around him as he pushed away the eyes, only to find several of them appearing again, this time covering his sword and robe, freaking him out a little. Dina cast some spell on him that made the eyes instantly disappear, but this only seemed to pull the attention on her.

Sylphie and the Fallen King tried to do something to the Dark Witch, but she was seemingly impossible to lock down. To make matters worse, the dark aura in the room wasn't just there to limit visibility and enhance her own magic. Jake had activated Arcane Awakening at 30%, yet he felt himself dropping in power ever-so-slowly, down to a level where it felt like the boost was only at 20% now.

In other words, they were in a race to deplete the Dark Witch's power before they themselves were depleted. The best way to deplete her seemed to be attacking repeatedly, but none of them had managed to land a blow yet. Jake had a plan, though.

"Next time she reappears, I will try to land a hit," Jake said right after the Sword Saint shot out a beam of water, the Dark Witch once more turning herself into a black sludge.

Jake had managed to place a Hunter's Mark on her before she had disappeared, but when she disappeared, so had the Mark. It wasn't gone, though... just scattered. He nocked an arrow and drew the string as he held back on doing anything as he allowed Dina to protect him while waiting for her to appear. Not that she had to do much to protect him, considered the Dark Witch would rather attack the dryad over him.

A few seconds later, he felt the energy from the Hunter's Mark begin to gather. Without any hesitation, he turned and shot a hastily charged Arcane Powershot toward where she was about to pop into existence. While the arrow was in flight, her form coalesced, and before she could turn into sludge again, Jake hit her with Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

It worked. Kind of. The Dark Witch was frozen for a moment, allowing the extremely fast arrow to strike her, and she only managed to turn herself into a sludge again halfway through the following explosion. What did not go that well was what happened to Jake.

The moment he had used Gaze on the Dark Witch, so did something gaze back into him. His vision entirely disappeared, blinding him. Next went every single one of his other senses, even his sense of touch and balance. Everything felt wrong, and if not for his sphere, he would have been entirely disoriented, as if stuck in a black space of emptiness, trapped within his own mind.

Fucking hell, he cursed internally, feeling more insulted than anything. Through his sphere, he saw pockets of energy gather close to him, but before they could even fully appear, the dark aura clinging to Jake's form was dispelled as his eyes gave off a deep orange glow.

Dina hadn't even had time to start casting something to dispel whatever had affected Jake before he had overcome what he assumed was some kind of hex through the power of pure Perception. Jake's feeling of indignance for her daring to attack his wonderful Perception would not go unpunished as he quickly nocked another arrow.

If she wanted to play hide and seek, Jake was gonna show her he was the best damn seeker around.

The next time she appeared, Jake instantly struck, hitting her once more. A few seconds later, Sylphie slammed into her after following Jake's direction, with a massive golden beam hitting her at the next place of appearance. With every strike, the Dark Witch didn't seem to take much damage, but the many dark runes lining the wall did disappear at a far more rapid pace.

Meanwhile, Dina and the Sword Saint were having a less-than-pleasant time as weirder and weirder magic began to appear. At one point, Dina even had to struggle as Bobo accidentally shot a thorn into her stomach; his senses somehow switched around, making him think he was shooting a thorn away from her and not into her.

The old man had it even worse, as he didn't have a Bobo to defend him, forcing the Fallen King to step in a few times to avoid the swordsman taking a dangerous blow. His senses seemed entirely off, his attempts to parry inaccurate and not at all like him.

This annoying battle of perseverance continued, and Jake soon knew that holding back was not an option. Arcane Awakening activated at the offensive 50%, with his other party members also using their boosting skills to try and weather the storm of dark magic.

Throughout this all, Jake was also doing one more thing: creating an arrow.

Within his quiver, a Protean Arrow was being constructed carefully. Jake was approaching this carefully, condensing a very special arrow just for the Dark Witch. Killing her was not the objective, just weaken her, so Jake wanted to make a poison aimed to do just that. The internal layer would be with the usual concepts, even if his knowledge about the Dark Witch was pretty much non-existent. When it came to the second layer, Jake would lace it with quite the dose of neurotoxins, making it a true knockout arrow.

All he would need was a bit of time, and his Protean Arrow should be able to-

"I got it," the Fallen King spoke.

An explosion of light erupted from the Unique Lifeform as the outline of a crown appeared floating above him. In the very next moment, the crown shattered, sending out a shockwave of pure golden energy through the entire core room.

The Dark Witch had just reappeared as the golden aura washed over her. The hood covering her hunched-over form was blown back, revealing her true form. She was some kind of scalekin, and her empty black eyes suddenly seemed to regain focus.

“What... where...” the voice of the Dark Witch echoed throughout the hall as Jake threw the Fallen King a look.

Damn asshole just had to take away Jake’s cool moment.

The Dark Witch below looked completely out of it, but the remaining runes covering the cave walls had all stopped glowing, and the dark aura making them all lose power was gone. Jake’s danger sense also told him there were no hidden threats.

“I didn’t know you could do that,” Dina said, sounding pretty exhausted from having dealt with the attacks from the Dark Witch but happy the Fallen King had succeeded.

“The effects of the Karmic Plague on her were soul-related in nature. Is it not only natural I would find a solution considering my station?” the Fallen King answered, sounding cocky as hell.

Which to Jake was code for the Fallen King not actually knowing he could do it either. He had just suddenly figured out a potential solution halfway through the fight and now wanted to flex on them like he had known all along.

As Jake was still grumbling about not being allowed to use his super cool new arrow, they got a notification they had completed a bonus objective.

Bonus Objective Completed: Dark Witch defeated. 1500 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake checked the message and was a bit surprised at getting 1500 Nevermore Points. The number felt both too small and too big. They had fought a level 300, true, but it wasn't a true level 300 witch. It was more like they had fought the mostly passive defensive spells cast upon this domain before she went insane. If they had actually fought her for real... yeah, that would have been a lot more annoying.

Speaking of the Dark Witch.

"You... you are Otherworlders?" she spoke as she looked up at them with confusion. The witch took a few moments to gather herself as she bowed. "I apologize; I lost myself. When I felt the Karmic Plague begin to take hold of my soul, I attempted to avoid it by warping my psyche and sealing away the influence... obviously, that didn't go well."

Seeing as things had calmed down, Jake and company floated down toward where the witch was standing. She patiently waited as she cast some kind of magic on herself. Her body warped slightly as her crooked back straightened, and she stood up straight. Her flayed robes were also changed out for a newer one, which was when Jake noticed something else.

She didn't have any real equipment on during the fight either... yeah, definitely not gonna try and fight a witch dozens of levels above myself within her domain again, Jake told himself. Well, not anytime soon anyway.

The Dark Witch observed them carefully as they floated down, her eyes especially on the Fallen King and Jake.

"I greet the Unique Lifeform. From your aura, I suspect it was you who managed to awaken me from my stupor?" she spoke toward the Fallen King.

"It was indeed,"

he said, full of smugness. At least Jake interpreted it that way.

"Then I must thank you," she said, bowing toward the Unique Lifeform before turning to Jake. "But... you... why are you unaffected by the Karmic Plague?"

Jake was a bit surprised she could feel if he was infected or not... but then again, he really shouldn't be. The lady had spent a long-ass time trying to get rid of it, so being able to identify it wouldn't be weird.

"I was affected," Jake answered honestly. "I just got rid of it."

She stared at him for a few seconds before frowning. "That... shouldn't be possible. The origin of this Karmic Plague was an early S-grade. A C-grade should not have the ability to resist it unless... are you in any way related to the Order of the Malefic Viper?"

Jake was once more taken aback at the question. Mainly that she knew about the Order of the Malefic Viper. Usually, these dungeon characters didn't seem to know much about the outside world... but then again, she did also know that the Fallen King was a Unique Lifeform.

"I am a member of the Order, yes," Jake decided to answer truthfully.

"Were you sent here to deal with the Karmic Plague, too?" she questioned curiously.

"Wait, you are a member of the Order?"

"No, I am not. But the faction I belong to was hired by the Order to be on the lookout for instances of plagues still out there, and I got unlucky and ended up here when I flew too close to the sun with one of my divination attempts, triggering whatever ungodly teleportation the maniac who planted the Karmic Plague also placed on this planet," the Black Witch shook her head.

Jake nodded as Dina also stepped forward.

"We heard you were working on some way to address the Karmic Plague but got stopped by the other factions... can you tell us a bit more about that? Is it possible to save this planet?" the dryad asked with quite a bit of hope.

"The planet... yes, it should be possible," the Dark Witch nodded. "But the people on it... that is another story. Though I can see you already managed to get rid of some of those old bastards. Back then, they came to me and said they wanted to help me to get rid of it. I thought it was odd with the Karmic Plague and all, but I felt desperate. Halfway through the ritual they were supposed to help me with, they all suddenly turned on me. The backlash from the failed ritual weakened me significantly, and when they all

attacked at once... I had to flee down here. I was unconscious for a while, but my passive defenses managed to keep them away, and when I awakened, I found my methods unable to be used due to the Living Seals placed on it, and my mind already heavily deteriorated.”

Ah, there we go, Jake thought with relief. The Dark Witch was beginning to feel a bit too real, so it was nice to see she still had some pretty clearly scripted dialogue. Or maybe she just really liked to talk about her own background while giving out exposition.

“How do you plan on addressing the Karmic Plague? If it was truly placed by an S-grade...” Dina muttered.

“Usually, I would agree, but I got lucky. Before I was sent here, my master had already given me an item and a method to address planets infected I came across. Those other bastards sealed it away, but now that the Living Seals are gone, it is useable once more,” the Dark Witch explained as she held out both her hands.

Energy gathered as a stone only about twenty centimeters in diameter appeared, floating above her palms. Jake used Identify and was taken aback.

[Mimicry World Core (Unique)] – A mimicry of a true World Core, able to mirror another true World Core.

That... definitely seemed like a special item, and Jake already had a good idea of what the Dark Witch was about to say next.

“Using this Mimicry World Core, my original plan was to mirror the World Core you see before you and then transfer the Karmic Plague into it, away from the true core of this planet. I have researched the Karmic Plague, and it should be possible. I also discovered that this specific strain of the Karmic Plague does have a built-in failsafe: as long as the source – in this case, the energy within the core – is destroyed, a chain reaction will occur, wiping out anyone infected,” the Dark Witch explained.

Well, that sounds convenient, Jake nodded.

“So... I ask of you. Will you assist me in this ritual?” she asked with hope in her voice as an objective appeared.

Bonus Objective Gained: The Dark Witch has been awakened from her failed attempt to circumvent the influence of the Karmic Curse. She has asked you to help her in ridding Tri-World of the Karmic Plague once and for all through a ritual that will also slay all those infected if the Mimicry World Core is destroyed afterward.

Current Progress: Assist the Dark Witch in the ritual to cleanse Tri-World of the Karmic Plague.

Jake saw the objective and quickly exchanged glances with his party members. It was clear they all knew what they were doing now. And, hey, even if Jake didn’t get to use his cool new arrow, at least he would be able to do some ritual magic to get one over on the Fallen King.

He was a bit sad about missing out on a prime opportunity to do a planetary sacrificial ritual, but oh well, he would probably get another shot at some point.

Chapter 723: Nevermore: Something Reckless

When it came to rituals, their group only really had two individuals who could be of any use. Dina and Jake both knew quite a bit about rituals and formations, while the other three were just sitting ducks incapable of assisting with anything of substance.

At least not in the beginning. Jake and Dina helped the witch set up the initial parts of the ritual but soon hit an issue that they should have honestly seen coming.

“Many of the ingredients I wanted to use are no longer capable of supporting the ritual... we will need some replacements,” the Dark Witch said with a deep frown. “Would it be possible for some of you to perhaps acquire them?”

That’s right, there were fetch-quests. That at least gave the Fallen King, Sword Saint, and Sylphie something to do while Jake and Dina worked on the ritual circle with the Dark Witch. Jake had feared this would add a lot of time to this final part of floor forty-one considering the long trek the three of them would have to go on for each item, but luckily the Dark Witch had a way to alleviate that.

While space magic was distorted on the planet, she had found a way to faintly tap into this concept and set up a few teleportation points across the planet, all of them underground. Some had been broken with time, but most were still functional. The only bad thing about these teleportation points was that they were one-way only. So the three of them would have to make their own way back.

This was a problem for all of them except for a certain old man who got to painting straight away. Considering he would have the easiest time getting back, Sylphie and the Fallen King were tasked with retrieving the items closest to the entrance of the Dark Descent, while the old man would go for everything else. All in all, the Dark Witch needed five items from powerful mini-boss monsters spread across the planet. A totally random number of items and not at all one corresponding to the number of people usually in a Nevermore party, Jake was sure.

With everything hard at work, time rapidly passed. Jake and Dina managed to get in plenty of conversation with the Dark Witch during this time and learned a lot about the history of Tri-World, as well as all the knowledge she had about Karmic Plagues. What was most interesting was just how much she knew, especially when it came to stories about how plagues had done harm to the multiverse.

She was practically a living lexicon of horror stories brought on by plagues, making it very clear how bad they were, and several times mentioned how plagues were the closest thing to being outlawed that anything could be in a lawless multiverse. How if one of them decided to ever try and create a plague, they would be hunted down and killed. That last part was aimed at Jake only for some reason, not giving Dina enough credit. She could totally make a plague if she put her mind to it.

During this ritual construction process, Dina and Jake did discuss a few times how they had to keep an eye out for anything hidden within the massive magic circle they were making. Something that would allow the Dark Witch to do something they had not discussed or were planning on.

Perhaps they were being paranoid, but getting double-crossed was kind of the expected outcome. Jake would lie if he said he didn't predict she would somehow change the ritual halfway through to absorb the plague for power or maybe spread it far and wide, as she – in a massive plot twist - had actually been entirely corrupted and was doing all this to assist the Karmic Plague.

But nothing seemed to be wrong with the ritual to either of them, no matter how far they got in the process, and after a bit over two months, the ritual circle was completed. The Sword Saint had made three trips during this time, teleporting back through his weird painting magic, with the Fallen King and Sylphie fetching one item each.

With everything ready, Jake was still hesitant. Because there was one part of this entire thing they hadn't quite addressed.

If everything went as planned, the Karmic Plague would be destroyed. Destroying it would kill anyone infected with said plague, so both the Sword Saint and Dina would be fine as they weren't actually infected yet due to the fifty-year incubation period. But... the Dark Witch was. This meant that while Jake didn't get to do a sacrificial ritual for a planet... he had been helping a witch construct a ritual for her own suicide.

Something he and the other four weren't going to leave unmentioned as this was the biggest cause of their suspicion the Dark Witch would try to pull something. However, if she was honestly willing to sacrifice herself...

"We are done," the Dark Witch smiled happily, seeing the entire ritual circle Jake and Dina had helped make. It was directly below the core, but once the ritual began, the Karmic Plague from within the World Core would detect the Mimicry World Core and, due to its design, be unable to resist infecting what it thought was another planet. Once it transferred just a little energy, the ritual would allow the rest to be dragged into the Mimicry World Core and thus dispel the World Core of Tri-World entirely. All of this was naturally only possible due to the Mimicry World Core, which was honestly overpowered in Jake's eyes and clearly an item designed for something just like this.

"We are done indeed," Jake nodded as he looked at the circle before looking at the witch directly. "I am not going to beat around the bush. Based on your own words and what we designed this ritual to do, if we successfully pull this off, you will die in the process."

The Dark Witch looked at Jake and the others as she smiled. "I know. Don't get me wrong, I am not a fan of dying, but I knew from the very beginning this was a risk I would be running when I walked this Path. Even now, I feel the influence of the Karmic Plague gnawing at me. I can suppress it for now, but in just a few years, I will be back to being the mindless monster you fought when you first encountered me. Death is preferable to that. Going out taking this damn plague with me isn't the worst death, at least. I do wish you five luck in getting off the planet, though. While I have no future, it is not the same for you all."

Her words seemed sincere, at least to Jake. He knew he, at times, messed up, but he still felt like he could get a read on people's vibes, and the Dark Witch gave off the vibe of someone who truly would do anything to get rid of the Karmic Plague. That small speech she just gave only reaffirmed his thoughts and made him feel a bit bad about being so suspicious.

"When immortality is not on the table, a good death is the best end for a well-lived life," the Sword Saint nodded respectfully.

Dina clearly didn't like it but still nodded solemnly. Jake didn't know if this entire floor was about teaching them moral lessons, but he didn't like that the only "right" decision was one where not everyone could be saved.

"Let us not delay more than necessary. While my mind is still mine, I want to finish this once and for all," the Dark Witch said in a resolute voice.

All that was left was to respect her wish as they got to work. All six of them were necessary for the ritual, though the Sword Saint, Fallen King, and Sylphie would only serve as energy sources and stabilizing elements, while the Dark Witch was the primary controller. Jake and Dina would directly support her, which would help the ritual to proceed faster. Usually, it would take about a week, but with Jake and Dina there to help, the Dark Witch estimated no more than a single day would be needed as she wouldn't need any rest periods.

With everyone in place, the ritual began. Right below the true World Core floated the Mimicry World Core, ready to mirror the giant molten orb above and become the new host for the source of the Karmic Plague. Jake still had to admit he wasn't entirely clear on how the ritual would proceed; he just knew he would be supporting the Dark Witch in whatever she did.

Runes covering the entire chamber lit up, not with the usual darkish light, but a deep red. Energy instantly began filling the core room, their party of five providing much of it, along with all the items prepared by both the Dark Witch and what was recovered by the Fallen King, Sylphie, and Sword Saint.

These runes then began to send light toward the middle point right between the true World Core and the Mimicry floating many kilometers below it. Over the next many hours, a large flat surface was summoned, resembling an odd black and red mirror, reflecting both the Mimicry Core and true World Core.

At the twenty-six-hour mark, Jake felt the ritual approach completion. Two World Cores were reflected in the mirror, overlapping perfectly. The Dark Witch sent them all a signal as they prepared for the final part. With a push of power, the entire chamber began rumbling.

For a moment, Jake saw the true World Core flicker out of existence, replaced by the Mimicry Core, only for the real one to return instantly. Two realities were overlapping, both true and false at the same time, until suddenly, the mirror they had summoned shattered. All the runes across the room also broke at the exact same time as the Dark Witch fell to her knees, exhausted.

Without even seeing the notification, Jake knew they had succeeded.

Bonus Objective Completed: Assist the Dark Witch in the ritual to cleanse Tri-World of the Karmic Plague. 2500 Nevermore Points earned.

Jake checked the notification and smiled a bit at their success. He threw his gaze toward the Mimicry World Core and nodded as he read its updated description.

[Mimicry World Core (Unique)] – A mimicry of a true World Core, able to mirror another true World Core. A mimicry of the Tri-World's core has been created from this item, and the source of a powerful Karmic Plague now resides within. This item has a built-in self-destruction sequence that can be activated at any time, utterly destroying the core.

The ritual was complete and had gone off without a hitch, just as they had planned. There was no deceit, no double-crossing. The Dark Witch didn't even make a move for the Mimicry World Core that now had the Karmic Plague in it. She did not do one shady thing throughout, which weirdly enough felt... weird. To see someone – especially someone called the Dark Witch – be so honest and truthful throughout, making a selfless sacrifice...

It rubbed Jake the wrong way about how this was all supposed to go down. He didn't like this ending.

No one had to say anything as their group gathered right in front of the floating Mimicry Core. The Dark Witch was the last one to arrive as she looked entirely spent, though she had a proud smile on her lips.

"We did it," she said in a melancholic voice. "Now all we have to do is destroy the core, and this will be over... don't worry, the self-destruction is not an explosion but a built-in implosion of sorts, more or less just erasing the entire core from existence. It was made for cases like this, after all. All that one needs to do in order to activate this feature is to infuse energy into the formation on it..."

Jake sensed her hesitation, as she didn't make a move to do what she had just said was oh-so-simple. Simply doing an action you knew would be the end of you wasn't easy. That one moment was enough hesitation for Jake to sigh.

"Ah, fuck it," he muttered as he looked at his party. "Am I allowed to be a little reckless here?"

“This is a dungeon; nothing done here truly matters. But I believe that goes both ways... if there is a time to embrace recklessness, perhaps now is the time. Fine, go ahead, perhaps there will even be bonus points for such a thing, but do not end your own existence for a stupid sense of vanity,” the Fallen King said, clearly understanding Jake wanted to do something potentially moronic.

The Sword Saint also just shrugged, with Dina looking confused about what Jake planned to do. Sylphie didn't seem to care overly much either way.

“Well then,” Jake said as he looked at the Dark Witch. “Wanna take a risk and see if we can get that Karmic Plague out of you?”

She stared at Jake for a moment before shaking her head. “While the thought is appreciated, I am well aware of the nature of this Karmic Plague. It has merged with me already, and my fate is sealed. Nothing short of a god could change that outcome.”

“It isn't that bleak,” Jake said. “The Karmic Plague is infecting you, yes, but differently than others. You managed to almost segment it away from the most vital parts of your soul, so while getting rid of it won't be easy, it isn't impossible either.”

The Dark Witch just sighed again. “Once more, I am aware. It was done in an attempt to save myself, but it didn't work properly. The Karmic Plague is designed to destroy me if the source is destroyed, and my feeble attempts will do nothing to change that.”

“If you are so confident you are going to die, just let me give it a shot,” Jake shrugged. “The worst outcome is what you expect anyway.”

“The worst outcome is you ending up also infected or sharing my fate,” she said sternly.

“I’ll be fine,” Jake waved her off.

He then turned toward the Mimicry World Core and opened his mouth. Palate of the Malefic Viper activated as Jake used the skill in a fashion he hadn’t for a while, as he quickly took out the item he had in his Palata – one of the treasures given by the Risen during his ceremony – and prepared to consume the fake World Core.

“What are you doing!?” the Dark Witch yelled as the core shrank and flew into Jake’s mouth. “That core isn’t something a C-grade can suppress! The innate will of the world is mirrored too, and... and...”

Jake stood there, rubbing his stomach as he felt the tremors of energy go through his body as the rowdy fake World Core complained. At least it did for a moment before Jake clamped down on it hard. One had to remember that the “stomach” of Palata was within his soul... and once it was in there, Jake felt the plague resonate with something else in there as it calmed down entirely.

Within his Soulspace, the drop of blood from the Malefic Viper pulsed with energy only once, suppressing the corrupted World Core entirely before going silent once more. This hadn’t even been a necessary part of Jake’s plan, but it was a nice surprise. What was even more of a nice surprise was what had come with that pulse of energy from the drop of blood. Knowledge of plagues had flooded his head, courtesy of Sagacity, saving him quite a bit of time, having to slowly absorb it from Palata.

The Dark Witch just stood there staring at Jake for a few moments. “Who the hell are you?”

“Someone with a plan,” Jake smiled as he turned and looked at the Sword Saint. “Could you give me a hand?”

“What do you need me to do?” the old man asked.

“When I give the signal, could you be nice and stab me in the head with that Glimpse of Spring: Erosion thing?”

Chapter 724: Nevermore: Fate Decided

“You know we can’t allow him to actually bring that Mimicry World Core out of that floor, right?” the Wyrmgod questioned the Malefic Viper.

“Does seem kind of counterproductive if he decides to reintroduce a Karmic Plague that was wiped out a long time ago back into the multiverse,” Minaga nodded in agreement.

“Relax, he isn’t gonna actually bring it out,” the Viper waved them off. “He is just going to eat it and consume all the knowledge of how to make plagues within.”

“And... that’s a good outcome?” Minaga said in a deadpan tone. “Totally seems like a good idea to teach him about them... especially considering his track record of always making well-thought-out decisions.”

“Come on, would he really be my Chosen if he didn’t at least know how to create a plague?” the Viper smiled. “Not saying he should make one, but nothing wrong with learning how to.”

"I am confident nearly every other faction in existence would disagree with that assessment," the Wyrmgod sighed.

"And I am confident at least half of those have a rule written somewhere that one of the reasons they shouldn't fuck with me is out of fear I will throw a plague at them," Vilastromoz shook his head.

"Hm," the Wyrmgod thought for a while. "I will reclaim the World Core if he brings it out, but should he consume it or sufficiently alter it, I shall allow him to leave with it as long as there is no chance of reintroducing the plague."

"Sounds fair enough," Vilas shrugged.

"Also, to be fair, I think most factions wouldn't fuck with the Malefic Viper even without the plagues," Minaga said. "And I do guess there is value in knowing how to make one, as there are some very interesting concepts at play. Speaking of which, seeing as you are the expert here... would it be possible to make a plague that wipes out Bloodlines that allow those possessing it to ruin any and all interesting labyrinth experiences? Asking for a friend."

Just to clarify, Jake wasn't planning some over-the-top double suicide or anything when he asked the old man to stab him. He just knew that what he was about to do wouldn't be something he had confidence in pulling off under normal circumstances, so he decided to indulge in a bit of clever use of system mechanics.

"You want me to trigger that defensive skill of yours that activates from a lethal blow?" the Sword Saint questioned, having quickly picked up on what he was getting at.

“Ah, that one,” the Fallen King nodded in understanding, having also experienced that one himself.

“Exactly,” Jake smiled. “And I reckoned that Erosion thing is the best skill to use as it seems pretty easy to dodge compared to the slash, considering it is just one line of water. True, using the Transcendent skill may be me overestimating my durability, but I want to assure the system will consider it a lethal blow.”

The Sword Saint considered for a moment before nodding. “Fair enough.”

Jake thanked him as he turned to his other three party members. “Better make some distance to not get hit by anything. Ah, but Dina, probably stay close. Someone might need healing. On second thought, someone will definitely need healing.”

“What exactly are you planning on doing!?” the Dark Witch butted in rudely. “And what exactly did you do with the Mimicry World Core? It needs to be destroyed, or all of this is in vain... wait, do you plan on keeping it? If that is the case, I will-“

“Relax, jeez,” Jake waved her off. “Trying to figure out a way to destroy the Karmic Plague without you dying in the process.”

“I... I already told you I am fine with my fate,” the Dark Witch said dismissively. “And unless you can call down a god, do you honestly think you or anyone else here can do anything?”

“Eh, I tend to be overconfident and reckless, yet I still turn out to be correct and have things work out for me in the end. And my guts are telling me I can pull this off,” Jake tried to assure her. Not very effectively, mind you.

"Trusting your gut? Don't be ludicrous. If the Karmic Plague is unleashed within you, death is the only outcome," the Dark Witch criticized him.

"Again, show some trust here. I also know quite a bit about plagues and even Karmic Plagues. At least, let me give it a shot. Worst-case scenario, you die; best-case, you survive. Doing nothing is literally the same outcome as your worst-case scenario, so why the hesitation?"

"Because if something goes wrong, the Karmic Plague may not be destroyed, I-"

"This entire argument is getting circular and is wasting everyone's time," the Fallen King said in an annoyed tone. "Jake here is the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, so you should show some trust. If any C-grade can rid you of the Karmic Plague, it's him."

The Dark Witch was about to protest as the Unique Lifeform mentioned Jake was the Chosen as the lizard woman's eyes opened wide. "I... I didn't... I apologize for my-"

"So you're on board?" Jake asked. He was a bit annoyed at the Fallen King spilling the beans like that, but things were getting tedious.

"I... yes. I shall trust you, Chosen of the Malefic One," the Dark Witch nodded resolutely as her voice slightly cracked. Jake even saw a hint of hope in her eyes, which only reinvigorated his desire to pull this off. Deep inside, he knew it didn't really matter as they were in a dungeon and all... but he still wanted to do it.

“Great,” Jake smiled. “Now, here is my plan. While in physical contact with you, I will break the World Core inside of my stomach right as the Sword Saint hits me with a lethal blow. This will make time slow down for me as the Karmic Plague is destroyed, at which point I will manipulate the karmic energy going from within my stomach into you. Before this, I will infuse the plague within you with a toxin that will react with this karmic energy to only destroy the Karmic Plague along with the part of your soul you isolated together with it. This is still destroying the Karmic Plague, but it is more like cutting out an infected tumor before it gets a signal to spread the cancer to your bloodstream.”

“I am unsure what you mean with that final analogy, but I believe I understand what you mean. Will I need to do anything?” she questioned.

“Don’t fight back and focus on protecting your own soul. It may get hairy, and it will definitely be a thoroughly unpleasant experience,” Jake said.

She nodded as Jake motioned for her to sit down as he looked at the Sword Saint. “I will need to set up some stuff before I begin, so it may take a bit before I need you to try and kill me.”

“Happy to try and stab you through the head any day,” the Sword Saint smiled as he stood to the side of Jake, making sure that his stab wouldn’t also hit the Dark Witch.

Jake sat down with his legs crossed as the Dark Witch sat in front of him. He put both his hands on her back as he subtly activated Touch of the Malefic Viper, pouring in a tiny bit of poison as he scanned her body through Sense.

With her not resisting at all, even suppressing her natural vital energy, Jake quickly found the portion of her Soulshape infected. Her case was by far the best of anyone Jake had seen, but she was still in a precarious situation. Usually, the Karmic Plague would inhabit the entire soul, but the witch had

managed to isolate it to somewhere around her stomach region. At least most of it. Small slithers also hit other areas. Removing it would lead to some serious damage... but likely survivable.

With intense focus, Jake did two things at once. Firstly, he pumped more poison into the witch using Touch as he “infected” the plague. This was to allow him some influence over it as he more or less tried to usurp control over the Karmic Plague. This was sadly also where his lack of power came in.

The reason why he couldn’t just destroy the Karmic Plague his own this way was due to the innate difference in level between Jake and the creator. If Jake was A-grade, he was confident in being able to cure her entirely without having to take any major risks or even needing something like the World Core. However, as things were, all he could do was try and nudge the destruction process in a favorable direction. Something that should be enough if his second objective went well...

He needed to influence the Mimicry World Core within his stomach. Something he couldn’t really do currently. Of course, Jake already knew how he wanted to do this: through Touch of the Malefic Viper. His problem was that the only skill his Palate only allowed him to use on a swallowed item was Cultivate Toxin, a shitty common rarity skill.

But... for the longest time, Jake had known that shitty common rarity skill wasn’t really necessary. He never used it. Instead, he used Touch of the Malefic Viper for most things. So, the question was: why even keep them separate? The answer was even more obvious. He wouldn’t. And he believed that if Cultivate Toxin became part of Touch of the Malefic Viper, then Palate would allow him to use Touch of the Malefic Viper on any item swallowed.

Jake needed to do little more than will for a fusion as he tried to influence the swallowed World Core. It barely took any effort on his part, almost as if the system had been waiting for him to stop being a moron and just get it done, as shortly after he began, a notification popped up.

Skill Fusion Detected:

[Cultivate Toxin (Common)] + [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] --> [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

Jake chose to not check out the updated description right away as he knew it worked the way he wanted it to. He didn't dwell on the unchanged rarity either or the fact he felt like he had just gotten a bunch more Intelligence out of nowhere. Instead, he focused on Palate and the Mimicry World Core.

Instantly he felt Touch activate on the Mimicry World Core, proving he had been correct. He looked within his Soulspace and observed the "stomach" of Palate and the core pulsing within as Jake slowly influenced it. It was naught but a slight nudge, and he felt the Karmic Plague fight back at every step.

Focusing on the core thoroughly, he put a lot of pressure on it as he exerted as much control as he could. With his mind split, it was difficult, but Jake refused to back down. He knew that truly changing anything wasn't going to happen, but as long as he could slightly influence the plague to act differently when it encountered the other influenced plague energy within the Dark Witch, it should be enough. With a deep breath, he moved on to the next stage once he felt that trying to prime the core more wasn't gonna happen.

You got this, he assured himself. The next part was where everything would be decided. Jake began to feel slight doubt about his plan as he slowly absorbed knowledge about the Mimicry World Core, becoming aware that things weren't entirely as he had hoped.

It was true that destroying the core could be done by activating the formation on it. It was also true it would just collapse and not actually explode and harm anything around it. The problem was that Jake

had decided to eat it... and imploding it within his Soulspace was not something it was designed to do. In fact, he couldn't even activate it.

So Jake decided that rather than use the built-in destruction formation, he would slightly alter the formation on the core himself and change it from a harmless explosion to something a bit more destructive. This did still mean one thing, though: Jake would have to bear the brunt of effectively having a World Core explode within his own Soulshape.

"Be ready," Jake communicated to the Sword Saint as he saw the old man get in position – sword raised and all.

He was worried about handling the fallout of an exploding core. Luckily for him, it was going to happen within his Soulspace, and as long as the resulting explosion was something he understood, he was confident in handling it. Well, having a part of him handle it anyway. The amount of energy that would be released was substantial, but Jake had an even more substantial and powerful source of pure energy he could make use of to suppress it.

Within his Soulspace, a version of Jake covered entirely in a black shadowy aura appeared right in front of the space that occupied the stomach of Palate. It looked like a massive orb of glass with the World Core floating in the middle, yet the shadow simply stepped through this glass and entered the glass bubble. This version of Jake then pulled back his arm as a katar appeared on its hand.

"Now."

The moment he told the Sword Saint to attack, so did his Eternal Shadow stab the katar into the World Core, triggering its destruction.

Right as the katar pierced the core, Jake also heard the rumbling sound of Words as Power as his danger sense exploded, and a thin beam of water shot straight for his head. Both things happened within the same fraction of a second as the destruction of the core slowed down within his Soulshape, as the concept of time was momentarily seized.

And seize the moment he did. Jake barely registered the notification he got upon the destruction of the core as a shockwave of ethereal energy pulsed out from within his body, slowly spreading from the confines of his Soulshape.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] --> [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] (Rarity Unchanged)

Jake ignored this one, too, as he focused on the task at hand. An invisible aura he could only sense through his Sphere moved out of him at a rapid speed, even with Moment active. It washed over the Dark Witch, and instantly the Karmic Plague went haywire – or at least it tried to.

It tried to spread and destroy to take the Dark Witch with it, but Jake controlled it. Barely. The lizard woman's body was ravaged internally, as several parts of her literally rotted away near-instantly. Jake barely had time to react to the function of the early S-grade Karmic Plague that told it to spread and stop it from infecting her entire soul at once. Emphasis on barely.

Whipping his head back, time resumed, and Jake felt a tinge of pain as his nose was cut off, but it was nothing compared to the screech that came from the Dark Witch as half of her stomach rotted away, along with one of her arms and several of her internal channels. Black spots of pure rot covered her body as Dina slammed her staff down, a green veil of energy covering Jake and the Dark Witch both.

Jake also quickly took out a healing potion and practically forced it down the throat of the Dark Witch as he also kept a hand on her to handle any fallout from the Karmic Plague that may have lingered. However, it seemed like the entire Karmic Plague had just self-exploded, consuming any part of the body and soul it had been a part of, leaving the Dark Witch with severe soul damage and physical damage taken. But... it was nothing that wouldn't heal with time.

Several seconds passed as all that was heard in the core room was the deep hum of the true World Core and the heaving pained breaths of the Dark Witch. Dina was focusing as much as he could on healing, while Jake kept just staring at the Dark Witch, Sense of the Malefic Viper on full alert. The Fallen King even joined in as a soft golden light fell upon the Dark Witch, lessening her pain from the looks of it.

Seconds kept ticking by, but no matter how much Jake searched, he couldn't find a single trace of the Karmic Plague anywhere. Not within any of his party members either.

They had succeeded... and the Karmic Plague was gone.

The notification that came a few seconds later nearly made Jake laugh as he had to admit he had forgotten about it.

Bonus Objective Completed: New Beast Alliance assisted with eliminating all Enlightened Beings in their territory. 1000 Nevermore Points earned.

He still smiled as the notification had pretty much served as a confirmation the chain reaction caused by the Karmic Plague had indeed led to a mass extinction of all the enlightened on the planet. An odd thing to celebrate, but something worth celebrating nevertheless.

"Are you okay?" the Sword Saint asked, and Jake was about to respond that the Dark Witch should be fine. That is when he noticed the old man was staring at him.

Jake did a quick scan of himself and noticed nothing that much out of the ordinary. At least not outwardly. Looking inside his Soulspace, things were a bit more messy. The stomach space created by Palate was filled with cracks all over, with intense curse energy lingering all over as Jake had been forced to deploy Eternal Hunger to suppress the energy backlash to not risk damaging himself.

What's more... the stomach was filled with energy still. It looked like an inferno was sealed within, trying to break out but luckily restrained by the curse energy, along with what was left of the stomach's structural integrity. Jake was worried about the energy until he noticed it depleting at a noticeable pace as some of it did leak through the cracks of the stomach, only to be instantly consumed by the curse energy.

Seems like Eternal Hunger is having quite a feast... but it's gonna take a while to heal Palate's stomach space, he concluded as he finally returned his attention to the real world and smiled. "I'm fine. Honestly, better than I thought I would be."

What was more important was the woman who was rapidly healing in front of him. The rotting flesh had slowly been removed or renewed, and while she still looked like shit, she was alive.

"I... I still live..." she muttered in a hoarse voice as she stared at the ceiling of the core room. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she began to sob. "I live... how... I didn't think..."

Jake just smiled, not saying anything, as he allowed Dina to keep doing her work.

Not far away, right below the true World Core, a gate had already popped into existence, making it clear they had passed the floor. The fate of Tri-World had been decided. However, Jake wasn't in that much of a rush, and neither were the others. For now, they just savored the moment before it was time to move on.

Chapter 725: Nevermore: Rewarding Good Behavior

Their party of five only ended up staying on the floor for an hour or so more as Dina finished healing the Dark Witch as much as she could. Some of the soul damage would have to heal on its own, but the scalekin was more than elated at just having survived.

"I don't know how I can possibly thank you," the Dark Witch bowed as they stood in front of the teleporter leading them off the floor. "I hope you find fortune on your Path, and if I can ever repay this favor, I will do so."

It was a bit melancholic hearing her make promises of the future when the five of them knew such promises could never be fulfilled. Making her leave the dungeon with them also wasn't an option. Chances are that even if the Dark Witch had ever been a true person, she was long dead in the real world, and if she still lived, it was because she had reached godhood... in which case this dungeon image also wouldn't be able to leave. Not that any of that even mattered either, as Nevermore didn't allow the attendees to bring anyone from the dungeon out of it.

"Take care of yourself," Jake had just said. "And keep fighting the good fight. The Lord Protector of the Enlightened Republic had some documents related to creating a way to teleport off the planet that may be able to help you leave if that is what you want. There is a lab hidden beneath where the now-destroyed capital is."

She nodded with gratitude as Jake and company walked through the gateway. It was odd how the Dark Witch seemed to know what the gateway was. But not truly. She knew it could take them off the floor – or planet – but not where it led or why she couldn't enter it herself. Just that she couldn't.

Appearing in the in-between room, Jake sighed loudly. Not because of the pretty damn boring room they appeared in that really paled in comparison to the cozy lounges Minaga's Labyrinth had, but because of the floor they had just done.

"Disconnecting these dungeon layers and the real world is difficult when the people become too real," the Sword Saint muttered. "I will not lie; I find the floors where they seem more like pre-programmed characters preferable to this. Makes it all more straightforward."

"Yeah," Jake nodded.

"Having some experience with her fate myself, being a boss in a Tutorial, I believe I have some unique insights. Even if the dungeon we experience is something we know isn't truly real, to the individuals living there, it is their only reality. To the Dark Witch, she was just a member of some organization who had arrived to help cure it of the plague. From her perspective, she was truly saved. Ultimately, even saving a "true" being in the multiverse is a mostly useless task as they are but one soul in an infinite sea of lives, living in an endless timespan where their paltry mortal existences matter not. So act according to what you judge best, be it in a dungeon or in the true world. In the grand scheme, neither truly matters, and consciously writing off beings as unreal is an easy path to apathy. It is a path all gods eventually find themselves walking down... for is the life of a mortal which will end in the blink of an eye truly more real than the life of a being in a dungeon that only exists when you are in there? Both are but momentary blips on the tapestry of the infinity that is their lives," the Fallen King said, getting oddly philosophical. Definitely seemed like he had some unresolved thoughts from being in a system event... but he did also have some good points.

"I think what we did was good," Dina said with a smile. "And being true to ourselves even in a situation where the stakes are low is only proof of being a strong character."

"Ree," Sylphie added wisely.

Jake just nodded, and before anyone else could say anything, they were hit with some long-awaited system messages.

Forty-first floor completed. 4100 Nevermore Points earned.

Achievement earned: Destroy the Karmic Plague from Tri-World entirely using the ritual in partnership with the Dark Witch, curing the planet while still giving it a path to recovery. 2000 Nevermore Points earned.

Reading over the floor completion and achievement, Jake nodded. The 4100 were expected with the rule change of every floor giving more base points, but the achievement felt a little low, only giving 2000 extra for choosing what was effectively the hardest way of completing the floor. Then again, they did complete a bunch of bonus objectives doing it this way, more than if they had chosen an easy path, so it probably was worth it.

The fact there wasn't any reward for saving the Dark Witch also didn't really surprise him. It wasn't part of their goals at all, after all, but just something Jake had done out of an odd sense of vanity. No... he had done it because it just felt wrong to let someone sacrifice themselves for his gain, so he had done all he could to stop that from happening. Even if it had wasted time and led to him damaging his Soulspace, he didn't regret it a single bit and would gladly do it aga-

Extraordinary Message: Additional achievement(s) based on unpredicted performance on the previous floor are being processed. Reward(s) pending; please wait.

Not that Jake was going to say no if the Wyrmgod and the system decided that an extra reward was in order.

"I did fear for a moment that Nevermore would not recognize what you did," the Sword Saint said, smiling at Jake. "I am pleasantly surprised it does."

"Yeah," Dina nodded. "It isn't surprising that there is no set achievement for it... I don't think anyone else in C-grade could have cured her unless they had a Transcendent skill or a Bloodline allowing them to uniquely cure plagues."

"Eh, I am sure someone else could find a way," Jake smiled, waving it off. Underestimating what others were capable of was never a good idea, and just looking at his four party members, Jake knew there were some real monsters out there.

"No, I don't think they could," Dina shook her head. "It took a unique combination of skills and abilities. Moreover, you had to handle the backlash of an angry Karmic Plague created by an early S-grade. The sheer level of pressure on your soul should have been suffocating... though I guess you never do tend to feel that kind of pressure."

Jake was about to protest when he stopped himself. Well, okay, he had to admit, he wasn't even aware there was meant to be some weird pressure from the Karmic Plague... or wait, was that what the drop of blood from Villy had promptly squashed the second he ate it? It was possible... either way, Dina probably did have a point. Even if someone else could replicate what he had done, chances are no one had done it yet in this incarnation of Nevermore.

"Let us just hope that the reward matches the uniqueness of the feat," the Fallen King said. "I shall meditate till the reward is done calculating. I would presume it is ill-advised to leave here before that is done."

"I concur and shall meditate for a while too. Even if using a Glimpse does not take much out of me, it isn't as simple as simply consuming a few resources," the old man said as he found a nice spot to sit down.

Dina did the same, with Sylphie deciding to take a nap on Jake's lap as he decided to go through some stuff of his own.

While it could be argued that saving the Dark Witch was just a moment of selfish vanity for Jake that didn't actually do much, the process by which it had happened certainly benefitted him. Two skills had been upgraded even if their rarity remained unchanged, and this downtime was the perfect opportunity to go through them.

First up was Touch of the Malefic Viper, which had gotten an even longer description than the last time he checked.

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper seizes control of the world. Attempt to inject toxic energy into a being through contact. The nature of the toxic energy is determined by the user. The Alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior or to further empower an existing toxic effect within a chosen target. Allows the Alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used to cultivate toxins of various forms. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 9 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

Reading through it, it was mostly the same outside of the upgrade from 3 stats a level to 9 and the added clarification that he only got 9 stats for every level in the C-grade variant of the profession. Besides that, there was only one place with any changes as far as he could see.

“Allows the Alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used to cultivate toxins of various forms.”

This part was still there before, but It had changed to be a lot more general, and when focusing on the skill, Jake felt unsure if he had even lost any of the effects of Cultivate Toxin. Upon further inspection, he did find one downside to the merge.

Before, he could just use it on any toxin, and it would be cultivated. Now it only worked on toxins that he already had some level of familiarity with, or in other words, types of toxins he had eaten before. This did seem like a big downside considering he wouldn't be able to cultivate powerful and unique natural treasures using Cultivate Toxin, but on second thought, why wouldn't he just use Palate and eat those with the special internal stomach, in which case, he would learn from the item through that?

Yeah, didn't seem like a big downside. Jake could also still use it to cultivate plants and such. In fact, this part was strictly better as far as Jake could see, considering he would now cultivate using a skill related to the Malefic Viper, and there had to be some Record-related benefits to that.

Moving on to the second upgraded skill, Jake saw a few more changes with this one.

[Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – The Malefic Viper has honed its venom by devouring myriad toxins and treasures found throughout the multiverse. In the same vein, the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper can consume toxins to learn their effects and properties. Further evolved, you can now also learn the properties of herbs while at the same time enjoying a greater benefit from all potions consumed. Natural treasures can be swallowed and refined at an accelerated pace using your current level of Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary). If the item is not a toxin, the item will still be refined but at a slower pace. Allows you to learn the properties of any treasure in your stomach as you slowly refine it. Allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash,

and the internal space will be damaged. Grants immunity or resistance to most poisons. Passively provides 9 Endurance per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper (C-grade variant). Through endless consumption, may your power grow; through gluttony, may your Records expand as you devour the world.

Ignoring the equally ridiculous length of the description, the same thing with more stats and clarification that it was only for the C-grade variant of his profession was present in this one. Besides that, there were two changes. One was the addition of Touch of the Malefic Viper now being used, and the changed wording around that addition. The second one was the ability to fully consume an item, something Jake had not directly aimed at doing but had ended up unlocking pretty accidentally during his recklessness.

“Allows the Alchemist to fully consume a swallowed item, destroying it in the process if possible. If the item cannot be destroyed or the result of its destruction is too violent, the Alchemist will suffer a backlash, and the internal space will be damaged.”

This sentence pretty much summed up what Jake had ended up doing with that World Core, including the part where the internal space got damaged. Seeing it described as part of the skill was honestly a big relief to Jake, as it made it clear this was “intended” damage, giving him hope it would heal naturally with time. He would still need to have Eternal Hunger get done eating all the remnant energy before the repair could begin, but hopefully, he wouldn’t stumble upon an awesome treasure he wanted to eat before Palate was ready again.

Satisfied with seeing the two skills improve, he also noted these two upgrades provided an immediate boost of 180 Intelligence and 180 Endurance before all bonuses. What’s more, he would get even more stats with every level-up... no matter how Jake looked at it, these Malefic Viper skills were truly overpowered, and he was all for it.

The upgrades, along with the entire curing process, had naturally also rewarded levels. Two of them, in fact.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 228 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 229 - Stat points allocated, +35 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (C)] has reached level 228 - Stat points allocated, +45 Free Points

Jake noted he was just one level away from getting his very first skill selection of C-grade, and while it was tempting to just grind out that level immediately, he couldn't just make his party wait.

Seeing as the processing of whatever bonus achievement they would get wasn't done yet, Jake also entered meditation while pulling out his Soulflame Cradle, as he had mentally shortened the name to, and infused some more arcane energy while he checked on the situation within it. Nothing much had really happened on that front as he was still waiting for his arcane affinity to get a proper foothold in the Cradle's world.

A few minutes later, Jake and everyone else exited meditation simultaneously as they all finally got the notification.

Calculations of extraordinary achievement completed. Special Grand Achievement earned based on actions performed with majority contribution from Nevermore participant Jake Thayne.

Special Grand Achievement earned: Allow the Dark Witch to survive while successfully curing her of the Karmic Plague. 500 Nevermore Points earned. Due to completing a Grand Achievement, you will receive a 5% multiplier of all Nevermore Points at the final calculation.

Jake stared at it for a while. 500 points wasn't much... but 5% extra points were.

"Is this really... okay?" Jake questioned out loud. The implication that this kind of Special Grand Achievement could even be earned honestly scared him a bit. What had other people gotten that he wasn't aware of? Was that why they had been behind on points at times on previous floors?

"Jake," the Sword Saint said. "When you get a good thing, you just smile and nod."

"But--"

"Smile and nod."

Jake and company appeared on the next floor not much after, having all recovered. This time, they found themselves standing on a cliffside overlooking a city below with a large compound right in the middle. Within that compound was a training ground directly in their line of sight, and Jake's attention was instantly drawn there even before the welcome message appeared.

Welcome to the forty-second floor of Nevermore: The Aloft Empire

You have arrived on a large planet ruled by the Aloft Empire, a faction ruled by a powerful A-grade emperor. More specifically, you find yourself within the land controlled by the Lunevile family, a small noble faction with an early C-grade leader at its helm.

Soon, the Lunevile family will attract some attention from forces they cannot handle. Uncover the nature of why the Lunevile family has become so conspicuous and ultimately decide their fate.

Note: Attracting the ire of the Aloft Royal Family will result in automatic elimination from the forty-second floor and require the party to start over.

Main objective: Decide the fate of the Lunevile family without drawing the ire of the Aloft Royal Family.

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: 68373

Jake read the entire thing over as he already had a guess of what this floor would be about. Especially coupled with what he saw down in the courtyard.

“This is an even more tricky one... if the emperor is A-grade, simply fighting our way through is out of the question... scratch that, just making the royal family angry will result in an automatic loss...” the Sword Saint muttered.

“This floor is another attempt to teach us the rules of the multiverse,” Jake shook his head.

“What makes you think that?” Dina asked.

“That guy,” Jake pointed to a kid down in the courtyard swinging a sword. He looked no more than nine or ten years old and was only E-grade, but Jake’s attention had instantly been drawn to them the second they entered.

“His form is simple but shows some promise, but I cannot see what else is special about him?” the Sword Saint questioned.

“Dina?” Jake asked.

“I can’t see anything either... wait... I think...” Dina said as she trailed off before her eyes opened in realization.

“Yep,” Jake smiled. “Kid’s got a Bloodline.”

While many would argue two didn't make a pattern... well, Jake was pretty sure he knew what to expect of this floor and several of the floors to come as he felt like they had just been thrown into a forced education plan on multiversal laws and etiquette.

Something the coming years would only further confirm.

Chapter 726: Nevermore: Floor Forty-Two

Floors forty-one to forty-five were a bit special in that they never truly changed between the eras. Every single iteration of Nevermore had these floors, and while they did vary, all had the same intent behind them:

Inform the denizens of the multiverse about some of the multiversally agreed-upon rules and best practices.

The choice of placing it so "late" into the dungeon wasn't a coincidence either, neither was it accidental it had been placed on the C-grade floors. C-grade was when one usually began to explore beyond one's own planets and began to interact with other factions and cultures.

Cultures which often had very different ways of handling things. Some had very well-defined castes and societal structures that effectively made certain people be born into slavery and others into opulence, while most simply segregated populations based on power, where all those weaker were heavily controlled by the powerful.

No one truly cared about forces that were too weak to interact with the rest of the multiverse, but those that did would be expected to follow certain codes of conduct. Nevermore was effectively a way to avoid factions coming up with the excuse that they didn't know about certain rules – made it so that a B-grade could not forcefully have a Bloodline Patriarch join his faction and then claim ignorance. This had

led to it truly becoming common knowledge, enough so that few even dared to try and circumvent them.

Even the Holy Church had heavily adapted how they approached individuals with Bloodlines. In the first few eras, it was normal for the Holy Church to effectively arrange marriages between those with Bloodlines with the expectations of them having a lot of children and hopefully even a variant Bloodline or two in there. Even if they didn't have anyone else with a Bloodline to pair someone with, they would instead just throw them at a powerful person to instead lean on their Records.

Now, whenever a member with a Bloodline was born or joined, their level of control over said individual would be heavily limited, and they would be treated as unique entities with different stations than regular members. This was even true for those with useless Bloodlines. The fact that those with Bloodlines couldn't enter the Holyland was also a major factor in this different level of treatment, but not the biggest one, as just the insinuation that the Holy Church forcefully coupled those with Bloodlines would lead to severe consequences, even for a faction often referred to as the most powerful in the multiverse.

Mind you, this didn't mean far more subtle means weren't still being deployed. The way the Emberflight tried to entice Jake into joining them was considered an acceptable method of trying to recruit someone with a Bloodline, and so was trying to pair them up with someone in the hope that something would come from that. The problem only arose when force was applied. This even applied to societal force, which was why the Holy Church was so careful in how it approached things.

The laws about Bloodlines had taken a lot longer to get accepted than those related to plagues but were now far more well-known. Some factions did still use plagues, but it was in heavily controlled settings and with lots of oversight, with some forms of plagues – such as Karmic Plagues – entirely banned. Plagues could also only be created by a set number of powerful factions, with only a few forces walking Paths that facilitated the creation of plagues. However, Bloodlines could be found everywhere. That is to say, limiting the use of plagues only negatively impacted a few factions for the betterment of the multiverse, while the rules around Bloodlines impacted everyone – or had the possibility to impact everyone.

This did mean some factions or people within factions didn't quite agree with the rules related to Bloodlines... and floor forty-two had been an example of one such faction.

In retrospect, the story of floor forty-two was kind of cliché. At least, Jake thought so.

A kid had been born into a lower-level noble family, with seemingly nothing special about him. Yet his body housed a grand secret, a hidden power: he had a Bloodline. He was a special boy who was bound for greatness, even if no one knew it yet.

Until the fire pirates attacked.

The day after Jake and company arrived on the floor, a giant spaceship broke through the clouds as a sea of fire descended upon the city. This fire somehow didn't damage anyone but swept them up and forcefully brought them into the spaceship of the pirates, everything happening in mere seconds.

Jake and the others managed to avoid the flames but were unable to really do anything. It took a total of ten seconds from the ship appearing to it taking off again. It was a fast operation... but not fast enough. A beam of light shot out from somewhere so far away even Jake couldn't see it, as an object slammed into the side of the spaceship.

The pirates didn't stand a chance as this object turned out to be an A-grade human who, with a single strike, tore the entire spaceship in two and saved the people who had just been kidnapped. Everything had gone so damn fast, and within an hour, everyone was back in the city, safe and sound.

All of this just seemed like one big showpiece, and Jake was unsure what exactly the purpose of everything was... until the very end of this scenario. The A-grade was a human wearing golden metal armor, and right before he took off, his eyes lingered on the boy with the Bloodline.

Three days later, a C-grade “inspector” from the Empire came. She claimed to be a healer there to make sure there were no lingering issues after the kidnapping attempt and focused primarily on the children. The thing is, this was clearly one big ruse, as the woman had a Bloodline, and she was capable of identifying the kid had one too.

Funnily enough, despite Jake and the others having snuck into the city and gotten close to the Luneville family through some subtle social engineering from the Sword Saint, she didn’t bat an eye toward Jake and Dina, as if their Bloodlines were entirely invisible. It was odd, but on second thought, the floor would probably be impossible if anyone with a Bloodline attracted the same level of attention as the natives.

Anyway... to make a long story short, the inspector turned out to be a higher-ranked noble from the Empire, and she wanted to adopt the kid with a Bloodline, but the Luneville noble family refused as he was their only child and the heir. The noblewoman didn’t take this kindly, and shit went south quick when she decided to just kidnap the kid, something the C-grade patriarch of the Luneville family wasn’t a fan of.

A small skirmish began, and the Luneville Patriarch ended up injuring the noblewoman before she fled. This put the Luneville family in a difficult situation as they found out during this skirmish that the kid had a Bloodline, but also that this noblewoman was the niece of the Grand Marshal of the Empire – the very same A-grade who had torn the pirate ship down.

One thing led to another, and Jake’s party accepted escorting the kid to the capital of the Aloft Empire to seek help from the royal family. This seemed like a simple escort mission at first, but they soon realized there was one tiny little problem... the capital was on another planet with the only teleporter to get there controlled by the Grand Marshal’s noble family.

However, there luckily was a powerful space mage who was an old friend of the Luneville family; he just happened to live on the other side of the planet. So, with that in mind, they set out.

Sixteen months and lots of twists and turns later, including having to do a damn fetch quest for the space mage, they arrived in the capital city of the Aloft Empire. From there, they had to jump through a lot of hoops to actually get an audience with the royal family while avoiding spies and agents coming after them. Their status could not be used on this floor at all, and same as everyone ignored the fact they had Bloodlines, so did their identities get ignored.

The entire floor was quite contrived, but the only people that the Grand Marshal's family had sent to search for the kid were in C-grade, most of them early and mid-tier C-grade. This was excused by everyone in B-grade and above being heavily kept track of by the royal family and military, but Jake honestly wrote it off as bad justification for why a random B-grade didn't just descend to smack their skulls in before kidnapping the kid.

Eventually, they did end up having a meeting with the royal family, where they revealed what the Grand Marshal had been doing. Only for it then to be revealed that the Grand Marshal had been planning a coup for a while and had one of the crown princes in cahoots with him. It was an entire thing that was honestly just background scenery to Jake and company having to flee through a hidden passage... but oh no, the very first noblewoman they had seen trying to kidnap the kid showed up with a party of powerful people all around level 280.

From there, a final battle ensued, ending up with their party naturally winning and getting out the other side of the hidden passage. All while defending a damn E-grade kid who they had to make sure didn't get squashed into paste by a C-grade or kidnapped. Again.

Yeah, they had one occurrence during the many months of travel where they split up, and someone managed to steal the kid right under the Fallen King's mask – something he had gotten plenty of shit for over the last year.

Anyway, the floor wasn't the most exciting, even if they did experience some novel things. It was heavily themed around stealth and social engineering, which made the entire thing not super interesting most of the time. Until the final battle, that is, where it was incredibly obvious the Wyrmgod really wanted to hammer home the rule that trying to kidnap a kid with a Bloodline wasn't gonna fly.

The scene happened to play out right as they came out of the hidden passage, something that was clearly no coincidence.

"The Dark Witch was more challenging," Jake commented as they approached the exit of the long secret passage.

"It was a slightly disappointing final battle, but I guess it is factored in that we need to protect the child," the Sword Saint agreed.

"Ree," Sylphie screeched, making Jake nod.

"Yep, Dina sure trivialized that."

Speaking of Dina. She was currently walking at the back of the group carrying the kid with a vine. Jake had knocked him out with a little bit of poison the moment any fighting started, with Dina then proceeding to protect the kid.

“He has a name, you know,” Dina grumbled a bit.

“We know,” the Sword Saint shook his head. “And I am glad that the floor is soon over and that I will not have to speak it again.”

“Yeah...” Jake sighed.

“I thank the system that I cannot have children if that menace is any indication of what it is like,” the Fallen King said in an even grumpier voice than Dina.

Oh yeah, because that was another added layer of difficulty... the kid was downright horrible. He got kidnapped because he ran off on his own, and he constantly made a ruckus whenever they were anywhere.

It wasn't that he had strong NPC energy. No, the exact opposite was the problem. He had way too strong main character energy, and in the first many months, he treated Jake and company like his personal servants until the Sword Saint managed to instill just a tiny bit of discipline in the little fuck.

Jake was ninety-nine percent certain that the kid being such a little asshole was a mental trial to see if the party would snap and just kill him. Something that was surely a viable way to pass the floor... alas, they had come this far.

Though he could admit that if they were forced to start over halfway through, it would be difficult to stop the Fallen King from snapping and killing the kid so they could move on faster.

Only Dina managed to handle the child somewhat okay. She had way more patience than anyone else in their group, that was for sure.

Anyway, back to just before they make it through the hidden passage, Jake raised a hand as he spotted the exit leading out into the large plains surrounding the capital. Even if he saw nothing with Pulse, it was better to be safe than sorry. "Alright, just ahead, and we are out of here... be prepared for another damn plot twist or random ambush."

With careful steps, they exited the escape tunnel, protective barriers at the ready. Far up in the sky, lights flashed, and the entire planet rumbled as two A-grades were fighting. They didn't truly feel any of the fallout, as a large formation protected the planet, and the two fighting – the Emperor and Grand Marshal – didn't want to destroy the capital, considering one ruled it and the other wanted to take it over.

Jake and company had barely managed to exit the secret tunnel and oriented themselves when suddenly everything seemed to stop. The deep rumbling ceased, the flashing stopped... and then the pressure came. Instantly, the barrier that covered the entire planet shattered like a broken mirror, and the aura of a being far above A-grade spread across the world.

A few birds fell from the sky, unable of handling the pressure, and even Dina, the Fallen King, and Sword Saint slightly buckled their knees. Jake instantly knew what they were dealing with.

Why the fuck is a god here!?

Jake didn't even have time to process the thought before he felt a presence lock onto them, and three figures teleported in from out of nowhere. One was the Grand Marshal, the other the Emperor, and the final figure was a young man who looked barely twenty wearing what looked like jeans and a simple sweater. One could easily mistake him for some average guy if not for his clearly divine aura.

The Emperor and Grand Marshal were both standing like statues, entirely frozen and unable to move as the divine being looked over Jake and his party before his eyes finally landed on the unconscious kid.

"Is that the child?" the god asked, getting straight to the point as he looked at the Emperor, who promptly unfroze and fell to his knees.

"Yes, your excellency... I was informed he has a Bloodline and later confirmed it... however, when I sought to confront my brother about his actions, he-" the Emperor began but was stopped as the god raised a hand.

He then turned his attention to the Grand Marshal, who was also unfrozen and fell to his knees as well.

"My lord... I... I thought... I was told the Pantheon didn't care about who ruled the Aloft Empire... why..." the Grand Marshal said as he knelt deeply, utterly incapable of even looking up.

"We don't," the god said in an annoyed tone.

"Then wh-"

“That kid has a Bloodline, you know that, right?”

“I... I know, so I thought that-“ the Grand Marshal tried as he stopped mid-sentence, seemingly incapable of continuing.

“Well, you should’ve thought some more now, shouldn’t you?”

the god sighed as he finally looked at Jake’s party. “I take it you five are the ones who have been protecting the Bloodline Patriarch during all this time?”

Jake would like to note that the god didn’t even comment on two of them being entirely immune to his presence and the three others barely buckling. This only played into his belief this was pretty much just a glorified cutscene. Hence he responded accordingly.

“Yes, we did all we could to protect him from any who wished to kidnap him.”

The god just sighed again as he looked at the Grand Marshal. “Now, how come a bunch of C-grades know how to act, and you don’t? Don’t even answer that... I don’t care. What I do care about is the fact that the Aloft Empire belongs to me, and I am not about to see myself be held accountable for having the Bloodline Accords be broken under my watch.”

The A-grade Grand Marshal seemed to struggle with giving an answer as the god shook his head and waved his hand, the entire body of the A-grade exploding into a bloody mist. The Emperor looked on with wide eyes as he didn’t dare try to lift his head, shaking slightly the moment the Grand Marshal, who was apparently his brother, died.

"I hope I don't need to elaborate on how I expect things to go from here? Let the kid go back to his family, and if I see or hear of even a single attempt to coerce or force him into doing anything, that will be the final day of the Aloft Empire. Am I clear?" the god asked the kneeling Emperor.

"Y... yes, I-"

"Great, we're done here then. Take the kid with you while you're at. Remember, I'll be watching," the god said as he once more waved his hand, and the Emperor, along with the sleeping child held by Dina, disappeared.

Jake and company stood there, watching all this unfold as silent spectators until the Emperor and child were both gone. When referring to the final part of the floor being interesting, it wasn't just about what happened with the Grand Marshal and a god appearing... it was related to what happened next.

Without any aura of grandeur, the god turned toward them and had an incredibly confused look on his face.

"How the hell are you the Chosen of the Malefic Viper? Isn't he in seclusion or something? What the fuck has happened in the ninety-third era!?"

"Wait, what?" Jake splurged out, confused, before quickly gathering himself. "Eh, the Malefic Viper is back... but..."

“Damn, really? Must have caused quite the uproar... and for him to even have a C-grade Chosen, that is very surprising,” the god slowly nodded as he turned to Dina. “Oh, and you are related to Nature’s Attendant, right?”

“Ye... yes,” Dina said nervously.

“Quite the impressive party... a Chosen, a Unique Lifeform... geez,” the god smiled, shaking his head casually.

“This may seem odd... but are you aware of where you are right now?” Jake questioned, unable to restrain his curiosity.

“In an image of the Aloft Empire, taken in the early parts of the ninety-second era. Or, if you are referring to where from a more meta-perspective, we are currently on floor forty-two of Nevermore,” the god answered casually. “And I am effectively here to teach you about how trying to force anyone with Bloodlines into reproducing or anything like that is very much against the rules... but I get the feeling you already know all this.”

“Huh,” Jake muttered. “I thought people in dungeons weren’t really aware they were in dungeons...”

“It works a bit differently for gods, especially a god who is contracted and paid to be here,” the guy waved it off. “Anyway, while I would love to stay here and chat, it is a waste of time for both of us. My true self won’t be aware of anything this image ever sees or learns, and you five look like the types to aim for high scores on the Leaderboards, so I won’t delay you anymore.”

“If I ma-” the Sword Saint began as the god just disappeared, leaving a teleportation gate in his place.

“I think that’s a no,” Jake smirked as they turned their attention to the gateway leading to the next floor.

Taking their cue to proceed, they did just that.

In conclusion, floor forty-two was very much a mixed bag.

Oh, and not just one - but two - more interesting did happen during the floor... Jake reached level 230 during the floor, his class leveling up after the fight in the secret passage.

And with that, he had gained not just one but two skill selections.

Chapter 727: Nevermore: Level 230 Profession Skill Selection

So... skill selections. It had been a good while since Jake had one last, and he would be lying to himself if he claimed he hadn’t been at least a little bit excited. Especially when it was his very first one in C-grade. The fact that he had gotten it while just sitting around waiting on a flying ship had definitely increased his enjoyment too.

He hadn’t rushed it, though. Usually, Jake wanted to jump right into them, but there was honestly no need to, especially not now that he had reached C-grade. While it was true that there could be some negative consequences to delaying picking a skill – primarily that you would end up getting worse options – the opposite was also true. For some factions, it was even pretty normal to delay skill selections until you had practiced a certain technique or magic with the hope of getting a skill.

This was also why there wasn't even a warning about negative consequences for waiting with the skill selection prompt, contrary to evolutions. He also wouldn't have to delay that long. Leveling-wise, floor forty-two had honestly been shit as they spent most of their time running and hiding, and with Jake having to constantly be on watch, he barely found any time to do alchemy. That is why he had only ended up getting his profession level while waiting in the capital of the Aloft Empire to meet the Emperor, at which point waiting just a few weeks more for the in-between room wasn't out of the question.

So that is what he did. But Jake was still Jake, and his patience did have limits, especially when he didn't just have a profession to choose skills but a class to pick for too.

After entering the boring in-between room, Jake excused himself from the party as the other four went to meditate a bit by themselves to fully recover their resources. He found a nice corner to sit in and, with high expectations and anticipation, began.

Considering his profession had reached 230 first, it was only right to start with that.

Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available

Accepting the prompt, Jake saw five options appear, making him smile. His smile did fade a bit when he saw the total list had shrunk quite a lot, as many of the skills he had been offered in prior skill selections were now gone.

Though, on second thought, it probably didn't actually matter that much, did it? He rarely went back and picked skills he had been offered prior anyway.

Shaking his head, Jake's smile returned as he turned his attention to the skills on display. Man, I have missed this.

He was going to take his time going over every single skill on offer, that was for sure. Starting with quite an interesting one.

[Conjure Virtual Mind (Epic)] – What is better than one mind? Two. Create a simulation of your mind that can think autonomously and develop ideas. This will be a clone of your mind and thus still be limited by your current Records. Can only exist within your Soulspace and cannot directly influence anything around it or manipulate any energy. All information between you and your virtual mind must be relayed orally or telepathically. The duration of the virtual mind and its level of sophistication are determined by Wisdom, Willpower, and Intelligence.

The first skill and the system started out by offering an epic rarity one. This was the C-grade version of epic rarity, too, making it even better. The same as if the very first skill offered in D-grade had been ancient rarity... or maybe not. Either way, the first skill offered was sure something.

This seemed like the first step in creating an avatar, and he had quite a lot of ideas as to why he was offered the skill. The first was naturally Sim-Jake, who had effectively been not just a simulated mind, but an entirely separate version of himself. The second source of inspiration was maybe Minaga and his cloning ability... but that one was a bit of a stretch. Of course, it was also entirely possible this was just a basic skill most people got offered around this point in their Path, as cloning or at least avatar creation did seem like a pretty basic technique for most of those considered truly powerful.

Needless to say, this skill would be far from an actual avatar as the Virtual Mind was rife with limitations. Enough limitations for him to write it off pretty quickly, and not just for the "low" rarity. The real problem with it was... the Virtual Mind was made for thinking and not doing... and Jake recognized he wasn't the best thinker. He was the type to do stuff until something worked. Or, in fancier words, he preferred doing practical empirical experiments to find solutions rather than relying on studying and theory.

In less simple terms, he wasn't the smartest cookie in the drawer, and having another mind to think up dumb ideas wasn't going to help him with anything.

Hence, he moved on to the next one... which he felt like he had seen before.

[Arcane Alchemist's Grand Purification (Epic)] – Embrace your arcane affinity as you stabilize what properties you desire and destroy the unwanted. Attempt to purify any alchemical ingredient, reducing it to its most basic state while ensuring its stability. Arcane purification can help destroy unwanted properties from an ingredient, making it purer. Must have suitable ingredients. Purification does not require any additional tools or equipment, but the skill's effect can be amplified with the use of certain catalysts. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness and chance of success of attempted purifications based on Wisdom and Intelligence.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your Alchemist's Purification.

Yep, he had definitely seen this one before. Thinking back, hadn't that also been during his first skill selection in D-grade? Yeah, he was pretty sure it was. The only difference was that it had now added Grand to the skill name, which had seemingly allowed it to even retain its epic rarity tag. There was probably some more stuff in the updated description too, but Jake wasn't overly interested.

Jake had skipped it in D-grade because the skill seemed like something he could easily do himself... which was still the case. So, why hadn't he? Well, the thing is, purification was usually used to bring an ingredient to a desired state or to "fix" ingredients with problems. The first of these reasons required the person to have a pre-known theoretical reason for wanting to purify an ingredient and remove properties – without just doing it during the crafting process. The second reason one would purify an ingredient and "fix" it was only necessary for subpar ingredients, and... well...

The thing is, Jake was a rich asshole Chosen who only got the best of the best, and even when he didn't, his entire Path of alchemy was just to make stuff work by throwing it together. He had very basic plans and outlines of what he wanted to do, but he didn't draw up entire tomes of research before crafting every poison. Jake remembered seeing some of the notebooks Reika had made, and it was intense...

Anyway, the mere fact Jake hadn't upgraded the skill on his own already was proof enough that he didn't need this. Jake couldn't recall a single time using the skill outside of purifying water a few times since he reached D-grade. Usually, if he wanted something gone, he would only figure that out during the crafting process, at which point he could easily remove it with a bit of destructive arcane energy.

Sure, it did suck to look at the Inferior rarity skill, but at this point, Jake was just waiting to find a use for it or to merge it with one of his other skills. Probably one of his Legacy skills... and if he wanted to do that, then picking an upgrade to it like this would only make that fusion process more difficult.

To summarise, Jake didn't need it, and picking it could even turn out to be detrimental down the line. So... next skill. And this one moved him up to ancient rarity.

[Arcane Curse Manifestation (Ancient)] – Allows the Alchemist to condense pure curse energy into objects known as Curse Fragments by stabilizing the volatile curse energy using your arcane affinity and encasing it in stable arcane mana. These Curse Fragments can be used in rituals, as alchemical ingredients, and as catalysts in crafting and transmutation. Curse Fragments cannot be effectively used directly as weapons. Be warned that wielding the power of curses can lead to unexpected results and requires a high level of control. Curse Fragments left unattended may begin to influence the world around them. The quality and amount of curse energy that can be put into Curse Fragments depends on Wisdom and Willpower.

This wasn't Jake's first time getting offered a curse-related skill for his profession, and it certainly wasn't going to be the last. The last time had been right after he had created Eternal Hunger, and truth be told, the entire concept of curses still very much spooked him back then. Especially considering he had just

managed to fight off the influence of Eternal Hunger, so when he was offered Condense Curse Marble, skipping it was a no-brainer as his use of a Sin weapon was just temporary. It wasn't part of who he was.

Now, things weren't quite that simple.

Whether he liked it or not, curse energy was now a big part of his Path. Eternal Hunger wasn't going anywhere but would stick with him until the day he died or managed to figure out a way to separate it from himself... if that was even something he wanted.

Jake had to admit that he wasn't entirely averse to his increased reliance on curse energy. He hadn't even hesitated to use it when he absorbed the World Core, as he knew it was a wellspring of energy that was still only growing by the day. A source of energy that Jake was uniquely qualified to control. While his affinity for dark mana was great, his ability to tame and control curse energy was far superior, and coupled with his Bloodline, he could probably have become a damn good curse mage or something if that is what he wanted.

There was also the fact that Sim-Jake had effectively usurped whatever instinctual presence Eternal Hunger had when it relied on its chimera form. Eternal Shadow, his only mythical skill, was also tied up in the use of curse energy.

All of this is to say Jake had come to accept that curses were now part of him. That being the case, Jake also had to face the reality that he didn't use curse energy nearly as much as he could or should but only relied on it for special circumstances or with a limited number of skills. Which, in retrospect, was honestly silly when he had one place where he could apply curse energy with great effectiveness: his poisons.

And Arcane Curse Manifestation was a way to do just that. It was a way to begin integrating curses into his alchemy and create interesting and potentially more powerful poisons. He could even use these Curse Fragments for rituals if he wanted...

Yeah, this one was definitely a contender. Of course, all depended on the last two skills. The first of which was... something.

[Malefic Plague Theory (Legendary)] – To kill an enemy, you use poison; to destroy a world, you deploy a plague. Allows the Alchemist to research and potentially create plagues of various natures. Plagues are incredibly complex self-replicating toxins that can spread independently of the creator by taking root in each infected target and using them as carriers. Do be warned that plagues can mutate and are incredibly difficult to control; thus, incredible caution and patience is advised when working on them. Malefic properties linger in all plagues you create, making them more potent and allowing them to spread faster. Stat bonuses are dependent on the nature of the plague.

See, Jake would be lying if he hadn't kind of seen this one coming, though he hadn't expected the first-ever plague-related skill he was offered to be legendary. He wasn't even entirely sure if the skill even deserved that rarity... until he read the second-to-last sentence. Malefic properties.

Anything with malefic properties had to be powerful, right? Jake assumed it meant the skill borrowed from the malefic affinity, something he was pretty sure only his Legacy skills did under normal circumstances. It made the rather normal-looking skill that was filled with warnings look quite a bit more impressive, that was for sure.

The reason he had been so certain he would be offered something like this was due to just how much knowledge he had gotten jammed into his head related to plagues. From both Palate and Sagacity, mind you, as the two of them had tag-teamed him in unlocking a flood of knowledge from the drop of blood when he healed the Dark Witch.

This knowledge did also make Jake aware of just how little he wanted the skill. And it wasn't just because of the multiverse generally not being a fan of plagues, as Jake was pretty damn sure he could get away with researching and even making plagues with his identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, but because he knew just how useless they would be for his Path.

Plagues, from a combat perspective, sucked ass. They were only good for killing people far weaker than the creator and wiping out entire civilizations. Why in the hell would Jake want to spend a shitload of time cooking up a plague only for it to work on people way weaker than himself? That would just be a waste of time, which was why he had no interest in the skill. Oh yeah, there were moral reasons for skipping it. Can't forget those.

Moving on to the final offering, one thing instantly caught his attention.

The rarity.

He could barely believe his eyes as he saw it. The very first Mythical skill he had ever been offered in a skill selection.

[Hallowed Shroud of the Heretic-Chosen (Mythical)] – To follow the Path of one who is blessed, yet a heretic, is an audacious and auspicious one, but there is safety to be found for those who follow the Heretic-Chosen of the Malefic Viper. Your very presence as a Heretic-Chosen helps protect those around you who follow a similar Path, hiding their identities as heretics by masking them as blessed instead. All those hidden under your shroud also experience a growth in Records gained related to the Path of the Heretic-Blessed. This skill partly borrows Records from your Shroud of the Primordial skill, making it work even against beings of divine nature. The shroud has no effective range but covers everyone who follows you regardless of where they are. Walk with confidence and spread your Path as all those who follow in your footsteps are protected by your Hallowed Shroud. The effectiveness of Hallowed Shroud of the Heretic-Chosen is improved by Wisdom and Willpower.

“Why is it shit?” Jake muttered to himself while sitting in the corner of the in-between room.

“You got offered a bad skill?” the Sword Saint questioned, having heard Jake complain and aware he was doing a skill selection. Jake hadn’t exactly been subtle about his impatience to finish the floor and have a proper calm period to do it.

“Well, it’s mythical.”

“Oh? That sounds incred-“

“And it sucks ass,” Jake interrupted him with a sigh.

“If I may, could I ask why you judge it so?” the old man asked.

“It is strong for what it does, sure, but it isn’t really something I want. All it does is help hide people and increase their Record growth, but only in relation to the specific Path that I don’t even think anyone else is following...” Jake muttered.

“You are referring to that entire Path of having both a Blessing, yet also considered a heretic?” the Sword Saint questioned.

Jake was about to confirm when he stopped himself. He... he was pretty sure he never openly talked about his identity as a Heretic-Chosen, so how-

"I can confess I, too, was offered skills related to such a Path, and I put two and two together and realized it originated from you," the old man shook his head. "From what I have gathered, it comes from the innate resistance to gods you carry and allow others to also experience. It makes you innately able to question things and stand in defiance of the gods – which treating them merely as equals apparently counts as. Aware of it or not, I believe you passively convert anyone you interact with a lot into a bit of heretic whether any of you intend for that to be the case."

"I see," Jake nodded. Yeah, it probably made sense they were offered skills like that with Jake's passive influence, right? Which begged the question... "Did you pick any of those skills?"

"No," the Sword Saint chuckled. "I have no need to, and they don't fit my Path. Plus, they all seem to revolve around you, and while I have nothing against you, Jake, I am not going to tie my Path to you."

Jake listened and slowly nodded... realizing the old man had just hit the nail on the head as to why he was so damn reluctant to pick up skills like this mythical rarity shroud. He didn't like the thought of people following him. He didn't like to imagine a horde of people looking up to him and relying on him, giving up being their own persons to follow some Path they believed Jake would want them to follow.

He wasn't trying to start some huge movement of Heretic-Blessed, as the system called it in the skill. If people wanted to take inspiration from him and go that route? Sure, go ahead, but he wasn't going to actively pursue the Path of being some prophet himself or encourage others to do so. It would be their choices, and any skill that encouraged others to follow the Path was a skill he didn't want. He preferred for the people around him to be equals and friends, not subordinates.

"Thanks," Jake muttered.

The old man just nodded and smiled, having seemingly read his thoughts. “Becoming a symbol or someone others look up to isn’t something one can control but will happen naturally the further one climbs toward the peak of power. People will always stare toward the sky in awe, and if they see you among the clouds, so will they be in awe of you.”

“Yeah,” Jake sighed.

“You can accept but not embrace it. In the end, you cannot control what others do, but you can control how you react to their actions. You are not responsible for others unless you want to be. It is not their right to put that pressure on you, so just choose what you believe you can live with and be true to yourself, even if that disregards the feelings of others,” the Sword Saint said encouragingly. “Or, I guess what I am saying is... go with your gut. That seems to have worked out well for you thus far.”

Jake nodded and smiled. The old man was right. He would just do what felt right to him.

That is why he happily picked Malefic Plague Theory to end all of existence and spread death and destruction to the entire multiverse!

All jokes aside, there really was only one skill that truly appealed to him out of these five.

So, pretty happy with his choice, and after only a little more deliberation while checking over prior skill offerings, he picked Arcane Curse Manifestation.

It was time to finally make some truly cursed poisons.

Chapter 728: Nevermore (Not Really): Meetings... So Many Meetings

That day, the Chosen Ceremony Support Group (CCSG) once more had their bi-weekly meeting as six women met at Jake's residence, as that was one of the only places they could be sure no one would interrupt or interfere. All of them were united in only one thing:

They each had a personal relationship with Jake and had all been severely impacted by his identity as a Chosen. No, they were repeatedly still impacted by his status.

This group consisted of Reika, Meira, Scarlett, Irin, Bastilla, and Izil, though they sometimes also had others join who also suffered from their association with Jake being revealed. These meetings didn't have any strict purpose... well, they had initially been a way to organize and get their stories straight with what information they could and couldn't share about Jake, but after only three meetings, the group had turned into what was essentially just a support group for venting.

"My family has constantly been sending people asking me if I could get a meeting with the Chosen, and when I say he is in Nevermore, they began to question if I know which floor he was at, and one of my aunts even asked why I didn't join the party," Bastilla – the beastfolk roommate of Reika – complained. "I barely even know him... we did one dungeon together! Why the hell would he bring me, of all people?"

"Have you tried misdirecting them?" Izil, the elf from the Altmar Empire, offered advice. "I keep telling them that I switched strategies from directly trying to make a close connection with the Chosen to instead focus on the people around him who do have a close connection... which means they are actively supporting me going to these meetings now as they think I am networking. Which I guess I kind of am. But it also makes them back off, at least for a time."

"That's a good strategy," Reika nodded. "I am lucky that I have no pressure from family anymore. Then again, that is mainly because the Patriarch is already close to Jake. Ah, by the way, as an update, the other alchemists from the clan have also backed off trying to get closer to Jake through me, and I warned them that trying to take advantage of the fact he brought them here may end badly. No, what I have had trouble with recently was this instructor who had a lesson I really wanted to take about ice-affinity flask brewing. The man is a total creeper who immediately refunded any Academy Credits I had spent on the lesson and then proceeded to offer private lessons. I thought he wanted... you know, but no, he just wanted intel on Jake."

"Wait... isn't that the same guy who taught cold-poison absorption and refinement?" Scarlett said in realization. "Big blue scalekin. Has a weird scale pattern on his chest that looks a bit like a cupcake?"

"That's the one!" Reika confirmed. "Geez, he tried it with you too?"

"Yeah, he definitely isn't subtle. I think he is from one of the Dragonflights or something, though I didn't actually talk to him; I just took the refund and informed him I was forbidden from speaking about the Chosen. He still sent me a natural treasure even after I told him to screw off, so I just ate it and moved on," Scarlett shrugged.

"Definitely nothing wrong with taking advantage of people like that; just be careful not to sow any debts," Reika nodded with a smile. She then turned to look at Meira, who was sitting quietly as usual. "Anything new happened for you over the last two weeks? Still the same problem?"

"Yeah..." Meira said meekly. "I don't even try to take normal lessons anymore, only if it is really necessary. I just work with Teacher."

Meira had the problem that she wasn't just the former slave and close associate of the Chosen. She was now also the first person that Duskleaf, the Grand Elder of the Order, had blessed in no one knew how

long, making her a figure many were interested in. Coupled with her demeanor and general personality, that was not a good mix, as she was far from used to the pressure.

Scarlett did have a bit of the same problem, being blessed by the Malefic Viper herself, but it was far, far from as severe as it was for Meira. The six of them had all questioned why Jake was so insistent on staying anonymous, but now, after having experienced just the impact of his status second-hand, they got it. While there were many advantages, the sheer mental drain was exhausting.

You had to consider if every single person talking to you had some ulterior motive and didn't actually want to talk with you as a person but were just using you to get to someone else. This was one of the reasons why these meetings kept happening: it was nice to talk to a group of people who didn't only suffer from the same issue but also people you were relatively sure weren't just there to try and get closer to Jake.

"Any positive stories?" Reika asked, trying to focus on the good stuff.

"I got one! My former supervisor, who just came back from an assignment a week ago, keeps inviting me out for drinks and asking to chat. This was the same girl who just a decade ago made fun of me for not landing any big fish in the net," Irin said, shaking her head as she displayed a proud smile. "I still remember when she spent three full hours bragging about getting with this young scion from some big Beastfolk tribe while throwing in jabs asking me who I managed to snatch up recently. Not a single comment from her for the last week, and I even purposefully keep bumping into her."

"Devilish," Izil chuckled. "Speaking of devilish... you said you had a skill selection coming up. Did you... you know?"

"Get an option related to Jake? No," Irin waved her off, smiling. "I got three total. Two for my race and one for my profession."

“And?” Reika questioned.

“Only picked one of them.”

“Really?” Reika said with a deapan face.

“Best option by far, don’t blame me. It isn’t like I am the only one,” Irin said shamelessly.

“Still,” Reika sighed.

“Alright, change of subject. You know what I am gonna ask, right? What’s the tally for the last two weeks? I am at thirteen,” Irin said. “Down from last week. I think people are beginning to get the message.”

“Only forty-three,” Reika said with a smile. “All of them in-person too, with half during a single lesson.”

“A hundred and two,” Bastilla sighed. “Most from back home... I don’t think they get that I don’t actually know the Chosen, like, at all.”

“Just eight; I think the fact I have a fiance back home got around,” Izil smiled. “I don’t have one, but it worked.”

“A hundred and seventy-nine,” Scarlett said quite proudly. “I rejected all of them... especially this super weird one.”

All eyes turned to the final girl in the room as she looked embarrassed.

“Meira?”

“I don’t...”

“Come on,” Izil said. “It can’t be that many, right?”

“... nine-hundred and five...”

The others stared at her for a moment before Irin began giggling to herself.

“That’s on me,” Izil raised her hands in defeat. “I accidentally let a bit too much slip to the Empire... so...”

"It's okay," Meira smiled. "I just ignore them..."

As for what they were counting?

Unprompted invitations. Invitations varied, with most of them proposals or people asking them out, along with factions that wanted meetings to establish a connection, naturally with the goal of recruiting them. Oh, and the odd ones, like this weird guy who just wanted Scarlett to bite him.

Life as a survivor of knowing Jake was truly challenging.

In a meeting room back on Earth, other associates of Jake were also working hard at dealing with everything Jake's identity as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper had brought with it.

"Any problems on your end, Arthur?" Miranda asked the man sitting across the large table. "I heard a demonstration recently got a bit out of control in... what was it called again?"

"Seawind Village, though we should probably update the name to Seawind City with its expansion over the last year. There was a recent influx of immigrant beastfolk who preferred to live closer to the ocean, and the locals didn't exactly take to this kindly. Especially not when the housing prices rose exponentially for all residences that were seaside, pricing out anyone who wasn't at least solidly in D-grade," Arthur explained, shaking his head. "While we managed to quell some of the anger by assuring that those who already owned housing there would be grandfathered into the new real-estate law without having to pay increased taxes for at least the next five years, many who wanted to move there in the future are still far from happy, and as you say, there was one protest recently that got out of hand. A few injured, but no deaths."

“I take it you have the situation handled, or do you need more assistance?” Miranda questioned.

“No, I believe that after an adaption period, things will calm down. We are also working on some high-rise construction that will provide more affordable accommodations that will still offer a view of the sea, even if they are not close to it. Many of the Beastkin want quick access to the sea itself due to their variant races, while the humans only really care about the view.”

Miranda nodded, happy that things seemed to be working out but more than a little tired of dealing with issues like this all the time. Even before the mass influx of slaves appeared – an influx that was still ongoing, mind you - they had been working on reforming many of the laws and institutions present on Earth to make what would effectively be a proper government.

Ever since the integration, it had become the norm for every City Lord to effectively be the local warlord who made their own rules and laws. While the United City Alliance and other factions did integrate many cities, they didn’t include even close to every single city. Especially not the rural ones.

Since the establishment of the council, they had actively made an effort to unite the planet. With the influx of slaves, this only became even more of a priority to make sure fringe factions that opposed this immigration wouldn’t appear without their knowledge. Recently, arrivals from the United Tribes to help assist Miranda had also begun coming, and while they were a great help in expanding the influence of the council, they were also ultimately newcomers, which many native earthlings weren’t big fans of. Lots of xenophobia all around, that was for sure.

“Speaking of beastkin and beast, did you look into the appearance of the C-grade beast?” Miranda asked another guy in the room. It was the former leader of the fort, now, after the Myriad Paths event, a reformed fist-fighting magic brawler, Phillip.

Phillip had given up entirely on being a leader of any kind, even after his second wind from having to deal with Haven during the entire Ell'Hakan debacle. He was now thoroughly retired... if by retired one meant having taken up the job of working for the government as an investigator of sorts. Ah, but he was not a leader with any employee responsibility. That was his big requirement for taking the job.

He had recently gone to investigate what was suspected to be the first appearance of a C-grade beast within human territory since Sylphie. C-grades were still pretty rare on Earth, so this had caused some ruckus, especially as the beast had appeared in a rural village with no other C-grades anywhere nearby. All other C-grades Jake – or now Miranda, having been given the authority – had to approve to enter protected human lands. The one exception was those who had grown up within these lands and evolved there, like Sylphie. And now this beast.

“Yes, I looked into it, and I don’t think there will be any problems even if we leave him alone,” Phillip shook his head and smiled. “In fact, this beast has apparently been protecting the locals in the area for quite a while and is a bit of a local hero. Plus, he was really nice... though he did seem to have the same thing as Sylphie where he refuses to properly communicate, even if by all accounts he should be able to.”

“Alright, good to know. Keep an eye out still; better safe than sorry,” Miranda nodded as they prepared to move on. In all honesty, she wasn’t that surprised. From the reports, the beast was friendly and had been living with humans ever since they returned from the Tutorial, all without any incidents of note.

It did make sense. Golden retrievers tended to be good boys and girls, so it would have been very surprising if it had turned into a bad dog.

Miranda smiled a bit at the thought as she turned to one of the estate developers who had been allowed to attend the meeting. “Moving on. Could you give me an update on clearing the buffer zone around Haven? Did you relocate all the illegal settlements as planned?”

Quite a while ago, it had been decided that a buffer zone of around ten kilometers would be made around the entrance to the forest Haven was placed in. This was to continue respecting Jake's wish of having Haven be a quiet little forest town, with the hope he would actually bother still visiting there from time to time.

Without this buffer zone, Haven would rapidly turn into a metropolis as every new arrival wanted to be as close to the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as possible. Why wouldn't they? Their primary reason for coming had been to form a better relationship with the Order of the Malefic Viper, after all.

Despite having set up the buffer zone, some people still chose to settle there. It was a constant struggle having to clear them out, and Miranda was honestly considering just placing a hex on the entire zone to give anyone who spent too long there horrible waking nightmares. Maybe diarrhea too.

"Yes, Mistress, they have all been moved to the primary city, and better signage has been posted to clarify settling within the buffer zone is not allowed," the female developer explained. "However, Mistress, if I may, we are beginning to run out of raw materials... the supply simply cannot meet the demand. We are especially in need of metals for reinforcing the structures."

"Hm, try to talk with the merchant alliance about obtaining more," Miranda said after thinking for a bit. "Lillian can update your budget, but I will need an itemized report of what you spend these funds on. We don't want a repeat of Ricardo, do we?"

"No... no, of course not. I will make sure not a single Credit is out of place," the woman nodded nervously.

Yeah, Ricardo had been... well, foolhardy was perhaps the right word? Actually, stupidly greedy was probably more accurate. He had thought he could skim off the top without anyone noticing just because the budding government was still young and disorganized. Little did the guy know that the leader of the

merchant alliance on Earth was Sultan, and when Lillian noticed discrepancies, the guy was fucked. Sultan was shrewd, but he at least knew how to take advantage of Miranda and Jake in a way that wouldn't annoy them too much.

This did introduce another issue: what to do with criminals? Luckily, the people from the United Tribes had some solutions there. While capital punishment was considered normal in the multiverse, it did feel like a bit much to execute anyone who committed any crimes, no matter how small. Others also had this issue, including the United Tribes, who also used this solution to keep certain beasts with low intelligence penned.

That's right, Earth had constructed its first proper jail. It couldn't hold C-grades or too powerful D-grades, but that luckily hadn't been necessary yet, either. They had achieved this by having high-level crafters make cells that were too durable for even the average high-level D-grade to leave a dent and further improved the place with a formation that weakened and drained resources from all those within. Finally, every single prisoner was magically marked to make them easier to track. With that, even if someone should escape, a C-grade guard would quite easily be able to hunt them down.

Miranda was about to move on when Lillian tapped her on the shoulder and sent a telepathic message. "I was just informed that a warrior found an interesting item after slaying a quite powerful C-grade."

Having a good idea of what she was talking about, Miranda asked to have the hunter come.

A few minutes later, a familiar figure entered the room. A lot of slaves had come to Earth, with few standing out. This man was among the outstanding individuals who, after getting freed, had willingly taken up a leadership position and become a great support for the council.

"Holstred, I hear you have been hunting?" Miranda said as she smiled at the former Knight Commander-turned-slave-turned-freed.

“Yes, Mistress,” he bowed, overly polite as ever. “I believe it would be of interest to the council to be aware that items such as these seem to have begun appearing across the planet.”

Holstred held up a black token depicting a large black pit with a dragon within. Miranda did indeed already know what it was as she Identified it.

[Greater Nevermore Admittance Token (Unique)] – a special token that allows the user to teleport themselves and up to 99 others with them directly to Nevermore City to enter the World Wonder known as Nevermore. Nevermore consists of a number of sequential dungeons with increasing difficulty. Time is warped within Nevermore, making time pass slower outside than inside. One can only spend a total of 50 years within Nevermore. This token can be reused to return the same number of people back to where they originally teleported from.

Requirements: C-grade

Miranda looked at the item and smiled slightly. If those tokens had begun to drop... it appeared another influx of newcomers to Nevermore was inbound.

Chapter 729: Nevermore: Level 230 Class Skill Selection

One skill selection was great.

Two skill selections? Now that was just awesome. And today was truly an awesome day.

Jake was already pretty happy with his new profession skill, even if he didn't have the chance to start experimenting with it right then and there. Sure, he would like to sit down for a few weeks and just make Curse Fragments and see if he could find anything to use them for immediately, but that didn't mean he was any less excited to get another class skill or maybe even upgrade one of his existing ones.

In fact... having both skill selections at once like this was double-awesome because it meant that it didn't matter if the next floor had a lot of downtime for crafting or was filled with combat; Jake would have something new and shiny to play with.

So, feeling in a good mood, Jake began the skill selection.

Arcane Hunter of Horizon's Edge class skills available

And was instantly disappointed because, as was almost becoming customary by now, there, of course, had to be one shitty magic skill on offer.

[Devastating Arcane Orb (Rare)] – Harness your destructive arcane mana to bring devastation upon the world. Allows the Hunter to summon an explosive orb of arcane mana at a target location within your range of perception. The arcane orb will be highly destructive and especially effective against environmental mana, with energies tailored to wide-scale destruction over focused damage, allowing each Devastating Arcane Orb to destroy large areas. Multiple orbs can be conjured at once for optimal devastation. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Devastating Arcane Orb.

Man, Jake was definitely feeling regret now. He should totally have picked Malefic Plague Theory as his profession skill, as he now realized he had missed out on a huge opportunity. Imagine the synergy. With a plague, he would wipe out a civilization of E-grades, and then he could blow up their cities with Devastating Arcane Orbs once everyone was dead! One for killing, one for destroying, the perfect combo to wipe out people too weak to fight back.

Alas, Jake had failed to predict he would be offered such a perfect skill in his class skill selection.

All kidding aside, why the hell would Jake want a rare skill that was tailor-made to blow up stuff? Not even enemies, just... stuff. Also, the reasoning behind him getting offered the skill felt pretty damn thin. Did it really all come from Jake blowing up some cities during floor forty-one? Sure, he did sometimes use highly destructive arcane magic to blow up large areas or as distractions, but enough for one of his five skill offerings to be taken up like this?

Yeah, it felt like it was a bullshit skill just there to fill the list. Something the next one on offer also kind of was, though at least there was some solid reasoning behind that one.

[Superior Arcane Armaments (Epic)] – Be it a weapon or armor, through your arcane mana, you shall never be found wanting. Allows the Hunter to in-depth design and summon armaments of arcane mana. Armaments can be given to others. Weapons created will deal a small amount of bonus destructive arcane damage, while armor will be strengthened by the concept of stability. The duration and durability of all items summoned are based on the mana expended and the nature of the armament's design. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom when using Superior Arcane Armaments. Additional bonuses may apply dependent on the nature of the conjured item.

Jake still remembered getting offered the skill Arcane Armaments and thinking it was pretty cool back several skill selections ago. He also remembered that skill had been an upgrade to one called Summon Spectral Armaments or something like that.

Now, he did have to question... why was the system so damn insistent on Jake learning how to summon armor and weapons? Three times getting offered effectively the same skill definitely felt like overkill. Additionally, why would he even need it in the first place? A summoned katar would definitely be worse

than both Blackpoint Blade and definitely way worse than Eternal Hunger. Could he maybe make some armor out of it? Nah, that also seemed bad, as Jake was fully dedicated to dodging stuff and trying to gear himself out in arcane armor just seemed like it would weigh him down. The two only real use cases Jake could see were to make things for his allies, as he assumed even monsters could use summoned items like this. The other one was to summon arrows... in other words, something he didn't have just one, but two skills, already doing.

Speaking of summoning arrows, Jake did feel pretty damn certain this upgrade to Superior Arcane Armaments came at least partly from his creation of Protean Arrow. Both were about designing things using arcane mana, after all. Of course, that upgrade had partly been facilitated by the Puzzle Cube that he had been gifted...

On second thought, Jake didn't want to go down any train of thought that would make him have any negative emotions towards that wonderful little box of puzzling wonders. The skill offered sucked and wasn't something he needed, so he proceeded to the next one.

Looking at it, things were finally starting to get interesting.

[Arcane Arrow Rain of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)] – At your will, cover the horizon in a sea of arrows. Allows you to repeatedly clone your arrows while in flight, allowing them to retain innate magical properties as one becomes hundreds. If the original arrow is shot upwards, it can be transformed into a devastating Arcane Arrow Rain, exploding as it releases a rainfall of arrows in a massive area. Cloning arcane arrows or creating Arcane Arrow Rains using arcane arrows has a far lower mana and stamina cost. On an internal cooldown, the Hunter can push himself beyond his usual abilities and create an arrow that, upon activation, will explode several times on a slight delay for multiple Arcane Arrow Rains. Doing this will temporarily make the skill unavailable. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility and Wisdom when using Arcane Arrow Rain. Increased damage based on Perception and the distance the arrows fall from when creating an Arcane Arrow Rain.

WARNING: This skill is unlocked by and will serve as an upgrade to your existing Splitting Arrow Rain, resulting in the loss of the skill

A direct upgrade to Splitting Arrow Rain, more or less. One that was linked to his class, too, making it even more interesting. Reading over the actual effects, Jake was both impressed and a little unsure about this one's upgrade path.

It was pretty clear the upgrade leaned heavily into just adding more arrows. Jake didn't doubt that the basic splitting function would be even better than before, with the entire Arrow Rain aspect becoming far better. Even the way the rain happened had improved, as rather than just mass-cloning the arrows, this skill would just make one big arrow that would then explode and create an Arrow Rain.

The integration of his arcane affinity into the skill also had the effect of making the cloning of all arcane arrows – which was all of them – more cost-effective. This was honestly a pretty damn obvious upgrade he should probably implement himself if he didn't take this skill. It seemed incredibly simple and was just something he had never considered prior. Adding his arcane affinity to the skill never seemed relevant, as he was just copying arcane arrows anyway, so what would double arcane do? Well, make things more efficient, apparently.

This was already a pretty good basic upgrade. More arrows, better cost-efficiency, and a more effective method of creating Arrow Rains. All of it was great.

However, the most exciting thing about the skill by far was the option to put the skill on a cooldown in order to “push himself beyond his usual abilities” and create a self-sustaining Arcane Arrow Rain. If Jake read it correctly, using this effect would allow him to create a massive Arrow Rain that lasted for a prolonged period of time without him even needing to do anything.

Jake had never run into any functionalities in skills like this one before, at least not like this. Sure, Wings did have a powerful effect it could trigger and then become unusable for a while, and Palate also kind of did with the current situation going on with it right now – because yes, on a side note, even one and a half year or so after having the World Core explode, his stomach still hadn't fully healed.

Anyway, back to the Arrow Rain upgrade, Jake was very curious about how this worked. Like, what was the concept between it? Usually, things that allowed you to break your own limits were classified as boosting skills, and even extremely powerful single-cast spells usually came with either a long cast time or some form of backlash or period of weakness after use. This skill didn't mention that Jake would experience any of this, only a cooldown. Just to find out exactly how that worked, Jake nearly wanted to select the skill, but he had to remain steadfast. There were two more options to go through, after all.

With the next one having a suspiciously similar line in the description.

[Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge (Ancient)] – No defenses shall stop your arrows as they pierce any foe that dares impede your Path toward the horizon. Allows the Hunter to create a Penetrating Arcane Arrow that will pierce through nearly any natural barriers and have a far higher penetrative effect on any defenses manifested or possessed by the target. Will temporarily lower the defenses of the foe if they are struck successfully. These effects are more powerful the higher the enemy's defenses and the level disparity between you and your opponent. On an internal cooldown, the Hunter can push himself beyond his usual abilities and forcefully infuse the concepts of the Penetrating Arrow of Horizon's Edge into another self-created arcane arrow. Doing this will temporarily make the skill unavailable, with this period dependent on the power of the arrow you infused. Due to conceptual synergy, Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge receives significantly increased bonuses from Unblemished Arrows of the Horizon. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Agility, Strength, Wisdom, Intelligence, and Perception when using Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge.

Again there was the ability to "supercharge" the skill and put it on cooldown. Was this maybe something inherent to the Hunter of Horizon's Edge class? Like how Avaricious was all about making his attacks more effective against higher-leveled foes, this concept allowed Jake to "supercharge" skills along with the usual bonuses?

If that was the case... why? What made this ability inherent to his class? Perception scaling made sense thematically with the concept of chasing the horizon. The horizon was just a metaphor for something unattainable that was incredibly far away, with any progress made toward the horizon just moving it further away. Perception played into this, as the further one could see, the more ambitious the horizon

he chased. The scaling based on levels also made some level of sense, as every enemy reflected what obstructed him on his Path toward Horizon's Edge, and every enemy was ahead of him on this endless journey.

The main theme of his class did seem to be going above and beyond, reaching for the impossible, so was this supercharging of skills maybe a representation of that? That he would reach beyond what he could reach beyond his own station and, at the cost of putting the skill on a cooldown, supercharge the skill for one final push?

He knew he wouldn't get an answer by just thinking about it, so he decided to evaluate the actual skill.

Penetrating Arrow seemed like a bunker-breaker of sorts. It was created to destroy defenses and would probably work very well as an opener of sorts when Protean Arrow wasn't an option. Or could he supercharge the skill and infuse the concept into the Protean Arrow? Yeah, that was definitely an option, too, if he went for the one-shot.

The increased synergy with Unblemished Arrows was also interesting, but honestly made sense considering the two skills were kind of similar. The skill was also ancient rarity, so it clearly dealt with high-level concepts... yeah, all in all, this skill would just be a great tool to add to his skill set. Sure, he did have a few doubts, such as how long it would take to summon this Penetrating Arrow, but as it didn't mention how fast or slow it would be, he assumed it wouldn't be too bad or good.

In conclusion, this one was definitely a contender. But he had one more skill offered – this one legendary.

[Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)] – All other magic - all other energies – falter as you embrace the supremacy of your arcane affinity. Determined in your Path, you are ready to dedicate yourself to your arcane affinity once and for all. With conviction, reforge your body, making arcane energy more easily

travel through your pathways while making you significantly more resilient to your own arcane energies. Passively increases the effectiveness and lowers the cost of all combat skills using arcane energy. As your bond with your arcane affinity deepens, so does your understanding of it, reducing the mana cost of all freeform manipulation using your arcane mana while increasing its power. As your arcane affinity strengthens, you surrender other forms of magic, significantly increasing the cost and lowering the effectiveness of all combat skills and freeform magic that does not utilize your arcane affinity.

When reading this skill, Jake instantly got reminded of Attunement skills. In prior skill selections, Jake had been offered both the Curse and Dark Attunement skills, which would have permanently transformed a portion of his energies into dark mana or curse energy, with the benefit of any magic using those energies improving, but at the cost of any other types of energy manipulation getting worse.

This one was incredibly similar to that, but it was no attunement skill. Attunement skills were permanent changes to your status menu, literally adding or changing it to have a new resource. Arcane Supremacy, being a passive skill, would likely also lead to some changes, but it was far from as severe as an Attunement skill.

The biggest difference was that this one only really affected combat skills and magic. Jake wondered for a moment as he checked his status menu just to confirm something. Yep, pretty much all his skills already integrated his arcane affinity in some way or another. The only ones he was a bit worried about were those like Steady Aim, Relentless Hunt, and especially Eternal Shadow... but he was unsure if those were even affected or if they maybe did somehow utilize his arcane affinity even if the descriptions didn't clarify it. One had to remember that his arcane affinity came at least partly from his Bloodline, so any skill related to that should also be affected positively, right? Or at least not negatively impacted.

Even something like curse energy Jake knew he could merge with his arcane affinity. In fact, it was better to merge it with his arcane affinity to stabilize it, something the Curse Fragments he had just learned to make were already doing. The Penetrating Stab also used his arcane affinity already.

One thing that also really interested him was how this one would work with Arcane Awakening. The part about making his body more resilient to his own arcane energies had to work great with his boosting

skill, right? As it was his own affinity, Jake already had an insane innate resistance to arcane energy, but that didn't mean he would say no to having to be even better.

Oh yeah, and reading more closely, when it talked about freeform manipulation of arcane mana, it didn't actually say that part only worked in combat... so maybe he could even use that elsewhere? The possibilities.

All in all, Jake concluded that Arcane Supremacy was a skill that would effectively just buff nearly every aspect of combat, with minimum downsides, and those downsides he could quickly iron out. The only true negative was that this would be Jake fully dedicating himself to a Path. That he would, once and for all, go all-in with his arcane affinity over all other types of energy. Which, to be fair, he kind of already was.

It was a good skill, no two ways about it. Legendary too, plus it had a great name, in Jake's opinion. The thing is, there were a lot of good offers this time around.

Jake read over the skills one more time, and he kind of liked the three last ones offered. Arcane Arrow Rain of Horizon's Edge, Penetrating Arcane Arrow of Horizon's Edge, and Arcane Supremacy all had different pros and cons, but all shared that they would be great additions. One would make him far better against massive foes and large-scale combat, as well as just give more overall damage to one of his core skills. Another would give him an arrow to break defenses and even empower his other already massively powerful attacks, such as his Protean Arrow, while the final one would just make nearly everything Jake did slightly stronger.

So... which one should he pick?

Chapter 730: Nevermore: A Bit of Testing

Choosing skills when there were four shit options and only one skill he wanted was much easier than having multiple skills that appealed to him. If possible, he would have picked at least two of them, as he

was honestly fine with missing out on either Penetrating Arcane Arrow or Arcane Arrow Rain, but he really wanted at least one of them.

That entire supercharging effect was just too damn interesting. What's more, if it truly was something inherent to Jake's class, would he maybe be able to upgrade other skills with the same effect? Would he become able to make an even better Protean Arrow that he could supercharge? Or, to be extreme... a supercharged Eternal Shadow.

Jake sucked at theoretical stuff, but as long as he felt how the supercharging effect worked just once, he would at least have an idea of how to apply it elsewhere.

But... if he wanted that, he would have to skip Arcane Supremacy. Just the name alone appealed to him as his arcane affinity was indeed the supreme form of magic, but there were cons to picking it. Plus, he had no idea how it would interact with his Malefic Viper Legacy skills or his ability to easily use curse magic. Touch should be fine as that one he had pretty good control over and could easily toss a bit of arcane affinity in there, but what about Scales? Wings? Fangs? Pride? All of them. Shit, just something like Malefic Viper's Poison that made all his poison better did not have anything to do with his arcane affinity. Would that somehow get negatively impacted, meaning all of his poisons would get worse?

Also, while Arcane Supremacy was cool, so was being able to supercharge skills.

Mentally he had already written off Arcane Arrow Rain while just thinking this over a bit more, and for two big reasons. One was that it just seemed the least interesting of the three, and two, because it was an upgrade to an existing skill. That meant he could upgrade the skill himself, even if he couldn't make it as good. Picking one of the other options would add a new skill, and Villy had repeatedly talked about how having more skills tended to be straight-up better.

Jake momentarily considered asking the Sword Saint or one of the others but decided against it. This was his skill selection and his Path. He had complained to the Sword Saint about the mythical Hallowed Shroud, but he hadn't actually asked for advice as he already knew such a skill didn't fit him. If he didn't know his own Path and knew what he wanted to do, how could he expect anyone else to?

Arcane Supremacy does seem best overall, right? he questioned. Yeah, it did. But picking it did mean fully committing to his arcane affinity, akin to picking an Attunement skill. He felt like there were many unknowns with doing that... and what if he discovered an affinity that he also wanted to use at some point? Curse energy wasn't something he had initially been interested in, but now it was a core part of his Path. What if that happened with some magic affinity he just hadn't encountered yet? What if there proved to be some fundamental problem with his arcane affinity? What if he faced an enemy who somehow resisted his arcane energy?

What if...

Fuck off, Jake... you gotta commit to things sometimes, he scolded himself as he got his shit together. Logically he knew Arcane Supremacy was the best. He would have to dedicate himself at some time to an affinity, as not doing so was just leaving power on the table. His intuition was also telling him he bloody had to pick it, but he still felt damn insecure. He was bad at commitments and any skills that would "lock out" other options... but there were times one had to do that.

Jake's arcane affinity was his affinity. There would never be any affinity that could suit him better, as this one was literally created by him and was tied to who he was. If there was any type of magic or affinity to ever commit to, it would be his own. Even if some of his skills didn't benefit from the skill or were negatively impacted right now, he would fix it in the future.

All he could hope was that the next skill selection didn't have any interesting options or at least had another skill with the supercharge option because, this time, it had to be Arcane Supremacy. With conviction, he selected the legendary skill.

New skill gained: [Arcane Supremacy (Legendary)]

He selected the skill and took a deep breath as he felt something was coming. Seconds passed before a shiver went through his arms as it slowly spread throughout the rest of his body. The shiver was slowly replaced by an odd warm sensation that was on the brink of feeling painful, and in his sphere, he saw a bit of skin slowly begin to flay.

Then, the system truly went into gear. A protective bubble formed around Jake's entire body, obscuring his form from view from the others waiting in the in-between room as the reforging process began. His skin sped up with flying off as both his arms rapidly began dissolving as if destructive arcane energy had ravaged them, yet the very next second, what was destroyed got rebuilt.

This was not simply his physical body undergoing a metamorphosis, but his entire Soulshape was influenced. The countless pathways that transported innate energy – stamina – throughout his body expanded and seemed to slightly change as the veins responsible for health points – vital energy – underwent rebirth next.

Nearly no part of Jake was left untouched. The only things he saw the system didn't influence were his eyes, as trying to reforge them was utterly unnecessary. However, he was surprised when he felt a faint spectral outline behind his back also get influenced until he realized it was his Wings of the Malefic Viper. Even if he didn't have them summoned now, Arcane Supremacy still affected them.

Jake had wondered if maybe he could achieve something akin to what this skill did himself... but undergoing the reforging process, he became fully aware of how far he was from achieving something like that. The endless pathways making up the body were so numerous it didn't make any sense, and each evolution only added more and changed those that were already there. To manually try to do something like this would be akin to changing a living being by going in and affecting every cell individually. Plus, one had to be able to do this change within a very short time span, or the body would

be in imbalance and try to “heal” any damage inflicted. Not to mention the fact one had to figure out a way to not just find and influence all of these pathways... one had to do it in a way that could directly change the Soulshape.

Soon enough, the reforging approached its end. Jake had almost expected his Bloodline to act up or do something during all this, but it was surprisingly silent. Content. It clearly approved of what was happening, and as Jake began to inspect some of the changes, he couldn't help but think:

This feels right... more right than it was before?

It was odd. The changed parts of Jake's body felt more... natural? At least more so than before being reforged. Like this was how they had always been supposed to look... no... maybe that it was at least closer to it than before? He couldn't quite put his finger on it, and before he could properly get an idea, his metamorphosis was fully complete.

The entire process only took around a minute before the protective shell that had formed around him slowly disappeared. Jake opened his eyes to see four individuals staring down at him, Dina with a worried look, the Fallen King and Sword Saint with pure interest, and Sylphie looking like she was annoyed at his commotion waking her up.

“So... you got an interesting skill, I take it?” the Sword Saint asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It reminded me a bit of when I underwent my full Nature Attunement... but not quite?” Dina said, slightly confused.

“First of all, yes, very interesting, and it is pretty close to an Attunement skill, Dina,” Jake answered the both of them as he slowly opened and closed his hand.

“So you have chosen to specialize your magic?” the Fallen King questioned.

“As I said, something like that,” Jake answered as he let a spark of arcane energy jump between his index and thumb. “I guess you can say I finally committed properly to my own arcane affinity, as odd as that sounds.”

“Will it affect your alchemy skills?” Dina asked with a bit of worry. “More often than not, that is one of the big hurdles for Attunement skills, as they can create difficulties for crafting. As far as I know, most alchemy is best with pure unattuned mana, so if you are attuned, it adds another layer of challenge and complexity.”

Jake felt for a bit as he transported pure mana through his body before shaking his head. “Nope, alchemy seems unaffected... in fact, it may be better than before. No problems moving pure mana around, at least.”

“Hm,” Dina said before smiling cheerfully. “Arcane affinities are odd, so I won’t ask anything. But it sounds like it was a good upgrade, so congratulations!”

“Thanks,” Jake smiled back at her. “Now, can I get a bit of time to familiarize myself with things?”

“How long will you need, you think?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Not long, I reckon,” Jake answered. “But don’t worry. I have a strong feeling I would like to do some live testing pretty soon.”

“Very well. Notify us when you are ready,” the old man said as he went over to a corner and sat down to meditate. The others also went back to doing their own thing and left Jake to do some testing. As much testing as he could do in the relatively small in-between room, anyway.

Jake started by consciously moving some arcane energy around and found it moved far more smoothly than before. It was like his internal channels had slightly expanded and gotten lubricated, at least when it came to leading arcane energy through his body. He also quickly tried summoning a bit of magic, starting with a barrier of stable arcane mana to encase himself, serving both as an experiment and a way to not annoy the others too much.

With little effort, arcane mana manifested all around him, forming a stable barrier in a bubble all around him nearly instantly.

Faster than before, that’s for sure... by around twenty percent, maybe?

Next, he took out Eternal Hunger and did a pressure test. He rested the tip on the barrier and slowly applied pressure until the arcane barrier began to crack and break. He repeated this a few more times as he kept summoning barriers to break.

Durability is up too, and more than the summoning speed. Maybe thirty percent?

Jake did regret not doing all these tests before he picked the skill to have a better control group, but he luckily had a pretty good feeling of how strong his different skills and freeform magic were before he got Arcane Supremacy.

Anyway, after a few more tests with both stable and destructive arcane mana using freeform magic, he concluded that both had undergone significant improvements. Summoning speed had improved the least, as Jake was already pretty good at that before, but potency was where things had improved the most. For stable constructs, he had just gone over how much they improved, while for destructive energies, he summoned them about fifteen percent faster while the potency had gone up about twenty-five percent. So a bit less than the stable variant.

Due to Jake's high Perception, he had always been pretty fast at summoning magic, so he guessed the bonus to that and potency were actually pretty similar. He also had more practice with destructive arcane energies, so Jake guessed the "true" bonus to summoning and potency – not factoring in Jake's skill - was somewhere around twenty percent for both. In other words, this bonus made his arcane freeform magic twenty percent better under ideal circumstances while probably adding more under non-ideal circumstances.

Next up was the improvement seen with skills. That one proved to be a bit more tricky to determine. Skills already included system assistance when activating them, and while you could practice and get better, it wasn't as much as one could with freeform magic. This didn't mean that skills didn't benefit, though. Through a quick test, he noticed the charging speed of Arcane Powershot had gotten faster, and his ability to construct a Protean Arrow had definitely sped up.

Power-wise, he estimated the boost was a bit lower across the board and varied quite a bit based on the skill. Something like his Avaricious Arcane Arrows – the arrows he normally shot – were surprisingly enough nearly twenty-five percent better than before, while the power of Arcane Powershot was only improved by about ten percent. Well, okay, that wasn't entirely accurate, as his increased resistance also allowed him to now charge Arcane Powershot for longer and faster, resulting in that potentially being the skill that improved the most.

He also wanted to test Arcane Awakening but decided to wait with that, as he would rather see the effects in a real fight. Besides, he would probably piss off his party members if he decided to see how far he could push the skill while inside the in-between room, delaying their progress even more than necessary.

Finally, when it came to the increase in efficiency and reduced energy cost, Jake had to be honest and admit that part was by far the weakest aspect of the skill. It wasn't really that he spent less mana doing stuff. It was just that less was lost in transportation, meaning he would estimate a five to ten percent efficiency improvement at most across the board.

Now for the downsides of the upgrade.

Firstly, Jake tried to move some dark mana through his veins to form a bolt of dark mana... and it was like dragging sludge. The feeling of the pathways getting lubricated had turned from smoothing things out to now being a sticky substance that made everything harder.

Power, speed, and efficiency had all fallen even more than his arcane energy had improved. With a bit of worry, he tried to move curse energy next and found the same result. It was indeed a lot worse in every single way.

Trying again, Jake did the same test with dark mana, but this time sprinkled in a bit of stable arcane energy and found that the dark mana this time traveled through his body as if it was arcane energy. The bonus did seem slightly weaker, but it was there.

So merging other affinities or types of magic with arcane energy works. Great.

Having tested that, Jake finally decided to try a few Malefic Viper Legacy skills... something he had been dreading. He hoped they wouldn't have been impacted too badly and began by summoning Scales and Wings. Both appeared and...

Nothing.

It felt the exact same as before, with the cost and effectiveness both utterly unaffected. Confused as hell, he pulled out Eternal Hunger and infused it with venom from Fang... and once more, everything was the same. He kept trying, wondering what was going on, until a rush of realization hit him.

Villy you glorious bastard, Jake grinned widely.

Arcane Supremacy worked on combat skills and freeform magic.

All of the Legacy skills were technically not combat-related skills. Sure, they were used in combat, but they all had Origins in something alchemy-related, resulting in them not being considered combat skills by the system. Truly, Vily was truly a goddamn scammer.

Wait, does that mean...

Jake tried his new skill to summon Curse Fragments right then and there. He felt the curse energy move through his pathways, as he felt it was utterly unaffected. It was like the "lubricating" effect didn't impact it at all. It wasn't a combat skill, after all. This also meant that the arcane parts of the skill didn't receive any benefits from Arcane Supremacy.

Next, he took out his cauldron and tried to use brew potion real quick, once more seeing it was unaffected. So that was a relief.

He kept trying a few more minor things but quickly reached a bit of an impasse. Any further testing he wanted would take too long or require real combat. That, or for him to at least not be locked in a small room where he couldn't make big explosions or fully charge an Arcane Powershot without blowing up someone.

Standing up, Jake stretched. "Alright, gang, done testing and ready to go."

It was time to experiment and get some floors done. Oh, and probably have some more multiversal lessons imparted to them.