

Hunter 296

Chapter 296: Treasure Hunt: Collaborative Project

Jake stared up at the woman as she seemed to be deep in thought. Considering she had helped him, he started up the conversation.

"You have experience with these kinds of puzzles?" he asked her.

She seemed to exit her stupor as she collected her thoughts and answered. "Yes, I have some experience from the tutorial, and through some practice objects I acquired."

"Practice objects?" Jake asked, his eyes lighting up. Had she managed to get something like the practice cauldron Villy had lent him? He still missed that cauldron every single day, but sadly he couldn't bring it back to Earth.

"From the tutorial store, I got an evolving puzzle box to keep practicing magic theory," she explained courteously if still a bit tensely.

Why the fuck did I not think of that? he asked himself. He had so many damn points, and yet he had chosen to buy that damn Omnitool as the fifth item. Why hadn't he gotten a practice cauldron? Man, did Jake want a practice cauldron.

"Very neat," he nodded, thinking it would be too rude to ask to see it. "Name's Jake, by the way. Nice to meet you."

He got up from the ground, as talking to her while sitting down was a bit awkward. Jake was just about to extend his hand for a handshake, but luckily, before he had a chance to do so, she introduced herself with a bow, sparing him the embarrassment.

“Reika of the Noboru clan, it’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Thayne,” she said, keeping up her courteous yet guarded attitude. The two men behind her also bowed but didn’t offer up any names. The silent types, eh?

“Pleasure is all mine. Real good catch on those entangled pathways; it wasn’t something I had encountered before, so thanks. Did you come here to solve the puzzle door too?” Jake asked.

Jake had been aware of her presence but not really noted her. Sure, she had looked at his construct, but so had dozens of other people. However, in such a short time, she had managed to analyze his framework, understand the puzzle on the door, and find a solution. In conclusion? She was good at these kinds of things, hence why he asked if she had experience.

“In part, yes,” she answered, not looking like she wanted to elaborate.

He just shrugged in response. “Either way, thanks for the help, and best of luck.”

“If we both aim to solve this puzzle, would it not make more sense to collaborate and solve it together?” she quickly cut in.

“Hm,” Jake said, a bit embarrassed to admit the thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. But then again... yeah, she was totally there to probe him or something. Well, he saw no reason not to give it a go. “I guess we could.”

He wasn’t really against it. On the contrary, it seemed like an interesting experience, and Reika seemed competent. He hadn’t really worked with anyone else besides birds since... well, pretty much ever, and it was a novel experience and seemed like fun. Also, Miranda would get super happy if Jake made friends with the Noboru clan, and the woman in front of him seemed to be quite the influential figure considering her two followers.

“Great, should we move elsewhere and do so in private?” she asked her attitude still as tense and annoyingly courteous as before. She sounded like she was at work and interacting with a customer she had to talk to but would really prefer just to avoid.

Jake nodded in agreement as standing surrounded by people and talking with someone wasn’t an optimal working environment. He moved to the side of the chamber and saw Reika tell her two followers to take off elsewhere. Jake wholeheartedly supported that decision as having two large men staring at him while talking to her wasn’t exactly comfortable.

Once they had moved to the side, she waved her hand as a magic circle appeared and created a barrier around them. It was a basic isolation barrier, and Jake had seen Miranda and others use similar before. He should really learn how to make those. Anyway, being isolated and all, he decided to make his mask invisible as it did seem a bit too impolite to keep his face covered. It should also be good practice for him, and besides, it would be easier to talk to her if she could see his face if a bit risky as she would be able to read his facial expressions.

“Just to know, what got you interested in these kinds of magic puzzles and general magic theory?” Jake asked his temporary partner. Once the barrier was fully active, he felt like it was okay to ask some more semi-personal questions, and besides, it would give him an idea of why and how she had her magic knowledge.

“Would it not be a better question to ask why I wouldn’t be interested in magic theory? It’s a fundamental power that opens numerous paths and possibilities. Is it not natural to want to solve the mysteries of this new world and discover the truth, especially when learning this truth can lead to tangible benefits?” Reika countered.

So, she likes magic theory but doesn’t want to outright admit she finds it fun. Got it. It was an easy conclusion as she talked about it with such fervor, and her demeanor completely changed. It reminded him a bit of Arnold in some ways, though Arnold was far weirder, and Jake found the dude hard to get a solid grasp on.

“True. You’re a mage, I guess?” Jake asked Reika. He felt her aura, and she did give him the feeling of a spellcaster over a melee fighter. She gave off a magical presence more than a physical one.

“Once more, only partly. I primarily began learning about mana and its application through alchemy, and I then expanded upon that knowledge and applied it to other areas. Spellcasting is certainly an ability of mine, but I am uncertain if that makes me classified as a mage. To my knowledge, you also make liberal use of magic in combat scenarios, and does that make you a mage?” Reika once more answered while countering with a question herself.

Jake had chosen to bite onto something in the first part of what she had said. Alchemy. That did explain some things as alchemy was a profession all about mana control and mana theory, but even more so... this was Jake’s first time meeting and talking to another alchemist. Okay, maybe he had seen others, but he felt that the woman in front of him had achieved the Perfect Evolution title and was an alchemist to boot. To rephrase, she was the only talented alchemist he had met.

“Alchemy? Awesome. What kind? What do you specialize in? I myself mainly do poison, but I also got quite a knack for potions and a bit of off-brand transmutation here and there,” Jake said, quite excited to meet and talk to another alchemist. Especially one around his own level.

Sure, the Viper and Duskleaf were also alchemists, but they were so far ahead of him that they weren't even fun talking to about alchemy. Shit, he was certain he still sucked too much to fully comprehend how much better they were than him.

"I primarily create compounds and catalysts for magic rituals and other auxiliary items, but I have also dabbled in more classical alchemical works such as potions. Recently I have worked on making performance-enhancing consumables, also known as flasks. I take heavy inspiration from the chemistry of before the system, and I have also begun to apply some pharmaceutical methodologies recently," Reika answered, pretty much saying: 'I mainly do catalyst-things, potions and flask,' in a roundabout way.

By now, Jake didn't need to be told what kind of person she was. He had met so damn many a lot like her before. She was the kind that had been practically living within the educational world for her entire life. This did make Jake think she was a bit younger than him. Physical appearances weren't always a good indicator of age anymore, so he couldn't exactly use that. As an example, Miranda and Reika looked about equally old, and Miranda was older than Jake by a few years. But her way of talking was just like so many of those driven people in university. He had to confirm, though.

"Let me guess, you were in Uni before the initiation?" he asked with a smirk.

Reika looked a bit embarrassed for a fraction of a second but quickly waved it off as she got a bit defensive. "I was working on my dissertation when the system arrived. What of it?"

"Oh, nothing at all," Jake said, putting up his hands as he shook his head.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Everything’s fine. Anyway, the puzzle?”

“No, what? Are you looking down on me just because I-”

“Hm, this next part seems a bit tricky. See those two pathways? Yeah, they’re freaking moving,” Jake said as he kept smiling and appeared to focus entirely on the puzzle.

“Seriously?” she said, glaring at him.

“Yep, pretty weird to have moving mana pathways, eh? Two at the same time even!” Jake replied.

By now, she had, of course, realized he was fucking with her, and Jake had committed to the tomfoolery. The reason was that he found her entire manner of speech and behavior from the start oddly uptight but also defensive. From the start, he had a feeling she had an odd interpretation of who he was. It wasn’t Jake’s first time either experiencing something like this, and it was totally his fault such interpretations existed out there. He had acted like some kind of mysterious powerhouse who didn’t put others in his eyes, mainly because that was honestly the easiest way to operate. Well, he didn’t think his reputation was bad as he hadn’t done anything outrageous yet, but he couldn’t say he was viewed positively either.

It all just made Jake feel weird. To suddenly have some status and position tossed your way when honestly, Jake just wanted to do his own thing and enjoy himself. He was childish and liked having fun and fucking with people. Especially those straight out of university or those still studying. They always acted so awkwardly, even by his standards, when they finally got out into the ‘real world,’ so to say.

Reika gave him those same vibes. To break down those barriers around her that made her so uptight and annoying was something he would gladly do by going against her expectations and forcing her to reevaluate him. And it seemed to work.

At least partly, because she was pretty quick to shoot him down as she completely ignored his antics and just focused on the task at hand... not knowing this was partly Jake's plan all along to get through the small talk and onto the real task at hand, and for her to act a bit annoyed at him was far better than her acting fake. He also believed he would ultimately learn more about her through this puzzle-solving session than he would by talking to her with her guard up.

"It isn't that out of the ordinary and is triggered by the stabilized flux of mana from the previous step," she finally answered, getting the show on the road.

Jake expanded his construct of mana as he made a particular section light up more. "Firstly, we will have to block this part not to break the equilibrium."

"Naturally, and then we need to open up that pathway," Reika said, pointing at a specific part of the puzzle, "or the pathway will be mana-starved and contract and lead to collapse."

"Hm, only that one? To keep the equilibrium intact, we need to also stabilize the other side of the section, or the entire thing will go out of balance and break apart," Jake said, not really asking but simply concluding.

"That's... true... yeah, that's right," she answered while Jake smirked.

They continued to one-up each other and continually challenged each other. Reika truly did have a different mindset than his own, and their methodologies were entirely different. Jake was the type of person who relied way too much on his gut and would often make impulsive moves and rather than 100% plan out the process from start to end, only go in with a rough draft and then micro-adjust and wing it, as he knew that more often than not, plans fuck up.

Reika was the type to have a solid method behind her actions and thoroughly plan the process from start to finish. A true academic that didn't simply try to understand an issue and solve it but also comprehend the underlying causes and theory behind why things worked as they did. Jake also liked figuring out how things worked, but he preferred to do so through testing and practical experience. Reika struck him as the type that would rather read all the research on the topic than half-arse an experiment. This was probably a good idea, in retrospect. Jake's approach did lead to his cauldron blowing up in his face quite a few times. He doubted that ever really happened to her, and being a chemist before the system, it did seem like good work ethic not just to mix chemicals and hope everything works out.

If Jake fucked up something in his work before the system, it would just be a broken excel sheet, or he would lose a bit of money in the short term for the company. Now, after the system, Jake was just durable enough not to take severe damage even if he fucked up during his concoctions due to *Palate*, *Scales of the Malefic Viper*, and of course, his overall high stats.

Ultimately, this difference in basic mindset meant that Reika wasn't taking any risks and being slow and methodical, while Jake was fast and experimental. As they constantly challenged each other and played off each other, the puzzle construct got solved faster and faster.

Jake would get a clear view of the entire challenge very fast, and Reika would spot potential blind spots and flaws. She also eventually made her own floating magic circle that wasn't a copy of the puzzle but instead an attempt to figure out the puzzle's internal logic. Like a predictive algorithm to spot where the most likely issues would be, she kept feeding it information with every step they passed, and towards the end, it came in handy as it functioned as a great guiding tool.

Only two hours after entering their isolation barrier, they stood there, staring up at the puzzle in front of them. Every pathway was cleared. Every pocket filled with mana. To bring it back to the metaphor with a regular puzzle... all the pieces had now been placed, and the picture was complete.

They both just looked at it, both trying to spot any flaws. None of them saw any, and they turned to each other as Jake raised his hand in her direction.

“Up top!”

She looked at his open palm for a while before finally catching on and giving him an awkward high-five. Jake didn’t mind it; he just smiled happily.

“Nice one all around. Should we flex on the populace?” Jake asked cheekily.

The puzzle outside had been visible to them this entire time, and the people present had made some progress during this time, but not much. There seemed to be an agreement that people were trying to solve the entire thing alone or in groups before opening the real thing. The reason? Because how the hell would they divide the loot if they had to split it between everyone?

What did this mean? That meant he and Reika were about to flex on the entire room and take all the loot for themselves while being showered in envy and resignation by everyone present. Now, Jake didn’t really feel bad about it because puzzles like these were, in his opinion, a reward in themselves. It had only been a few hours of puzzle-solving, and Jake had already gotten a lot of nice ideas on how to improve some things – most of them courtesy of Reika.

Reika looked over at him and asked with a smile, clearly elated at their success: “Are you ready to let down the barrier?”

Jake nodded as the mask appeared on his face again. A second later, the barrier fell away, and instantly attention was directed their way. The majority of the room was aware that he – the leader of Haven – and someone from the Noboru clan had gone in there, and he even saw a few looks of resignation when they noticed Reika being in a good mood.

“Will you do the honors?” he asked her.

She looked a bit surprised at him as her smile grew. “With pleasure.”

Jake just watched on as she extended what looked like a beam of mana into the puzzle and the entire thing began moving. Section after section was unlocked, and the whole room was silent for the minute it took for her to do the entire puzzle. Not a single mistake was made as she simply replicated the construct Jake had perfectly copied.

Finally, the last part was solved, and the entire gate lit up as it began opening.

Sighs sounded out throughout the room, with a few muted “congratulations” and “good jobs” coming their way. Not a single person seemed to have any thoughts of stealing from them, as they all backed away from the gate, letting Jake and Reika be the first to enter.

For all this time, Jake had consciously held himself back from peeking inside to see what was behind the gate with his Sphere of Perception, but now he finally let loose as he took it all in, and... well, there was a lot.

What was hidden behind the gate wasn't a treasury.

It was an armory.