

“What you’re saying is that you think some of your kind is still alive?” I asked the Kurghal village goat, translating its bleating into words.

The goat nodded. A pair of floating cymbals above its head clanked.

It had just finished a lengthy exposition dump about what happened to it during the Great Quake. The crimson goat, only a kid back then, the goat kind, not the human kid, and twenty-odd companions—a tiny portion of their herd—escaped a collapsed cave in the aftermath of the tragedy. But their troubles were far from over. Powerful monsters, awakened by the moving earth, snacked on them. The Great Quake continued to indirectly cause more deaths in its wake. I could see why most NPCs thought we were the last Mardukryon tribe.

Only the crimson goat managed to survive long enough to reach safety in Kurghal Village, the adults of its group sacrificing their lives to protect it. That meant the crimson goat was over two centuries old. Though probably not as long-lived as Mardukryons, it was nonetheless astounding that musical goats could reach this age.

“I see... And you think that the survivor goats are with the lost Mardukryon tribes?”

The goat nodded again, more eagerly this time, its long red fur swaying like curtains blown by the wind. A surprise that this horny fellow—it did have majestic coiling horns—held important clues related to the main quest.

It turned out that Mardukryons and the musical goats had a tight history. The musical goats lived on the icy mountain where the Mardukryons were imprisoned long before the latter’s arrival. It seemed that the Dalkanus also got samples of the musical goats from whichever planet Mardukryons came from and brought them to Hierakon to make the Mardukryon zoo more realistic.

The Dalkanus didn’t need to recreate the Mardukryons’ prison. They could’ve dialed back the history of Mardukryons they wanted to capture in their display. Why couldn’t those golden weirdos plop us in our natural habitat instead?

Which was... *I don’t know*. Maybe a volcano?

On the other hand, the musical goats looked well at home on this mountain, with very thick coats to *weather* the weather, and their white color for camouflage. The goat in front of me had explained that it purposely dyed its fur a bright crimson color, something about being a symbolic beacon against the backdrop of the snow for its kind to find.

Since musical goats occasionally lived in Mardukryon villages, selling wine and offering their unique brand of magic, it was likely that if Mardukryons were still running around parts of the mountain yet unreachable to us, there’d be goats with them. And the crimson goat was adamant there were Mardukryon survivors besides us of Kurghal Village.

“You have a lot of faith in Mardukryons,” I said. “I agree with you. There should be survivors. Otherwise, there wouldn’t be a quest to find them. Going to be ultimately lame if the search ends with nothing. Anyway, I’ll help you find your buddies while I’m looking for mine. Two birds, one stone thing—I’m an expert on that.”

The goat plucked the strings of a floating guitar beside it using its horns, playing a few notes of a cheery tune.

“Any clues where to look?” I asked. “You probably haven’t searched far. No offense, but you almost got killed by mere Frost Macaques. Have you tried asking other Mardukryons for help since we have the same goals?”

The goat answered that it had joined Mardukryon search parties in the years immediately following the Great Quake. It had also hired Pathfinders to look for any leads.

“Let me guess,” I said. “Gibil is one of them.”

The goat confirmed that I was right, *as usual*. Not surprising that the romantic Pathfinder was more than willing to do it in return for bottles of the finest [Peely Fruit Wine]. Must be why he was excited about the Hermit Crabores he found carrying possible evidence from other Mardukryon tribes.

Unlike Gibil, most NPCs didn’t appear to care whether there were other Mardukryon tribes out there. Even if they thought that there were, they weren’t eagerly launching expeditions all over the mountain. Arakmad, for example, was content to be buried by his wares even if he wholeheartedly believed that Kurghal Village wasn’t the remaining Mardukryon settlement.

Maybe it was just time... A couple of hundred years was a long time despite our lengthy lifespans. After that long with no clue, it was understandable to just focus on our village.

“But you didn’t find anything,” I said. “So, no clue then. What? You’re going to give me something?”

### [ Obtained: Piece of the Tattered Map ]

“You had this all along? Eh, it’s not a clue to the main quest, but an unlocked area is more than welcome. *Welcomer!*”

I slotted the piece into the [Tattered Map] in my inventory. An area to the right of Bawu’s piece lit up, leading further away from the three other pieces I got. I needed to unlock the way to Bawu’s piece first. At any rate, this was valuable progress. Other players might’ve gotten the village goat’s map piece—maybe Eugenius had—but I was certain only I had Bawu’s piece.

“Five pieces down,” I said. “Don’t know how many more to go. What’s this?”

### [ Quest Completed: The Uncertain Search - Gaining Knowledge I ]

#### [ Quest: The Uncertain Search - Gaining Knowledge II ]

*Having learned much about the history of the Mardukryons and found many pieces of the [Tattered Map], it is time to go forth into the unknown that has now become less cloudy with the clues you possess. Perhaps the roads less traveled or the new paths that you will forge will bring you leads in finding the lost Mardukryon tribes.*

“Progress on the main quest!” I raised my oud triumphantly like a sword. “What triggered it to complete? And there’s a new quest in the chain too.” I peered at the details on the floating screen.

Nothing specific, similar to the one before it. I’d rather have a to-do list because that was much easier to fulfill rather than something open-ended. Players were free on how to go about completing it and activating the next one, so long as they achieved... a certain something.

Was it gathering another five pieces of the [Tattered Map]? Or perhaps the trigger for progress talking to a particular NPC? Could also be obtaining specific information.

“Where did you get your piece?” I asked the crimson goat. “Haven’t yet received a satisfactory answer to this huge lingering question of why the Tattered Map was torn and spread randomly everywhere. The Mud Golem inside the tunnels even had one. Bawu and Gula also each had a piece.”

The goat replied that it was given by an elder goat before succumbing to its injuries from the Great Quake. Just like the other NPCs, the goat didn’t know why it was torn or anything else about its history.

I scratched my tusk. “If you got a map piece right after the Great Quake, that means it was already in tatters before that. Is this the only map of its kind?” Doubtful that the [Tattered Map] had other copies if NPCs gave so much importance to its pieces.

If my deduction was correct, and it usually was, why was it the only copy? Mardukryons had magic and plenty of scrolls rolling around. How hard could it be to copy a map? Probably not that hard.

Yet no one made any. It also must’ve been torn a long time before the Great Quake for it to have no copies. Or there were copies but they were all destroyed by whoever ripped the [Tattered Map] apart.

I asked the village goat, but it didn’t know the answer.

It also didn’t know what was so important about the [Tattered Map] that its pieces were hidden and preserved before the Great Quake. I could see why it was useful now in searching for the other tribes, even if the landscape was largely changed by the Great Quake. But what about back then? It was a map that led to other tribes, not to some treasure.

Didn’t olden Mardukryons already know each tribe’s address on this mountain?

Maybe... they didn’t. Except for the guy who made the map.

Possible that certain tribes weren’t connected to the Sigil Totem warp system, weren’t part of Mardukryon trade routes, or weren’t contacted for a long time. The Mardukryons might have split for one reason or another long before the Great Quake. A civil war, perhaps. Some other misunderstandings warranted cutting off connections with other tribes.

“Whatever the big issue was before,” I muttered to myself, “that doesn’t matter now. Plenty of new questions, but I’m also feeling a lot closer to finding the other tribes.”

The goat pattered nearer to me, looking up with expectant eyes sporting horizontal pupils.

“And finding your horny friends too,” I said. “Do you know who else might have pieces of the [Tattered Map] or anything at all that could help?” My path ahead was simple: collect pieces of the [Tattered Map] and ingredients of Bawu’s cure-all potion. That was the way off this mountain.

The goat didn’t know anyone else who had a map piece, but it did have an idea that might aid my search.

“You want me to learn goat music magic?”

According to the goat, playing music spells while searching the mountain might attract other goats. Make sense somewhat, though the crimson goat was probably just looking for a bandmate.

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not so sure it’s right for my tank build... But if it’s for a quest, then I’ll go for it. What do I have to do? Are you going to give me an Ocadule for—oh, a quest.” *Pieces of Music* tasked me to collect loot from monsters during the Great Hunt that the village goat would fashion into a personalized

instrument for me—I took that to mean I could choose an instrument with buffs while performing that I wanted. After that, the goat would teach me music magic.

“Well, I’m already looking for ingredients for... another thing... during the Great Hunt. And I’m also looking for a cave while I’m at it, so it’s all good. Herald Stone eradicating the avian population in one fell swoop once again.” I accepted the quest and trotted to the merchants.

I was mulling to buy a Sigil Totem and begin my search for Elder Pabilsag’s cave without my party when Kezo’s message popped, telling me to go to our meeting spot by the Snowy Swineling area. While I was busy having a concert here, Kezo and Paritor had logged in. We were waiting for Megan and Nitana, and we could register for the Great Hunt.

How do I go about tricking them into helping me with my side quests?

I paused. Then shook my head. “I don’t need to trick people all the time, do I?” I sighed. I should just... ask for help. That simple. Wading for so long in the carnivorous business world, I didn’t have any true friends.

But this was different. A game, that was all. *I should try letting my guard down for a change.*