

Hunter 295

Chapter 295: Treasure Hunt: Puzzle

This wasn't Jake's first time engaging with a magic puzzle, but it was his first time encountering this type. Before returning to Earth, the practice cauldron Villy had given him during his alchemy training session deployed similar methods to this gate's magic puzzle. However, the cauldron had been focused on alchemy, while this gate was more of a regular and more general mana-puzzle.

Except... you couldn't really call it a regular puzzle. It was like those weird puzzle games with ropes and rings you could buy as a gift to a friend to piss them off because you knew they sucked at those kinds of things, and that was totally not something Jake had ever done.

This brain puzzle did differentiate itself from even that by one huge thing: you couldn't test things. One could also compare it to having to do a puzzle, and while you could see all the puzzle pieces, you weren't allowed to misplace a single piece on the board. Doing that would result in being infected with a curse... in other words, every move had to be accurate from the beginning to the end.

Finally getting a proper understanding of the puzzle, Jake suddenly understood why so little progress had been made. It also had to be mentioned that this wasn't an individual puzzle, but the board was visible to everyone. Therefore, any progress made on the puzzle benefitted everyone present. This had ultimately resulted in no one daring to try and make the next move in case it was a mistake, and they would be punished for it, possibly having to leave.

Now, Jake didn't actually think it would mark the end of the Treasure Hunt for him if he fucked up and got cursed here. He had seen that woman be cursed when he first entered, and while it was potent, it wasn't something he couldn't handle. He didn't want to do it, though, as curses were damn annoying and took so long to get rid of.

Jake observed the circle first from a distance as he furrowed his brows. They have made a bit of progress, he concluded. A few basic steps had been taken. About one-twentieth of the puzzle was solved already by the crowd.

The first part did seem relatively simple. Like most puzzles of this kind, it got harder the further you got. At least partly. In some ways, it also got more manageable as you began to understand the logic behind the puzzle and how it all fit together to create a whole.

He had to admit... he liked that things like this puzzle door existed in the Treasure Hunt. He liked that it wasn't all about fighting but also that things like the trap room he had trivialized had been there. It made it all feel less like just another murder fest. Well... it was still a murder fest. Which was good for Jake. Jake was good at murder, after all. But he felt like he was also usually pretty good at puzzles, so he wanted to solve this one.

It scratched that same itch alchemy did. Would Jake possibly be able to obtain more rewards if he decided to just leave and hunt down more foes or scour the rest of the tower for other hidden treasures? Probably... but now he wanted to solve this puzzle, so he would solve the puzzle.

With all that in mind, Jake got up from his chair as he walked closer to get a better look at the whole puzzle in all its glory. He got a bit of attention, but most were either focused on the puzzle or had gotten used to his presence now. Or maybe they just realized gawking wouldn't lead to anything and ignored him consciously. Either way, Jake was left alone as he got closer and stared deeply at the gate.

What if you direct the mana through... no, false pathway. That way, then? Hm... no, another dead-end. Ah, but if you move it through, wait, no, that would trigger that thing.

Jake ended up closing his eyes as he entered Thoughtful Meditation, the entire gate and magic circle still prominently displayed within his head, courtesy of the Sphere of Perception.

He began going through possibilities in his mind as he cradled his hands and made a miniature version of parts of the puzzle as he experimented. The small construct broke apart time and time again, but it slowly expanded as well.

More and more people began entering the room, and more and more began doing their own small experiments. There were even groups forming. Many also left during this time, primarily those who were less magic focused, likely believing their time was better spent searching the tower for treasures while leaving their party members behind. Hours passed by like this, and soon the large chamber had over a hundred people, nearly all of them mages or people with very mana-focused professions like Jake.

Jake was alone, but a few people did notice his construct and how his was larger and more elaborate than anyone else's. Yet, he wasn't happy as he felt quite a few kinks in this method. He felt like he was missing a piece of the puzzle somewhere, as he had been stuck at the same point for nearly ten minutes.

"I got it! The top-left channel and the center-left channel are entangled based on their identical oscillation when probed," he suddenly heard an excited voice say, cutting through his meditation. Jake frowned, and without thinking, he checked it out and found it to be true as he infused both simultaneously with equal amounts of mana and saw that his construct didn't break apart.

He opened his eyes and saw the one speaking to be a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties with two older men behind her. She had long black hair and two dark eyes looking down at him as he sat in meditation. She didn't look at him in a condescending way but just looked happy she had figured out the magic puzzle thing. Jake looked back through the holes in his mask as he tilted his head and answered.

"Good catch," he replied, as he Identified all three of them. Jake assumed they had also tried to Identify him earlier, but he had kind of begun filtering out the sensation of being Identified as people tried – and failed – to all the time. The two men with her were totally sizing him up, by the way.

[Human – lvl 113]

[Human – lvl 115]

[Human – lvl 116]

The woman was only 113 with the two men behind her higher level, but he didn't for a second doubt she was the strongest person in the group of three. Jake wondered why he hadn't heard of or met her before.

He stared deeply up at her as he also sized her up, neither speaking as she looked down at him. Slowly her smile faded as she broke out of her excitement. She instead took on a pensive look as she seemed to be deep in thought as Jake also wondered who she was.

A few hours earlier, Reika had been exploring the hidden small crypts found spread on the plains as she got a report from one of her two followers who wore a communication bracelet. They weren't truly guardians even if they were a higher level, but more her supports. Needless to say, they were elites of the clan, but neither had gone for the Perfect Evolution. Instead, they had chosen to prioritize some immediate power for the clan over their own personal future growth. It was a decision she disagreed with but could see the necessity of.

"Miss Reika, a group of classes affiliated with the clan have made contact with Lord Thayne after he assisted them within a tower. The tower should not be far from here," the man said respectfully.

"I see," she answered. She had told him to relay any information regarding Lord Thayne. Her great grandfather was still set on having her be the leader of the diplomatic entourage heading for Haven, and she didn't wish to go against the Patriarch, even if she didn't agree.

If she was honest, she didn't like the person so respectfully called Lord Thayne by everyone, but she was also aware of it primarily being because she didn't understand him. The Noboru clan had looked into him and his background to see who he was before the system, and it was just a whole pile of... nothing. He was no one. A middle-tier office drone who worked in finance. Granted, his grades during university were great, but he hadn't precisely attended a university she would put much stock in. He had also done a bit of archery, but she had at least three family members who were better than he had ever gotten.

Then there was his family. He had no heritage worth mentioning. No close family outside of his parents and brother. No long lineage or famous ancestors... not even a single known noble anywhere in his family tree. There was nothing that made him special. And somehow, not only was the Lord of Haven an outstanding individual, but the little brother had become the Judge of the Court of Shadows. Somehow two Lord Thaynes had emerged from nothing. He had been a damn teacher, and while that was a profession she held much respect for, it wasn't exactly one that lends itself to the position he was in now.

To Reika... none of that made sense. They had researched so many other capable individuals. Carmen of Valhal had been an extremely talented if unstable, and violent boxer who had been hardened through incarceration. Eron was a savant-level surgeon with one of the best track records on the planet. The Augur of Sanctdomo came from a long line of successful businessmen and women and had been a young prodigy and genius from birth. His bodyguard was former special forces before he retired to become a private bodyguard. Even the one known as William made sense in that he was a young diagnosed psychopath who just happened to be talented in magic and got lucky with being blessed by a god.

This pattern repeated itself with all they investigated. All of them had been prominent figures, either infamous or famous. One could simply not hide heaven-sent talent like what was required to truly stand out in this new world. There had to be traces and evidence. Reika didn't believe in coincidences. So she surmised something did exist that made Lord Thayne special... something that just hadn't been visible in the old world.

To make it even more confusing... this special thing also spread to others around him. Matteo of the Court of Shadows, formerly known simply as M, was a top-ranked assassin in the world.. and he had somehow been beaten by the school teacher Caleb Thayne. Even that Casper of the undead faction only seemed to be who he was due to his relation to Jake Thayne. He had been a tutorial with both the Augur and William... making her sure he was the one common denominator of these odd occurrences. There was something about him, and she wanted to figure out what it was.

But... she wasn't going to upturn her life to do that. She had her own goals and objectives in this Treasure Hunt, and learning more about Lord Thayne was just one of them. Hence why she didn't interrupt their current task.

"We continue and finish off this crypt first. Have someone else return to the tower and see if he is still there, and if not, have them explore it," Reika commanded as she drew her blade and continued down the hallway.

Hours later, they had wrapped things up and were headed up from the crypt again as the man in charge of communication gave an update.

"We have confirmation that Lord Thayne has slain a Count of Blood within the tower and is now working on some kind of magic puzzle to open-"

"Wait, he has slain one of the Counts?" Reika stopped him as she asked. Her great grandfather had sent back information that a Mark of Blood had to be used to gain access to the chamber of a Count, and you needed one such Mark from a Viscount... how the hell had the man managed to slay a Viscount and then a Count within such a short period, and could now just be relaxing and solving a magic puzzle...

Wait, a magic puzzle?

"Yes, he defeated it and-"

"Tell me more about this magic puzzle. Also, we're heading there now," Reika interrupted. Details about how he had slain the Count were just secondhand information, and from what little she had heard of his earlier exploits, it was just a mix of teleportation, bow and arrows, magic, and dual-wielding blades. Explanations were a waste of time, and she was certain she would have to see it herself to comprehend his power.

"It appears to be a complex puzzle to open a hidden treasury. A collaborative project, it appears," the man explained as he continued. "Current attempts seem to have..."

He continued explaining what they knew of the puzzle so far and even went back over some of the happenings regarding Lord Thayne. Apparently, some absolute idiot of a thief had tried to rob him or something. She didn't put much weight on it but instead focused on the information regarding the puzzle.

While she was a competent combatant with her sword, she viewed her true talents as alchemy and magic in general. She had chosen to pick up the blade due to prior experience before the system, but that didn't mean she only used that. Her great grandfather had encouraged her to pursue her own unique path, and so she would.

Entering the tower was simple as there were several entrances at the base of the mountain. Once inside, a member of the Noboru clan stood ready and led her to the puzzle room where she, for the first time, laid eyes upon the so-often talked about Lord Thayne.

She looked at him... and she didn't get it. He just looked weird. He didn't give off any particular presence to her even though people had talked so much about it. Contrarily, he just looked tired as he sat in meditation with some glowing magic circle in his hands... huh?

Reika looked up at the magic circle on the gate and compared it to the version in his hand... how did he replicate so much of it? He hasn't been here for that long... what?

Continuing to look at him for the next half an hour, she saw him make fast progress, but suddenly he stopped. She had inadvertently walked closer at this point to get a closer look at his mana construct. She compared it to the version on the wall and frowned. They were completely identical, and he had come so far, yet he was now stumped? What part was it? She could see that he repeatedly attempted to cause a change in a particular pathway. She activated a skill to better see the mana movement and another to analyze it. Getting lucky, she caught the issue and couldn't hold herself back.

"I got it! The top-left channel and the center-left channel are entangled based on their identical oscillation when probed!" Reika splurged out, a huge smile on her face as she figured it out. She only realized afterward she had done it as she inadvertently got the attention of the man – but not before he confirmed her theory to be true.

"Good catch," he answered, looking up at her. She met his eyes by instinct and peered into them.

Reika had been around elites for all of her life. Hardened military men, CEOs of some of the largest companies in the world, generals, and what many would argue was the best humanity had to offer. But compared to the eyes of the man in front of her...

He wasn't like any of them. All of them had an air of superiority - one of assumed influence, status, and confidence that seemed to invite respect. But Lord Thayne.. he didn't invite respect. He didn't assume power or confidence. He demanded all of those. Not because he was a leader... but because he was powerful. It was a fact, not an assumption.

The only other person she had ever met that made her feel that way was the Patriarch, a man who gave off an aura that made one feel like he could slice you apart at a moment's notice yet could also explain to you the profound secrets of the world.

She didn't know how the man named Jake Thayne had suddenly appeared on Earth out of nowhere. She didn't understand how that could happen. But she wanted to find out. She always loved finding puzzles and understanding things she didn't understand... and something told her the man in front of her was possibly the most interesting and challenging puzzle she had ever encountered.