

Hunter 371

Chapter 371 - The Good Stuff

Jake felt like he had wished for a bow for years, even if it had only been like a week. He had felt naked using a shitty bow, not sure what would happen if he got into a big fight. So when the system offered a bow, he was both relieved and ecstatic.

Now the only question was... would the bow be good?

The answer? Fuck yeah, it was.

[Bow of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – A bow offered directly by the system due to Earth's performance during the Treasure Hunt event. This is a bow for an apex hunter who only seeks to challenge worthy foes and effortlessly strikes down those inferior that dare impede his quest. Increases damage done against foes dependent on level disparity – both lower and higher – up to a certain threshold. This effect is based on Perception. The bow is incredibly durable and will adapt to energy infused into it, beginning to take on its properties and empowering attacks using the adapted energy. Enchantments: Apex Hunter. Requirements: Soulbound

He had already placed his bid halfway through reading the description, and the further he got, the more the smile on his face grew. It was basically just his Big Game Arcane Hunter and working against lower-level foes. It was a bit funny that the bow was just straight-up worse against those of similar level to himself. Except it also managed to fit in some Perception scaling, making Jake a happy clam.

It was also able to adapt to his energies, which is likely what forced the Soulbound requirement, a bit similar to the scabbard before. This did not make it a growth weapon he could use for life, though, as the material strength and Records within were still limited... but that didn't make it any less awesome here and now and for many battles to come.

Jake waited patiently as the bid on fifty million remained. He stared at the countdown and frowned, a bit confused as it just reached zero without anyone else even attempting to bid.

“The item has been sold for fifty million Credits.”

And it was just that easy. No one had fought him, and Jake couldn’t help but turn and look at Sultan, who just shrugged.

“I guess no one wanted to put a target on their back for you to use that bow on down the line. So far, you have a reputation for being a bad target to provoke. Especially after the Treasure Hunt,” Sultan explained. “Also... archers able to afford it and able to bid are limited. Maria obviously chose to not fight you, and besides her, I honestly can’t get on anyone else with fifty million Credits and the potential to challenge you.”

Jake nodded in acknowledgment. “I’m not complaining.”

He couldn’t help himself but take out the bow and admire it. It was of a simple design and was honestly just a wooden stick with a string attached. It looked like something a semi-competent bowyer could make within an hour, and compared to his old bow with fancy gems faceted in it and glowing veins of arcane mana, this one just looked cheap. Heck... the design was practically identical to the tutorial bow he had gotten that very first day.

And Jake had absolutely nothing against that. In fact, he preferred it. In his mind, simple was best, and if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

Still basking in the feeling of finally having a good weapon again, he heard the announcement of the next item.

“The twelfth item is a Thousand Swords Formation Array Disc. This formation is especially suitable for protecting a settlement inhabited by sword-users and can use their skills with the sword. Bidding starts at fifty million Credits.”

[Thousand Swords Formation Array Disc (Legendary)] – A Thousand Swords Formation Array Disc offered directly by the system due to Earth’s performance during the Treasure Hunt event. This array disc allows the user to place down a Thousand Swords Formation at a chosen location, using up the array disc in the process. The Thousand Swords Formation allows up to a thousand sword-wielding individuals to pool their power together to create a singular phantasmal blade. The users of the formation must be of similar strength.

It appeared the system had done a U-turn, and now it was back to those faction-focused items. Jake had a theory these were because there were no outstanding individuals to reward, so it just rewarded multiple people or entire factions.

In this case, it was clearly a reward for the Noboru clan and Reika. It just screamed samurai clan, and seeing it offered did make him consider what would have happened if they had put that illusory formation up for sale and the Noboru clan had bought it. Would the system then just have offered something else? Or would they have been forced to choose between two different formations?

If that was the case... was there a risk Jake would have been offered a quiver and not a bow if he had not bought the legendary one earlier? No, Jake, don’t even think about it... no one needs that kind of negativity in their lives.

As for the formation... well, now we were back to the fact that many used swords, so sadly for them, they had competition. This meant they had to shell out three hundred and eighty million Credits.

Moving on... it appeared that the Holy Church had also had enough of a collective contribution to get an item. Perhaps the most shamelessly aimed at any faction so far.

“The thirteenth item is a block of Holy Marble. This marble is especially suitable for creating a statue or a monument related to a god in possession of the holy affinity. Bidding starts at fifty million Credits.”

[Holy Marble (Legendary)] – A block of Holy Marble offered directly by the system due to Earth’s performance during the Treasure Hunt event. This marble is infused with a substantial amount of holy mana, making it especially suitable as a raw material for a sculpture depicting a god of the Holy Pantheon.

Seeing the item appear was a bit comical. It was a massive block of stone giving off a faint golden glow, nearly ten meters tall and wide. The auction room was utterly massive, making it not an issue, but seeing a giant block of stone just float did look funny. Jake even saw a few down on the floor flinch when it just popped into existence.

As for the item itself... well, as Jake knew, only gods of the Holy Pantheon could even use the Holy affinity. It was like only Villy, and those with his legacy could use the Malefic affinity, and only the Risen and those related to the Blightfather could use the Blight affinity. It was the Holy Mother’s affinity, so the only reason anyone would possibly bid on it was to mess with the Holy Church and force them to spend more than they wanted.

Anyway, it went for three hundred and ninety-two as the undead decided to fuck with them.

Next up was Valhal's turn, this item looking a lot like a reward for Sven.

"The fourteenth item is a Horn of War. This item is for the leader who indulges in war and leads those under his command to victory. Bidding starts at fifty million Credits."

[Horn of War (Legendary)] – A Horn of War offered directly by the system due to Earth's performance during the Treasure Hunt event. Blow the horn of war to signal it is time to wage war, reducing stamina consumption of all those under your command who hear the sound. Blow a second time in the midst of battle, releasing a wave of inner energy, restoring a substantial amount of stamina for all those affected. Will also amplify the effect of leadership-related skills if used with the horn.

Jake actually found this item genuinely interesting, and he also recognized that while it was surely aimed at Valhal, fitting their theme and all... it was one every single faction with a lot of warriors could make good use of. Even Miranda could probably use it.

Bidding began, and instantly it was a bloodbath. The first bid was from the Holy Church, the second one from Valhal, and the third came from the Noboru Clan. Jake just sat back with a slight smile as the price just went up and up.

Jake was already certain Haven as a city would not be offered anything. They only had Sultan and Neil with his party during the last phase besides Jake, while every other faction had way more. The Court had already received that Heart of Darkness, and Jake guessed the Dungeon Core was seen as the reward for the undead.

"How far up do you think the price will go?" Roman asked Sultan as they stared at the bidding.

“Not much higher,” the merchant answered, as the price went to seven hundred million. “While this is good... many factions should soon be broke, and the use of it is limited for those not commanding large groups.”

What he said turned out to be true, as the price only went to seven hundred and twenty-four million before bidding stopped. In the end, it went to Valhal as it rightly should, only the Holy Church bidding with them at the end. A part of Jake really hoped the undead made them unable to afford it by hiking the price up on the Holy Marble.

I wonder what is next? Jake thought, not sure what more there would be. Unless it was something for the undead if the core did not count? Either way, it was clear there was more as the system spoke again.

“The fifteenth and final item is a bottle of Soul Renewal. Soul Renewal will be able to heal anything afflicting the soul, including temporary damage sustained due to the use of Transcendent skills or skills used to circumvent death. Bidding starts at one billion Credits.”

What appeared was a small bottle that looked like a potion bottle with some transparent liquid within. Jake felt nothing from it, and without using Identify or hearing the system describe it, he could have totally had mistaken it for just being purified water.

[Soul Renewal (Unique)] – A bottle of Soul Renewal offered directly by the system due to Earth’s performance during the Treasure Hunt event. Soul Renewal is able to heal any wound to the soul and restore any damage or temporary affliction imposed upon it, including afflictions of the Truesoul. Requirements: D-grade.

This was the final item of the auction, with a starting bid of a billion Credits... and Jake understood why. This was no simple item. It was one that confirmed his theory that it wasn’t that Transcendents were

above the system when it could create something that could even heal the backlash from one. Healing the Truesoul was not something anyone could do... not even gods. Often the Truesoul would just heal by itself with time – a long time – or one had to restore that parts that were damaged somehow through other actions. Like how the Sword Saint now had to get the levels back he had “lost,” effectively repairing it by using experience.

The item was clearly aimed at the Sword Saint. This small bottle would allow him to completely get rid of the backlash from the Transcendent skill within a moment. It couldn't be any more obvious who it was for... at least, he didn't think it could. Until he felt something poke his mind. It was faint and weak, a mere request for him to open a channel of communication. He had felt it once before and allowed it in as the familiar voice spoke in his mind.

“It has been a while... hunter,” the voice of the King echoed in his mind. It was the same as back in the tutorial... but different in many ways too. It no longer carried disdain but a feeling of respect, and even more so, a sense of weakness.

“You really did survive, huh,” Jake answered through the link, having had plenty of experience with telepathic links during all his talks with Villy.

“In... some form... yes,” the voice answered, already sounding weaker than before. “I require that liquid... and I swear it will be of benefit to you... on a King's honor...”

Jake, still wearing the mask, frowned beneath it. “What kind of benefits?”

“...I...” the voice petered off as Jake felt the King enter slumber once more. He barely registered the word and wasn't sure of the meaning. He felt like the King had wanted to say more without being able to... so now he was too damn curious.

Returning his attention to the bidding, only around seven seconds has passed, with the price currently at one-point-two-three billion Credits. The current top bid was the Holy Church, and Jake was confused when the undead overtook the bet with one ten million higher, only for Holy Church to bid again.

He hadn't seen the Sword Saint place a single bid. Is he out of Credits?

It was possible he didn't have a billion... but he should have, right? Jake found it hard to believe he didn't. Jake still had around four billion even after buying the bow and Sylphie's Gift of Wind. That is to say... the other factions didn't stand a chance.

Jake was about to bid when he saw the price go up by another ten million. The bidder? Sultan.

"You're that rich?" Jake asked with exasperation.

The man just looked straight at him as he answered unapologetically. "Yes."

"Well, this one is mine," Jake just stated as he outbid Sultan by ten million. He was then outbid by the Church, so he bid again, only for the undead to bid, and just when Jake thought it was over, the bastards over at Valhal had apparently convinced Carmen to also toss in a bid.

Jake refused to lose as the price kept climbing one small step at a time. It was to the level of just getting silly with the price going up more than twice every second as four factions were bidding. Sultan was smart enough to bow out, and the other major merchant Jake knew of, Arthur, had not been part of the last phase and was thus unable to bid even if he had the funds.

The silly display continued for several minutes as the other parties dropped off one by one until finally, Jake placed a bid of two billion and one-hundred and eighty million Credits, outbidding the Holy Church. It went uncontested as he theorized no one had the funds to keep up.

The bottle appeared in his inventory without further ado as the system spoke again.

“This marks the end of the final phase of the Auction event. All Credits traded during this phase will be distributed among the participants of the final phase of the Treasure Hunt, dependent on their level of contribution.

“For the remainder of the event, all participants are free to make use of the space provided. May you find your path, denizens of the ninety-third Universe.”

With that announcement, the system being disappeared like it had never been there. It was honestly a bit anti-climactic of an end to the entire event.

However, he did note how it said it had distributed Credits. Jake had spent quite a lot and had been below two billion after getting the Soul Renewal. So when he checked his Credits after getting some back... well, it was just comical to him.

Credits Available: 4,101,258,995

Jake was only down half a billion in this entire phase, despite being the person spending the most. He just shook his head as he asked Sultan beside him.

“How much did you get for contributions?”

“About six hundred thousand,” the man answered.

“I got two hundred and twenty,” Neil chimed in.

The others in his party had similar numbers. Jake chose to not share, and they didn’t ask.

Checking how much time of the auction event remained, he saw there was still a bit left. A few hours, it seemed. It was likely time to trade and do some politics. At least that is what Miranda left to do shortly after, with Sultan also taking his leave.

Jake had no immediate plans himself and couldn’t really go anywhere as he had a bird sleeping on his head, and teleporting out of the booth would likely be bad for her. So, he decided to just spend this time inspecting all of the stuff he had gained and get a bit of relaxing in.

This entire auction had been a bit hit and miss, but he had gotten some good stuff overall.

Once he got out... oh boy, there were things to do. Cursed blades to enhance, a Queen Bee egg to evolve and hatch, a King to awaken, and equipment to test out. It was also truly time to get everything related to his underground alchemy lab going. All in all, busy times ahead, just as he liked it.

Chapter 372 - Soul Renewal

Reika had sat in the booth together with her great-grandfather as the auction of the Soul Renewal was underway. She was confused at his refusal to bid and had failed to hold herself back. When it was finally sold, without him even fighting for it, she failed to hold herself back.

“Why-“

“Choices have consequences,” he answered before she could even finish her question. “I made a choice, and now I bear the burden of that choice. I have already forced one change of season... let’s not break the balance more than necessary and force another.”

Still finding the answer unnecessarily vague, Reika nevertheless nodded and accepted his words. Deep in her heart, she just thought he was too proud to use such an item. Perhaps a part of him didn’t want to spend the funds of the clan on something so personal. Perhaps he truly did believe that he didn’t need it ... maybe he even saw it as a test he had to overcome.

While Reika tried to take a logical approach and a scientific one where possible – something that had become quite a bit more complicated after the system – the Patriarch was different. He had always been a spiritual man who believed there was more between heaven and earth. He had been a good businessman and logical when operating his corporate empire, but a part of him had always found solace in the metaphysical. A solace and belief that had now translated to power.

“I understand,” she just said with a nod as she got up. “I shall take my leave and go discuss with the other branch managers now.”

He just nodded slowly in return as he closed his eyes to rest. The Sword Saint, one of the strongest people on Earth, was still too weak to walk around without his cane and found it exhausting. But... it was his choice.

Well... in some ways. Reika did believe he had enough Credits to compete, but she was unsure if he could have beaten the competition.

Jake was powerful and influential in every way. Even if he seemed to not realize it himself very often. There were archers in the Noboru Clan who would use the bow offered; some had personal funds to afford a bid, at least when it was below a hundred million. But none had made a bid out of respect and perhaps a bit of fear.

Reika understood why the Patriarch placed so much importance in hopefully making him an ally, or at the very least avoiding making him an enemy. Which is exactly what she was going to talk to the branch managers about... delegation of her responsibilities.

Because shortly after returning the auction event, it would be time for her to begin her travel towards Haven. Of course, she would not leave while the Patriarch was still in his current state. And if she did have to leave, she at least had to make sure there would be no problems.

The rest of the auction event passed without anything noteworthy happening. Jake had bound his bow to himself, chatted a bit with the others, and watched over the still sleeping Sylphie. When only ten minutes remained, everyone had returned to the booth as they prepared to leave.

“Would you like to return to Haven right away or stay in Skyggen a while longer and make your own way back?” Miranda asked him.

"I think returning is best, also for the bird on my head," Jake answered. He had also spoken to Caleb about his parents before leaving, so him not returning to Skyggen was expected.

Neil chimed in as he had also just returned. "I have compared some notes with the space mages from Skyggen, and I think we are closer to a teleportation circle than ever. Shouldn't take more than a month from now."

"Nice," Jake said. "Should make the choice easier then if I can just go visit again in a month or so."

With all of that decided, they just kept chatting as Sylphie had yet to wake up. Considering she was on his head, he assumed that counted as physical contact, but he still wanted to make sure as he raised his hand, pressing down on her like she was a hat on a windy day. The fluffy ball of feathers was very squishy.

Miranda placed a hand on his shoulder just before the time expired, and his vision shifted for a moment. Shortly, Jake found himself back in Miranda's office in Haven. Sultan appeared together with them, having had a hand on the shoulders of Felicia and Roman to give them an easy trip to Haven. Jake had never actually considered using this method as fast travel, but it appeared to work quite well, and it would in no way surprise him if other factions did it.

"Now this is interesting," Sultan said just as they had returned. "Very interesting..."

"What is it?" Miranda inquired.

"I received the best title I could from the auction event and have gained some new interesting opportunities... something for us to discuss at a later time for sure, especially now that the System Store is gone," the merchant answered.

Upon hearing that... Jake remembered something about how the System Store would only be available until after the auction event, but he had honestly thrown it to the back of his mind. He hadn't used the store much himself but had people like Sultan and Lillian act as his agents instead. Honestly? It wasn't that big of a loss.

It would perhaps be a bit more difficult getting raw materials to mass-produce potions with it gone. Luckily, Jake should have a large storage by now to get him by, but before that ran out, he wanted to establish some ways to cultivate his own herbs.

Jake got up as he bid his farewell to go back to his lodge, telling Miranda to have Hank come by to talk about the underground alchemy lab whenever the builder got time.

He also discovered only around an hour had passed in the real world during the event while making his way back. His trip to the lodge wasn't the fastest as Jake had to travel carefully due to the still-sleeping Sylphie on his head. Could he have just lifted her down and held her in his hands? Sure. Did he? No.

When he got back, Jake saw that not much had changed even if he had been gone for a week. At least not above ground. With his sphere, he saw people underground, doing some stuff to the walls. Hank himself was not there, but a bunch of other workers, including someone Jake had seen with the construction chief of Haven, were present.

Seeing no reason to bother them, he would just wait for Hank. Jake took a seat on his porch as he leaned back to relax. With a hawk on his head, Jake did as anyone does when being done with a system event... he filled Villy in.

"So, Villy, got time?" Jake asked out loud as he established a connection with the god.

"Just been waiting for you to call first to not disturb your talks with the other mortals. That is just common courtesy, you know?" Villy answered more or less instantly. "Now give it to me. What happened in the event? Any good stuff?"

"Awfully curious, eh? Missed me?" Jake joked.

"Yeah, been a real downer. You know, it's like when you were just watching a damn great video, and then suddenly the internet dies for a time, and you just have to wait for it to get fixed as the video buffers. Excruciating experience," Villy returned his joke. "In all seriousness, it is an unsettling experience for many gods if their blessed are in special closed-off system spaces like that event. We have no way to know anything about what you're doing, no way to contact you, and for many gods that aren't me, it can even be dangerous as they lose their ability to influence the one they have blessed and control them."

"That's why we use that time to talk shit about the gods."

"Not gonna lie, that would be the best time to," Villy said. "But come on... give me a rundown. Including why the Sylphian Hawk has consumed a Gift of Wind."

Jake finally relented as he quickly explained how the event had unfolded. The Viper was unsurprised and unimpressed at the entire thing, as apparently, it had been bog-standard... until he reached the final round. When Jake mentioned the system entity had appeared, he got especially interested.

“Yes... the shape they take differs. When you look at it, you see a human. I see a snake... the hawk on your head probably saw a hawk there. Or a human... it differs from individual to individual; it isn’t always a being of your own race. As for the things you explained about how time and space seemed weird... well, don’t try to think about it too much. Neither of those concepts have much meaning when the system is directly involved.”

“I know, I already gave up trying to understand it. But, how powerful is the system actually?” Jake asked. He already kind of knew, but he wanted to learn it from someone who should know more.

“The question itself is nonsensical. That would be like asking how strong reality is. How strong energy is. How strong the concept of existence is. There is nothing to quantify, nothing to compare. For a single event, the system has recreated entire universes on a whim, created beings more powerful than any god, even I, and facilitates everything we are. Without the system, none of us would exist. Everything is the system; the system is everything. Just think about it like that,” the Viper explained.

“So, overpowered times infinite?” Jake asked half-serious, half-jokingly.

“Infinite times infinite even!” Villy joked back.

“Huh. Where do I file a complaint about my bow only being legendary then? Could have given me a Bow of One-Shot or something.”

“Sadly... it appears even the omnipotent system has limited powers in the realms of customer support. Though technically, you just having voiced or even thought your complaints means they have been registered and are known,” Villy gladly answered.

“Well, I shall just make do then,” Jake relented, acting all offended. “Anyway, the final phase had some good stuff...”

He mentioned the items one by one, Villy being impressed with what the system gave out. The Heart of Darkness and Dungeon Core were both incredibly valuable items that would go for ludicrous prices in the wider multiverse if one could even buy them. The legendary equipment was all great, too, though Villy honestly cared little for those. Jake knew he only faked being all excited for Jake’s bow, but that was okay... it was like Jake getting his very first beater car and going to his friend with a parking house full of supercars. Sure, he would act happy for you, but he wouldn’t exactly be impressed.

Villy also found the Holy Marble a bit funny and said that the formation for the Noboru clan and the Horn were also both nice. According to him, both would be useful for the rest of D-grade and a good way into C-grade before they would begin falling off and requiring upgrades.

Only one of them so far had actually impressed him out of all the items. The Gift of Wind. It was the kind of item that could never, in any way, be bought. It was an item that even S-grade elementals would go on slaughter through entire galaxies to obtain, and gods would duel over.

It was an item that was more qualitative than quantitative in power. The exact effects Villy was not sure of, but it would likely just result in Sylphie upgrading a skill and affecting her Records for future evolutions. As she was categorized as a monster, natural treasures could also perhaps give her levels, though the Gift rarely did that. All in all... it was great for her.

“The final item was a bottle of Soul Renewal,” Jake said as he was done summing up what they got.

“... I have no idea what that is,” Villy just answered, with Jake hearing genuinely confusion in his voice.

Jake responded by summoning the bottle in his hand to show it off, as he Identified it again.

[Soul Renewal (Unique)] – A bottle of Soul Renewal offered directly by the system due to Earth’s performance during the Treasure Hunt event. Soul Renewal is able to heal any wound to the soul and restore any damage or temporary affliction imposed upon it, including afflictions of the Truesoul. Requirements: D-grade.

He waited for a moment as Villy didn’t say anything. After ten or so seconds, Jake was a bit weirded out. “So? Thoughts?”

It took a few seconds more before the god answered. “I can’t Identify it.”

“What?”

“I said that I can’t identify it. I only get that it is an item called Soul Renewal. There is no description of it. What does it do? I assume it helps heal soul wounds or something?” Villy asked.

“Well, the description says that...”

Jake read the entire description out loud to the god, and he felt some reactions through the link between him Villy. Especially as he read the last part and mentioned how the system had directly stated it could be used to heal the backlash of using a Transcendent skill or a skill used to overcome death. Jake did also mention the D-grade requirement, but according to Villy, that didn't even matter anymore.

"That is an entirely unique item created specifically for you and the old swordsman... it... isn't truly an item. It does something items cant," Villy said.

Confused, Jake asked. "What do you mean not an item?"

"That what you are holding might as well just be a bottle of purified water. It isn't what is in the bottle that matters. It is pretty much just a bottle saying that the system will help whoever it is used on. There is nothing there. No Records. No mana. No energy. It truly is just a bottle of... nothing," Villy said, Jake hearing some resignation.

"So I can't eat it with Palette or scry any information from it?"

"No. No one can. There is nothing to scry from nothing. But, do know this does not make it any less useful. If you choose to hold onto it, I reckon you could get a lot out of using it for someone in the wider multiverse. Even if the limit is D-grade. But, I guess you plan on using it on your mask?" the Malefic Viper asked.

Jake nodded in affirmation. "That is the temporary plan right now if I don't find anything else. But I am a bit unsure what it will mean. Though the King did say that he would make it worth my while. Even promised it on a King's honor, whatever that means."

"Sounds like a plan," Villy answered.

"... come on, tell me, what is up with the King of the Forest? You said Unique Lifeforms have weird ways and all that, but give me something," Jake insisted.

"No, that is between you two. All I will say is that you may have mixed feelings about the entire thing," Villy answered, being purposefully vague and annoying.

"Also... I must say I gained a lot more respect for that old man. He has chosen to suffer and live with the backlash over an instant cure. While that may seem dumb, I applaud the decision. This period is an important part of his Transcendence and something he has to experience. This may seem out of the left-field, but do you think he would be open to being blessed by a god that may understand him?" the Viper continued, as he asked.

"I'm not sure about that. The Sword Saint seems stubborn, and while I talked to him during the auction, it sounded like he rejected all gods trying to contact him. But... what god were you thinking of? That Dao-guy you talked about? Seems to fit," Jake asked while making a qualified guess.

"No, not him. While it may look like he fits on the surface, what the Sword Saint needs is not a teacher. The Daofather teaches and takes disciples. The old man is no disciple but a leader himself; he would not fit there at all. No, what he needs is someone who only offers perspective and gives him the power of the blessing without much interference," Villy explained.

Jake nodded, the words making sense to him.

“So... who did you have in mind?”

“The Primordial of Time, Aeon Clok.”

Chapter 373 - Time Wizard & Future Plans

Jake had not heard much of the time god known as Aeon Clok... only some basic stuff from conversations with Villy and some casual reading. Out of all the Primordials Jake had heard of, he seemed like the hardest one to pin down and understand. He kind of got most of the others.

They had religions, empires, orders, or domains they controlled. The Wyrmgod had Nevermore, Yggdrasil was a massive fucking tree dominating an entire region of a Universe, the Starseizing Giant an even more massive entity that liked smithing and being big. All of them were public, besides two. Well, it used to be three, but Jake kind of dragged Villy into the spotlight again. Also, while Stormild did not have a faction per-se, the living catastrophe still controlled a large domain and had many elementals following her.

The two hidden ones were the dear Eversmile that Jake honestly still couldn't understand, but the other was Aeon. He was just a time mage or something who liked to make watches, with the most on-the-nose last name “Clok.”

“Can you give some information on the guy?” Jake asked Villy.

“Sure. Aeon Clok, Primordial of Time, the Watchmaker, bunch of other names too, but that is just par the course. As far I know, he was a human born to two F-rank humans on a planet with not a single D-grade. He became a watchmaker as his profession, gained by working with his family, and he was always intrigued with the concept of time. Mind you, all of this is stuff I learned later, so it may be wrong or partially made up. He was the first one to reach D-grade on his planet in centuries, but he didn't stop there. He kept experimenting, he kept making watches, and eventually, he reached C-tier... without having killed a single thing. He was just a watchmaker, and I heard his class hadn't even reached level

100 by the time he was C-grade. Entering the wider multiverse, it quickly became clear that he was a freaking nightmare to deal with. B-grades tried to kill him in vain due to his magic,” Villy explained as he gave some lore.

“Huh... he sounds impressive somewhat, but Primordial-level? What made him so special? A Bloodline? Did he become a Transcendent early on?” Jake asked.

“Bloodline, no... Transcendent... not before he reached S-grade. No, it was simply his skills. Their rarities were often two or three levels above what it should be at his level, and his sheer comprehension of the concept of time made him near-unkillable. In late-stage B-grade, an entire group of S-grades wanted to hunt him down as he had acquired a natural treasure they wanted. They hunted him into a world much like Yalsten... and only he exited it, now firmly in A-grade. He had killed a group of thirty-seven S-grades, all able to kill him in a single move if they got the chance... but they never did. Moreover, he killed them without ever truly fighting them... for they all died of old age. He trapped them and manipulated the world itself to accelerate time,” the Viper said, Jake now beginning to get it a bit more.

“Okay... that does sound pretty badass,” Jake recognized.

“His most impressive feat is not that, but what he did in S-grade as he aimed to become a god. Ah, but one interesting thing was his motivation to even become one. You see, wanting to become a god to become immortal is normal. Wanting it for the power is normal. But Aeon wanted it for neither of these... no, he just wanted time. The concept of immortality didn’t matter to him; it was not about life or death; it was about how it felt like the ultimate way to beat an aspect of time as a concept. He wanted to steal time... to claim it. And that was his Transcendence. The day he evolved to a god, he stole a moment of time itself. For a moment, the entire multiverse froze... I still remember that day as clear as was it yesterday. I was already a god, and the sheer sense of wrongness was intense. I can’t begin to explain it. Out of all the Transcendences I know of, his is the most complicated. I don’t even fully understand it myself, but I do know I have no fucking idea how to kill him and that out of everyone in the multiverse, he may be the hardest to put down permanently,” the Malefic Viper continued.

Jake nodded along as he listened. He always liked hearing these stories of gods and how they grew to power. It was like those old mythical tales, but something that actually happened with a chance to meet the myth themselves.

"I guess that leads to the question... what makes you think he is a good fit for the Sword Saint? I do know he got younger and stuff, but I'm not sure it was time magic. Also... are you sure Aeon will even bless him?"

"Eh, my plan was just to put the human on Aeon's radar. As for why they would fit together? Well, because they are similar in some ways. Both are ridiculously stubborn and achieved their Transcendence by claiming something as their own. The mortal claimed the concept of seasons, and I do think his magic is somewhat time-adjacent, and honestly, even if I am wrong, Aeon may just be interested as the swordsman is interesting," Villy explained.

"And what's in it for you?" Jake asked. Villy wasn't the type to help a random old man out of the kindness of his heart and based on the entire thing with Stormild, Jake was certain he did a lot with his own agendas.

"In this case... I owe Aeon, so this can be part of paying back that debt. He rarely blesses people, but that doesn't mean he gets nothing out of it. Also... I'll be honest, I find the dynamic of focusing so many blessed by Primordials on one planet interesting. I don't know if this has happened before in a newly integrated Universe, ever. Especially not with Eversmile and Aeon both involved," the god answered.

"Makes sense, I guess, even if it is a bit of a weak reason. Now... final question on this matter; why the hell is he called Aeon Clok and not some cool title? I already think Eversmile is stupid, but Aeon Clok? It sounds... childish? Like what... he is called a "long time clock" or something," Jake asked.

“Hah, always interesting hearing the opinions of those newly integrated, as no one would find it silly in the multiverse. Maybe even get you labeled a blasphemer and heretic to be hunted down. But you are actually correct. Aeon’s last name was Clok, which was just his family name as they made clocks. And don’t even try to argue that is stupid as your planet liked to name people stupid stuff based on the parent’s job. Anyway, his first name is the only one he chose, and he chose it to go with his last name. In some ways, his goal was to become an eternal clock; a watch that would forever record and be one with time itself,” Villy explained.

“You know surprisingly much about him for one so enigmatic,” Jake noted.

“Because I know him well. We have spent a lot of time together once upon a time. Out of the other Primordials, he is someone easy to get along with for me, even if he is quite peculiar,” Villy kept explaining.

“So, a friend?”

“Something like that,” he answered.

“Well, then be free to invite him for beers one day; he sounds interesting enough, and it would be interesting to meet a god that had once been human,” Jake shrugged.

“... Jake, if it was anyone else, I would interpret that as a joke, but with you, I am genuinely unsure. Then again, there are few people who could even handle being in the prolonged presence of one Primordial, much less two, a concept you for some reason don’t seem to get.”

“I was serious; why wouldn’t I want to meet a god damn time wizard?” Jake questioned.

“Because he could kill you if you said the wrong thing? Imprison you in a tiny subdimension with accelerated time until you die of age, forever trapped in total darkness with no stimuli till nothing of you remains?”

“That doesn’t sound like a present-Jake problem, but a potential future-Jake problem,” Jake shook his head with a wry smile. “But enough about that... I meant to ask, did you know my scimitar was something called a Sin weapon?”

“Of course,” the god answered.

“And you never told me?”

“You make it sound like that knowledge would have had any benefits. It’s just a classification of a curse, so not sure what I should say, and it isn’t my fault you never bothered to research the obviously very peculiar growth curse on your own weapon. You know what it did, didn’t you? But why are you asking about it now?” Villy answered with another question.

“It’s because I’m considering to use these two and the curse on the scimitar to create a new powerful weapon,” Jake said as he pulled out the Chimera weapon and the Root of Eternal Resentment. “Any thoughts on that?”

“Sounds fine. A pretty good idea even,” Villy answered.

“Nothing dangerous about it?”

“For you? Probably not. I believe your survival instincts should keep you well enough in check to not try and slaughter something too powerful while in the inevitable blood-fueled rampage that you will be under, as you kill anything with vital energy you come across,” the Viper answered.

“... explain?” Jake asked, wanting the god to elaborate a bit on that one.

“Well, Jake, while you do have Pride to resist the effects of the curse, do you honestly think you would be able to fully resist it? That Root has a lot of curse energy within, and that Chimera weapon should be able to contain it as it seems very compatible, but when you transfer the curse, you integrate with it even more. I don’t think this is a big problem, but I do think you want to do it somewhere far away from anyone you don’t want to kill, but also not somewhere you can’t kill anything. You need to sate the hunger of the curse somewhat,” the Malefic Viper explained.

“So, I will become a rampaging beast?” Jake asked, frowning.

“No... you will become a rampaging hunter. You will feel an overwhelming compulsion to kill, and if this emotion was standing in opposition with your Bloodline, I could see you resist it... but the thing is, it doesn’t. In fact, I could be afraid it would amplify it. Hunger is a powerful kind of sin, it is a very broad concept, and you cannot tell me you don’t instinctively want to consume. Consume life as fuel to advance your own power.”

Jake kept frowning as he slowly nodded, unable to deny it. “So... find some desolate area without any human settlements, but many beasts to kill when I merge them?”

“Up to you. You can also find a human city to do it in, but the wild is probably better as you want to kill powerful beings, and I doubt you can find many human settlements with enough worth killing, and it would take too long to slaughter E-grades,” the Viper answered nonchalantly.

“Yeah, no, not going to slaughter an entire human city,” Jake answered, adding in his mind. Not without good reason, at least.

The thought surprised him about as much as the sentiment that he didn’t even feel like it would be that horrible. He didn’t feel like killing humans. In fact, he would very much prefer not to, but at the same time, he wouldn’t hesitate if he felt like it was the best course of action.

“Again, your choice. Anything else interesting you wanna bring up?” the god asked.

“Now that I have you... advice on making my very first secret underground alchemy lab?”

Hey, with Villy being a master alchemist and all, why not ask? The god also gladly answered as Jake began going over his plans as he got feedback. Especially when he asked about making an artificial sun from the Sun Fragment, he learned a lot, as Jake had no experience with that kind of thing.

He also asked about things related to the Dustpollen Bee Queen and advice on securing the best possible start for the insect. The god was actually impressed Jake had managed to swipe up such a good treasure and emphasized Jake did not half-arse it. If he did well, that Bee could be the most beneficial thing he had gained from the auction in the long term.

His advice? Collect a mountain of D-grade cores from insect-like monsters to use in a giant ritual with the Nucleus and try to give birth to a powerful variant - the cores of other queens being extraordinarily

important. Jake took it all in, as a plan began to form in his head of what to do in the future to deal with both his Sin weapon issues and his D-grade core-scarcity problem.

Because he remembered a certain area between Haven and Skyggen, nicely out in the middle of nowhere, with a giant underground network of insect monsters...

The two of them kept talking about a myriad of topics for a good while as Sylphie was still just sleeping. Jake himself was waiting for Hank or someone else to arrive in order to get started with some underground construction plans, and he honestly wasn't in much of a hurry to get anything done here and now.

But, he planned to get construction started and get some work delegated before he would head out again. Jake had obtained many items of high value during the auction, but he couldn't equip many of them yet. Which is to say he needed levels. To get those, he planned on going on a hunting trip towards the insect-infested area.

Because he had a feeling, he would soon have plenty of time to do alchemy, especially when Villy just said "soon" when he asked about that off-world teleportation thing he kept talking about. Of course, for an immortal god, soon could mean in a million years, but Jake believed they would be a bit faster than that.

Shortly after he ended his conversation with Villy, he detected movement as three people entered the valley. It was Hank and two of the people he usually worked with. When Jake saw him get closer, he went to greet him – bird still on his head – and he was pleasantly surprised when he finally laid eyes on him.

[Human – lvl 100]

“Congratulations on the evolution,” Jake said with a smile.

“Thanks,” he just answered, not even mentioning Sylphie on his head even if his two colleagues stared a bit.

“Now I heard you have some ideas for the underground lab... but before you say anything, does it have anything to do with those?” Hank asked as he pointed to a stack of massive black metal gates lying on the ground, having created a small crater.

“...yes?”

“Well, then you gotta help us set it up... because none of us can lift them, and they are too unhandy even if we manage to work together,” he explained. “I can’t even put them in my special storage due to their properties. It is some weird metal you have gathered.”

“Oh...” Jake answered, the thought having not even crossed his mind before. Well, he did know he couldn’t put them in his own storage, and he guessed that was just due to their size and weight, but maybe they truly couldn’t be put in storage.

He summoned the Cube he had managed to get the Sun Fragment into and failed again, more or less confirming the gates’ magic resistance also expanded to that.

“No problem, I’ll help,” Jake said.

“Great. Now, are you down for a tour of how it looks currently down there and future plans?” Hank asked.

What a silly question... fuck yeah, he was.

Chapter 374 - Jake's Laboratorium & To-Do List

Jake carried the heavy as fuck gate down towards the underground, having left the still-sleeping Sylphie back in the lodge as working with a bird on your head while working on construction was considered a safety violation by Haven's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (HOSHA).

Hank was also carrying one as they tried to get them all down and in position. The two other workers had tried to carry one, and while they could, they quickly noticed a problem... the ground beneath their feet.

See, the problem for them wasn't necessarily that they couldn't lift it using certain skills, but that it would be like walking through a bog with your feet sinking down to your knees due to the sheer weight with every step.

Hank managed to avoid this by using some skill a lot like water walking, except it made so every one of his steps seemed to hit a far larger area. On the other hand, Jake used a few different methods, like wrapping it in strings and lifting it up, while condensing platforms of mana to step on to lessen the stress caused by his feet on the ground.

Now, while Hank could carry the gates himself, that wasn't all one had to do to get them installed. When Jake reached the tunnels, he saw that the tunnel had been equipped with what looked like a large doorframe that went a few meters into the soil around it.

Currently, they were in the tunnel dug into the cave leading down to the biodome with the dungeon in it. This tunnel led into the alchemy lab under construction and served as one of two entrances. The first entrance was directly below the lodge itself, while the second was through this cave. They had also discussed having another tunnel connect the biodome and the lab but had decided against it for a few reasons. Primarily that the biodome area would likely become a bit more populated once more people began actually using the dungeon.

Something Jake learned Neil and his party were planning on doing soon. Felicia and Roman would probably also want to try it shortly after getting a few more people to go with them. Or they would do it as a group of two... though Jake didn't think they could currently.

The doorframe itself was heavily fortified once they got to it. In fact, the entire tunnel was enchanted and reinforced with several pillars and beams to keep it stable and – perhaps more importantly – incredibly durable. Jake could still break it, but he doubted anyone below D-grade could, at least not without a lot of effort.

Of course, it would all be made stronger with time, but for now, it was fine, and once they got some barriers and stuff in place, it should be even better.

“Yeah, hold it just like that,” Hank said as they had finally managed to get the gates into the large tunnel. Jake was amazed how well they fit but learned this was because the man had spent part of the week Jake was gone to make sure it would.

Jake was holding it all up as the man attached the two gates on hinges, dropping them down as the ground shook a bit. Hank did some stuff on them one by one, as the two people with him got to work. They did something that almost looked like welding to fasten it even more and reinforce the entire thing.

“So, how will the gate open?” Jake asked as they were working on attaching it fully.

“By having enough strength to make the gates move,” Hank answered. “There are methods to enchant the hinges and implement an opening mechanism, but doing so right now will be incredibly difficult. We will also have to isolate those enchantments as the metal the door is made from almost gives off a magnetic field isolating itself from other energies. Great for not caring about having small gaps in the side of the doorframe, not that good for making automatic door-opening devices. Maybe an analog one can be made, but it will need a lot of force.”

Jake shrugged. “Works for me fine so far. Any plans on how to make the door work at the other entrance?”

“Made some modifications adding a small entrance area once you drop down where the gate can be put. The drop itself is not large enough to support getting a gate through, so we will have to carry it through the underground complex through this entrance. Anyway... before that, let me show you around the place,” the builder said as he and Jake went through the newly-installed gates, leaving the two workers Hank had brought with him to continue their work.

The tour made one thing clear... Jake really was getting a bit more than just a lab. It was an entire underground complex, and he even saw that a part of it had several stories. A lot of the multi-story part of the complex was what Hank described as the living area, which included a few bedrooms, a meditation chamber – that was apparently popular, Hank said – and a massive library.

One of the biggest rooms by far was the lab itself. It was large and currently mostly bare, with tiles covering the floor and what looked like a black glass-like coating on the walls and ceiling.

“The tiles, walls, and ceiling are all covered in three layers of materials. Towards the outer edge is a coating of a metal a lot like Tungsten, which is incredibly durable and will keep outside energy from leaking through the soil. The middle layer is a silver-like metal that is very mana conductive and enchanted with several enchantments to strengthen and isolate. The last layer is the glass you see, which is incredibly suitable for reflecting and containing energies. In fact, you could view this entire room as a big bottle,” Hank explained.

“So, nothing leaks out of here?” Jake asked.

“Should be able to contain all kinds of poison you toss at it, including nearly all kinds of acids. But be careful because it is still somewhat susceptible to physical damage, so don’t begin shooting that bow in here. Overall I am quite proud of it, and for the entrance to the lab itself, the plan is to make an air-lock type system.”

“Wouldn’t it work to just put another gate there to isolate the lab?” Jake followed up.

“For a time, sure. But the gates are made to resist energies, while I know your poison can sometimes get more than purely energy-based. From what I understand, these gates were made to isolate from curse energy and not poison. Finally, while they resist magic, they are not immune to it at all. Prolonged exposure to poison as you described you wanted to make would be a bad idea,” Hank shook his head.

Jake nodded in understanding. His plan was to make the alchemy lab into a poison-filled hellhole for anyone but himself to create poison in. The atmospheric poison would provide him with increased mana regen at all times, help feed his Palate, and even allow him to place a few plant boxes in there or something like that with poisonous plants in them.

Potions and elixirs and what-not he would just make somewhere else like the meditation chamber. When making poison, the problem was that you pretty much needed an isolated lab due to the fumes

and escaping energy being harmful. Energy also escaped while making potions or elixirs and other beneficial products, but getting a whiff of health potion fumes wasn't going to kill anyone, while a good whiff of Necrotic Poison fumes could melt your nose off and erode your lungs.

He still remembered when he made poison in the valley above and the black patch of grass where he had done it.

The rest of the tour was not that interesting as it was all still under construction. There was no furniture of any kind, and the walls were still only halfway done. Jake had to admit, he had expected it to just be an underground cave, but they were cutting out the walls, hardening the soil to turn it into stone, and then shaping it to make the walls look like concrete. Hank even asked if he preferred a certain color to paint them. Jake didn't and just let the interior designer handle it. Because that was also a thing. It was slowly taking the form of a modern-looking apartment if you ignored the lack of windows.

After the general tour, Jake helped get the second gate in position on the hinges on the gateway directly below his lodge. As a final thing, Hank brought him to a room Jake had wondered about, especially as he had noticed some rather complicated work done above around it.

The room, which was more a cave, looked like some kind of basin and sat directly below the pond above. Jake saw pipes in the walls leading upwards, two on each side, as he asked.

"A swimming pool?"

"... no, it was actually meant to be a water storage as I know alchemists tend to need a lot of water," Hank answered, giving Jake a deadpan look.

“Oh... that’s also smart,” Jake agreed.

“Well then, wanna see it fill?” the man asked with a smile as he showed Jake some controls over at the side.

“This entire system is created by Arnold. I will be honest, I don’t quite get it, but you can use the system to take water from the pond above and even reverse the flow on other pipes to jump water up there. The pond itself has a natural drainage and the waterfall provides a source, making it quite a good place to get water from. Ah, and the pipes are enchanted, so nothing living can even enter them, meaning you don’t have to get scared of any of those small eels getting through. You can even use these controls to raise barriers and section off certain parts if you want to create water with specific affinities,” Hank explained.

Jake nodded. The basin, in his defense, did look like a large swimming pool. It was around thirty meters long, twenty meters wide, and an impressive five meters deep. As he stared at it, Jake got an idea.

“Can you show me how to do that sectioning off thing?” Jake asked.

“Sure,” the man answered, giving Jake a quick rundown of the control panel. The panel looked like a mix between an eighties computer and a sci-fi machine, featuring overly large buttons, levers, 3D displays, a screen with a horrible resolution, including blocky words and illustrations.

Jake had to admit... Arnold was stupidly smart, if weird as fuck, and possibly a bit insane. Then again, who wasn’t these days?

The entire pool was made so underground pipes connected every different section, meaning one could transfer from one end of the pool to the other without any issues. The way to create sections was just walls of that glass-like material used in the lab, and the more he played with it, the more sure he became of this plan.

He manipulated the basin as a wall of glass appeared and sectioned off an area around two and a half meters long and wide area, creating a box. It was the smallest he could do, and it was just fine.

“Before we fill it, let just toss this bad boy in there,” Jake said as he took out a small stone and threw it into the empty section of the basin he had just created. He had actually planned to use it on the pond above, but this seemed even better.

The stone he tossed?

It was the Dewstone from the Treasure Hunt.

[Dewstone of Serenity (Legendary)] – A small stone created by the combined effort of a group of water nymphs to help heal a close friend. A powerful vampire eventually acquired this stone and brought it to Yalsten, where it has been ever since. Will passively transform surrounding water by infusing the power of serenity into it. Effect lessens, and transformation progresses slower the larger the pool of water. Has many alchemical uses.

With it, he planned on infusing a section of the basin and create his very own special Serene Water. Hank saw him throw it and shook his head. “That stone looks more expensive than this entire complex.”

Jake shrugged. “Maybe it is, but now it’s part of the complex and adding to the value. Anyway, let’s get started?”

The builder agreed as Jake and Hank began draining a bit of water from above. He first filled up parts of the larger pool but set it to only drain a little to not empty the pond above. Then he redirected a bit of the water into the cube he had sectioned off. Ah, but again, only a little bit to raise the water a couple of centimeters, not even submerging the Dewstone.

Minutes passed as the pool was slowly filling, and Jake felt the water around the Dewstone be affected. Then, a few more minutes later, he felt like a switch had been flipped, and the water began giving off a faint glow as he identified it.

[Serene Water (Rare)] – This water calms the mind of anyone who consumes it, allowing them to more easily focus while suppressing the effects of most mental afflictions. Continued consumption will help heal minor soul injuries. Has many alchemical uses.

“Great success,” Jake commented.

Hank agreed with a thumbs-up, saying: “Well, this was what this sectioning feature was built for.”

Jake spent a bit more time manipulating the control panel and filling up the cubicle of water with the Dewstone in it. He also set it to only fill the basin slowly to not drain the water above too much before putting the entire system to “automatic water renewal mode,” which would -as the name suggested, automatically fill the basin with water whenever he drained it.

Leaving the basin room, the two of them were done with the tour, and Jake had to admit... it was way better than he had expected.

“Honestly, you guys went above and beyond,” Jake said with a smile once they were back up in his lodge, just chilling with Hank and the two workers who were taking a break after finishing some preliminary work on both gates.

“Just doing our jobs, and it was Louise who did all the designing, and besides, you saved our lives. I would be dead right now without you, and even if I was still alive, I doubt I would have ever made it to D-grade,” Hank answered.

“You’re good at what you do; I think you could have,” Jake answered. “But thanks... I really appreciate all the work you and Louise did. The work all of you did.”

The last part was to the two workers, who gladly accepted the words. Jake wasn’t wearing his mask either as he was beginning to feel a bit better with going without. Months ago, he wouldn’t even have considered it, but now he felt like there wasn’t any need. He could feel how the two workers had an almost unhealthy level of respect towards him, and Hank’s sincerity was unquestionable, so hiding his face before them was unnecessary.

The group kept chatting a bit more, and Jake gave a few potions he had to Hank for him and his workers as they took their leave. Jake honestly didn’t have that many anymore due to selling them at the auction... which meant he knew what he had to do.

A to-do list to do.

First up: Grind potions and create a good stockpile for himself and even some for the city if necessary.

Secondly: Stock up on elixirs and get himself fully capped out using those too. Perception all the way, of course.

Thirdly: All the research. Investigate rituals, curses, methods, and what-not to create the cursed Chimera Sin weapon. Also, research rituals related to the Pollendust Bee Queen and finally methods on creating an artificial sun.

Fourth: Begin growing a garden or at least make plans to. Maybe even talk to Miranda about if there were other alchemists in the city or willing to join the city who could assist in this.

Fifth: Through the effect of prior points, get levels, become able to equip, and become familiar with at least a good portion of his newly acquired equipment.

Finally: Begin the trek towards the insect plains to do the curse ritual.

But before going, and after all his other preparations, he had one other thing to do...

He had a King to awaken.

Chapter 375 - Oh Gosh, It's A Time Skip!

Miyamoto stood on the flat hill as the rain fell around him, mixing with the blood of the beasts he had slain. He wielded his blade as the leader of this beast horde growled before him but didn't dare to attack. The Sword Saint smiled as he bent his knees.

"Rainblade."

The rain around him moved as he commanded, his skills more responsive and powerful than before. The battle was swift but explosive as he cut down his foe, taking only a few minor wounds in return.

"Better," he muttered to himself as a figure appeared beside him.

"You are about as powerful as you were when we battled," the former Monarch of Blood, Iskar, said.

Miyamoto nodded, understanding this himself. He had still not regained all of his levels but needed seven more in total... but that he was already as strong as back then now was proof of how much his skills had grown. Not only in rarities, but there was a conceptual improvement.

Right now, he was in his winter. The period where he was weakened and regaining what he had lost. After he had regained all his levels, he knew that he would be able to invoke Springtime Advent once more, and the second time the consequences would be less. Not because the Transcendence had become less powerful, but because he would have become closer to what he was always meant to be.

Springtime Advent was not only about claiming power. It was about claiming a different him, a different Sword Saint that had walked the path closest to his heart. A selfish swordsman who only had the rain and his blade as company.

Perhaps one day, the skill would cease to matter... but for now, it was not only a power-up but a guide to his future. A guide to power.

As for why Iskar was here... the divine artifact had already imprinted upon the Miyamoto. While he could leave it back at home, he had chosen to wear it, as more effects had begun to appear. The constant whispers of embracing the Gift of Sanguine and ascending to a higher form were tiring, but the temptation was useless towards him.

Because he had already seen his ideal, and that was not one where the rain was red.

Three months after the Treasure Hunt, he had finally managed to get back most of what he had lost and knew that the last seven levels would be simple. The levels lost were evenly split among his class, profession, and race, and every time he gained a level, it would be to all three at once. Luckily, the method in which he gained them did not matter either. He could do it by painting, fighting, or merely meditating on the blade.

"Let us continue," he said as he placed the blade inside his new scabbard and took out a paintbrush. He placed it upon the canvas that was the horizon as he painted himself standing at the edge of it. Miyamoto finished it by infusing power as the rain around him functioned as ink.

Iskar disappeared, and the Sword Saint stepped through the plane of water that was his painting as he appeared more than a thousand kilometers away. He was out of a lot of mana but otherwise ready to begin yet another hunt.

The Malefic Viper leaned back in the chair as he sat within the room, enjoying the backdrop of cogs and wheels turning in infinite patterns. All of it was one well-oiled machine that both existed and was merely a metaphysical representation of the concept of time.

Beside him sat a man, smiling as he also observed. He had orange hair, glasses, and a clean-shaven face. He wore a well-fitted black suit, but there were a few stains on the sleeves from his work. Vilastromoz doubted the man would be considered handsome by human standards as his face was rather long and angular and didn't have many of those traditionally handsome traits.

Not that Aeon had ever cared much about how others perceived him.

"Have you made a decision yet?" the Viper asked his old friend. The two of them had observed the Sword Saint ever since Vilastromoz had his talk with Jake back then nearly three months ago. He hadn't heard much of the Heretic since then besides some curses in his name, proof he was no doubt busy.

Aeon turned to him, his face relatively neutral. "He is incredibly powerful for a D-grade... within the epitome of talent, no doubt. His Transcendence also appears rather impressive as it clearly also impacts his future growth positively, turning the backlash into opportunity. Moreover, above both these, his sheer skill with a sword and his constant growth still stand. Personality-wise there are no complaints either."

"But?" Vilastromoz asked. There was always a but.

"Tell me, Vilas, what is the most impressive thing about him in your eyes?" Aeon asked.

“His mentality and approach to life,” the Viper asked without hesitation. The Sword Saint was powerful because of many things, but the things that made him powerful were his mentality and life approach. Jake was a lot the same. You could give someone else his Bloodline and talent in energy manipulation, but without his sheer will and mind, the Bloodline could as easily become a pure hindrance no more useful than an inborn Sin curse.

“Yes... partly,” Aeon answered. “This man has truly died once... or at least been reborn. Do you believe that?”

Vilastromoz frowned. “Are you sure? Usually, you can feel it, and I am not sure how he would have? Without Yggdrasil or some sublime natural treasure, it shouldn’t be possible.”

“I would agree... which is why I am uncertain if he ever truly died or was merely reborn. A rebirth without death, if you may. A conceptual one. Moreover... this did not happen after the integration of the ninety-third universe... but many decades before. It is a mystery, likely even to himself.”

The Viper couldn’t help but break into a smile as he understood. “A mystery you aim to explore?”

Aeon returned his smile as he had clearly made up his mind. “Yes.”

Jake had a bucket list of things to do, and do the bucket list he did. From the beginning, he grinded out potions like a madman. He did a bit of preliminary research on making uncommon potions but found it still above his ability to do, as the common-rarity ones spanned quite a lot. So common ones he made.

He spaced out his activities between doing everything on the list to avoid it getting too samey. Whenever he got bored making potions, he researched curse rituals a bit, and whenever that got boring, he made a few elixirs and chugged those down.

Lillian had handed him the entire storage she had purchased from the System Store while it was available and had given him quite the haul. He should be good for a while when it came to all basic ingredients for most potions and low-ranking elixirs.

Sylphie had ended up sleeping for nearly an entire week straight, and on the third day, her parents had returned and were both incredibly worried. Jake had to convince them both she had just eaten something good and was digesting it, which seemed to calm them down a little. Especially when he promised to look after her.

The lab was also soon getting done, but there was still work to do, and while they no doubt could have it all done, Jake didn't want to make Hank focus more resources than necessary on it. Many other construction projects were underway that also needed the best builders Haven had to offer, so Jake couldn't monopolize them.

When Sylphie had finally woken up, Jake felt nothing different from her at first, but she told him that the wind was slightly louder. Jake wasn't sure what exactly she meant, but she said it was a good thing, so it was all good.

She had taken off into the forest and, last he heard, managed to join up with her parents to spend some quality time together by murdering beasts.

Speaking of quality time... the teleportation circle to Skyggen had been established, and Jake had his family visit him. They had only come by for a day and hadn't met anyone besides Jake and Miranda. His parents had come with Caleb, with Maja staying home to take care of the kid, and while it was only

brief, as they knew Jake was busy, but it had been pleasant. Sultan was also a happy man as his trade network had just expanded significantly. Oh, and Jake could now get dark-affinity stuff more easily.

Anyway, back on the alchemy front, Jake had crafted around a thousand potions in total of different variants. Around four hundred mana potions, four hundred health potions, and two hundred stamina potions. Of those thousand, he had given out the majority to others or sold them using Sultan. However, he had naturally kept the best for himself for a rainy day.

For elixirs, he actually hadn't needed that many. Jake had just crafted thirty-three Perception elixirs giving five each, and that had gotten him capped again. Not to scoff at it, thirty-three times five was still 165 extra Perception before all bonuses.

On the research front, Jake was beginning to have a good idea of what he wanted to do with the curse ritual. He had to admit, he had put off finding out more about the Pollendust Bee Queen ritual to focus more on the Sin weapon. He found that the curse ritual wouldn't be that difficult; it would just be taxing. He had considered using the legendary Carbonic Catalyst, but all research indicated that would be unnecessary or even mess something up.

In fact, the primary thing he needed for the ritual wasn't about the ritual itself but to keep himself calm during it. For that, he had prepared a certain something: A vat full of Serene Water. This was only to get him through the hardest part, as he was becoming more and more sure that keeping his head cool throughout it all would be impossible.

His research had been done through a variety of means. He had, of course, Sagacity, but the knowledge gained from that was often a little iffy and ultra-specified in certain areas. It could randomly contain some insights into creating an artificial sun, but not a whiff on how to grow a plant.

Thus he had used his other mean method: all the books. One had to remember, the first thing Jake found during the Treasure Hunt was a bookshelf with valuable books. With Reika, he had also raided an alchemy lab full of even more books, and just generally throughout the Hunt, he had found books in Vaults. He also still had the ones from the challenge dungeon. All of this is to say that Jake actually had a lot of books to put in the library down in his alchemy lab and had made sure that was one of the first areas to be finished.

When it came to growing a garden, Jake had put some feelers out, but Haven didn't really have any alchemists of note. Miranda had taken it upon herself to try and recruit some, and it had been just in time as she had received a message from Saya and Skyggen a month and a half ago that Reika was about to head out. She would bring with her alchemists of the Noboru clan, which should fix Jake's gardening issue. So now he just had to wait for them to arrive. Oh, and about the artificial sun... he hadn't even begun to do anything regarding that. Too much to do.

Anyway, all of this had naturally led to one more thing. Levels.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 132 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 138 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

Seven profession levels in two months and three weeks didn't seem like a lot, and for Jake, it honestly wasn't. But this time had been primarily spent doing research and crafting products he had made many times before, so it wasn't unexpected.

And with profession levels also come the sweet race levels.

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 138 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 139 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 140 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Now, level 140 did not normally mean anything special besides being a multiplicative of ten, and humans liked that kind of thing, but for Jake, it meant it was time to get a new coat and a new stabby-tool.

[Nightprowler Armor (Ancient)] – Armor created from the hide of a powerful C-tier Nightprowler variant. The hide is incredibly sturdy against physical and magical attacks, especially piercing and slashing blows. Due to the Records left by the Nightprowler, any time you are not under direct sunlight, activate the passive ability Shadow Prowl, increasing all effects of stealth-based abilities as shadows hide you. The armor also slowly repairs while not under direct sunlight. Enchantments: +300 Perception, +250 Agility, +100 Endurance. Shadow Prowl. Shadow Mend. Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race

[Bloodfeast Dagger (Ancient)] – A dagger created from the bones of slain enemies of Yalsten, all melded together to create a ceremonial dagger typically only used during the Bloodfeast, a sacred tradition among vampires. Once Yalsten fell, the dagger was left in the pool of the last Bloodfeast, forgotten. The dagger is extremely sharp, and any cut made with it will result in increased bleeding. Blood spilled using this dagger will have its properties improved. Enchantments: Bloodfeast Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race.

He had put the armor on right away and sold his old one back to Sultan. As for the dagger, he didn't replace anything due to the broken Nanoblade. He had handed it to Arnold long ago but told the man to only try and do something with it if he had the time.

With the new armor on, he had instantly felt the effects. It felt like everything was slightly darker around him while underground in his lab, and instinctively he was aware that he was more hidden. Jake wasn't the most sneaky sort usually, but he did believe this armor would help, and to be honest... it did give him some ideas related to his own Expert Stealth skill.

He had also naturally put on the bracers he had bought.

[Bracers of Cursed Thorns (Epic)] – A pair of bracers formed from the vine of an unknown but highly toxic plant-like lifeform by a vampire from Yalsten long ago. Allows the user to infuse the bracers with mana, releasing highly toxic thorns that can be used in melee or ejected as projectiles. Due to the remnant connection with the main body during the crafting process of these bracers, a curse was placed upon them to release spikes that penetrate into the wearer's body, injecting the highly toxic poison. Enchantment: +250 Vitality, +150 Agility. Cursed Thorns. Requirements: lvl 135+ in any humanoid race

These were cursed, sure, but it wasn't the kind of curse whispering stuff into your ears, just the sort that liked to stab your forearms.

Jake decided this would have to be good enough as he didn't want to grind five more levels to put on his new legguards. Jake had upgraded his bracers, bow, quiver, dagger, and chest armor already through the Auction, and he believed that had to be enough.

However, he did discover one thing... he didn't get full value from his new chest armor. He was missing some Agility, and he quickly noticed the reason: that darn equipment cap. Villy had told him long ago how one could only have an extra 20% in a single stat. Jake had luckily saved up 115 Free Points and decided to put it into Agility as, quite frankly, he needed the stat.

This still meant he was missing 42 Agility, but he would eventually get those just by leveling. This is to say, it didn't really matter much.

With that... Jake had more or less done everything he felt like he needed to do before heading out. He had a plan for the curse ritual in place, the items gathered to make it happen, and delaying it any longer felt unnecessary.

Now, the Chimera weapon still had a level requirement of 150, but Jake felt things should be fine. In fact, he was certain the requirements would change to Soulbound anyway. Heck, it was probably at least somewhat beneficial as Jake couldn't bind it, meaning the curse had to overcome the weapon by itself. This would consume a tiny bit of the energy, but with the sheer quantity within the Root, that didn't matter at all.

On that day, Jake left Haven as he headed towards the place he had chosen to name the Insect Plains. Not the most artistic or original name, but he wasn't known to do that anyway. A part of him considered doing his first order of business in Haven but ultimately decided it was probably safer to do somewhere far away lest it resulted in a battle.

As Jake took off, he spoke to the mask on his face.

"Soon," he promised, something he had done several times during these last two months and three weeks or so.

Jake felt an emotion of recognition from the King within but also a sense of annoyance and impatience like he had just been left on a cliffhanger.

Chapter 376 - A King Reborn

Jake traveled for a bit over a full day before reaching the place he had dubbed the Insect Plains. The plains themselves looked idyllic besides giant hill-sized mounds and holes covering the ground. Occasionally he saw insects crawl out, but none of them were even above level 60.

The insects were all termites. Giant dog-sized termites. However, as he stood there and felt below the ground with his sphere, he did detect movement of larger ones - ones the sizes of cars. Jake guessed these were the D-grades, or maybe just powerful E-grades. Either way, he would hunt them soon enough.

But, now, he had a mask that wanted awakening.

Honestly, there weren't any preparations to be made. Jake just went a bit away from the plains and found a nice grassy hill overlooking it in the distance. There, he took off his mask, and using his Alchemical Flame, he burned away a patch of grass a few meters across and placed the mask in the center. Then he took out the bottle of Soul Renewal.

[Soul Renewal (Unique)] – A bottle of Soul Renewal offered directly by the system due to Earth's performance during the Treasure Hunt event. Soul Renewal is able to heal any wound to the soul and restore any damage or temporary affliction imposed upon it, including afflictions of the Truesoul. Requirements: D-grade.

"Are you ready?" Jake asked, getting no response. Yet he had a feeling the King was aware. Waiting.

Jake himself was ready for whatever would happen when he poured the liquid on the mask. With a string of mana, he manipulated the bottle as he opened it and tipped it for the liquid to fall out. It hit the mask but did not spill off it. Instead, it appeared to sink into the mask and become one with it. For every drop that hit the mask, Jake felt like more awareness and consciousness returned to the King, and as the bottle emptied and the final drop fell, he felt an aura be reborn as his vision shifted.

--

The landscape was bare, as a figure appeared. Jake instantly felt everything around him as he perceived the entire infinite space, and just by feeling that, he knew where he was.

At the same time, he also felt his body outside. The last time he had found himself within the odd space was back during the Trial of Myriad Poisons, where he fought the draconic version of himself. Well, it wasn't really a fight.

Yet there was also something else there. A mask lying on the ground, mimicking how it looked in the outside world.

Jake was not the first to speak but patiently waited. Soon enough, he heard a voice echo in his mind, no longer weak and tired.

"You have come far in a short time, hunter," the voice of the King said in his mind.

At the same time, the mask lifted itself off the ground. Out of it sprouted a root-like tentacle that further split into dozens of parts every second as they took the shape of a humanoid form. A fleshy black form with a mask on it soon stood before him, with the bark-like skin slowly growing on it as the hands and feet turned ivory and clawed.

This happened both within this weird space he believed was his soul and in the outside world.

“And you have come back to life,” Jake commented as he Identified the Unique Lifeform before him.

[Fallen King – lvl 140]

“It is questionable if this fallen one was ever truly dead... or perhaps I was. My body was destroyed, but I managed to preserve a fraction of my soul to rebuild. I merely needed a new vessel to facilitate that recovery... and that vessel was you,” the King explained, surprisingly forthcomingly.

“Very open, huh?” Jake commented. He was busy feeling out the aura of the King, both in this space and in the outside world. Many doubts dominated his mind, like why the King of the Forest was now called the Fallen King, and also why he felt an odd connection with the King still there. Most surprisingly was that he still had the mana from the mask... which had to mean it still existed, despite now clearly being on the being in front of him. Or was the mask the one wearing the body? So many questions.

“Deceit will offer me no benefit in this scenario, while truthfulness may lead to a conclusion we are both satisfied with. As you no doubt know by now, my return does not mean the severance of what binds me to you,” the King said as he moved his clawed hand, opening and closing it. “My mere presence within your Soulspace should be proof enough of this.”

“No, no, it is not proof enough,” Jake said. “I know close to nothing about soul magic in comparison to you, but what I do know is that you being here isn’t normal. You said I wouldn’t regret resurrecting you but gain something instead... so don’t leave out any details.”

Jake didn’t let his attention leave the King as he felt the Unique Lifeform move both inside this Soulspace – as the King called it - and in the real world. The King could apparently exist in both places at once, while Jake was only aware of the outside due to his Sphere of Perception. This only proved his point of who knew more of soul stuff.

“Very well... when I fell, I managed to keep a fragment of myself alive within the mask to one day return. You obtaining the mask and linking it to your soul served as the fuel to what would one day give me enough energy to regain awareness. That day was when you reached the same level at which you had slain me. The fuel was your very mana as you channeled it through the mask, as it amplified a portion of your soul to increase your mana capacity. Your evolution to D-grade was the time a faint ray of consciousness appeared, and since then, I have been slumbering within, experiencing only dreams. Ah, but I did see that healer who dared stare upon my exposed soul so openly and made him aware of his folly with a subtle threat to rip his soul apart,” the King explained in detail, the last part with great joy.

Jake, still debating if he should believe everything frowned. “So, you’ve been leeching off me?”

“Symbiotically growing with you. To begin with, I am a symbiote over anything else. This vessel you see before you is one I crafted myself and adopted as my primary Soul Shape,” the Unique Lifeform continued.

Still unsure, Jake had flashbacks to the battle with the King of the Forest that long ago. He had often imagined how he could have done better, done worse, and how he had compared every powerful enemy to the King for a long time. But now that he stood before the Unique Lifeform, Jake had even more questions.

“How did you lose?”

It was a question that had burned in his mind for a long time. He wasn't sure how he had won in the end. How the King had not managed to somehow pull out a victory, how all of the quest items had worked to flawlessly, and how he had not been killed in that last massive wave that shattered the outer layer of his soul.

“Arrogance, miscalculation, and ignorance,” the King merely answered. “I had not put the items of those Beast Lords in my mind... you see, not a single one of them were worth anything. I did hold some respect for the Great White Stag, but the others? Utter fools and weaklings of no consequence. Weaklings who failed to reach D-grade, especially the stupid pig.”

“How exactly did the tutorial work?” Jake asked, perplexed by the words. Clearly, the King was not some conjuration unique to the tutorial but had a vast history beforehand. “How did you end up there?”

“I... was born in a shithole. When I first gained awareness, I was on a small insignificant planet. The strongest beasts were D-grades, with only a small few settlements of enlightened races like humans. The strongest human I had ever seen was only barely a D-grade and fell to a single attack. You see, while I cared little for the inhabitants, the system one day gave me a quest. Conquer my planet, capture the four beasts you knew as the Beast Lords within dungeons, and attend the tutorial as a final foe that only the most talented would have a chance to encounter.

“I shall be honest, actually engaging in combat never seemed realistic once I saw it was only humans entering the tutorial. They had less than two months to reach a level at which they could challenge me... it was preposterous. Yet you managed to do so – with help – and my loss is inarguable. Even if the circumstances were truly in your favor.”

“Explain,” Jake insisted.

The King's eyes flickered behind the mask as he seemed to laugh. "Do you truly believe the system wanted you dead? That it wanted me to kill you? My task was never to kill you; in fact, it would penalize me for ending your life. I chose not to kill you... and I realized too late that I would have to or face death myself. Until the very end, I believed I could merely make you fall at any moment and be done with it. I saw no danger until it was too late. And now, I find myself shackled to you for my own hubris."

Shackled? Jake questioned in his head. He knew something weird was still going on as a connection persisted between them, one he could not quite comprehend. The King kept mentioning it... and it gave him a bad feeling.

"So... what happens now?" Jake asked.

"That, I do not believe is up to me to decide," the King answered.

"What do you mean?"

"Did I not say what the reward for my resurrection would be? It is I. It has always been so. Circumventing death is no simple task... and in order to do so, I needed a shackle. A bond. One you created the moment you chose to bind the mask to your soul, allowing me to anchor my existence."

"But I am the owner of the mask, whi-"

That is when the realization struck him. Suddenly the words of the Viper that he would have mixed feelings made a lot more sense as he felt incredible complex emotions all at once as he asked...

"What happens if I die?"

"I die," the Unique Lifeform answered as if the answer was obvious.

"What happens if you die?"

"Either true death or another round of recuperation... the prior more probable," the Unique Lifeform casually answered.

Jake really didn't want to ask the final question but did so anyway...

"Are you... forced to stay... or?"

"I can choose to banish my existence to the void of nothingness at any moment if that is what you ask. But if I can choose to relinquish the bond that keeps me shackled to you as my unwilling master, then no. That only you can do."

Wanting to ask the next question even less, he still forced himself to.

“And if I willingly remove the bond?”

The King didn't answer, them both knowing the answer already. The King would die. Perhaps permanently this time around. By now, the realization had truly seeped in. Jake had willingly entered a completely one-sided contract with the King by binding the item without knowing it. In essence... the creature that had once been the mighty King of the Forest was now no more than a slave, shackled to Jake.

“I am not okay with this,” Jake outright stated.

“The choice was not one made with consideration but one of desperation and opportunity. I had the choice between death and to try and find a new path bound to my killer... do not think you are the only one unsatisfied with this scenario, hunter,” the King stated outright.

“How to break the bond?” Jake asked, already determined to get rid of it as fast as possible.

“If I knew a path to do that, I would have lied to you to manipulate you into doing that from the get-go instead of trying this method, wouldn't I?” the King chuckled, the laugh echoing in Jake's mind.

“Then what the fuck do you suggest?”

“An agreement,” the King said. “A contract, if you may. A mutual promise, where we both can come out of this situation with what we want... the only question is, what do you desire?”

"This shitty situation not to be a thing?" Jake said with exasperation.

"This does make me question why you invested exorbitant fees in healing my soul," the King questioned.

"Well, duh, of course, it was so I could fight you again and win properly," Jake said like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Truly a simple hunter, with an even simpler request. This scenario does not make that an impossibility or even difficulty. But if you cannot think of terms, let me propose a deal. Naturally, my goal is release and true freedom. That is all I desire. In return, I shall offer my assistance where you deem it necessary. But do not think for one moment I shall act as your pawn or slave... I have chosen to avoid death, but I still find it a preferable existence to one of eternal servitude," the King proposed.

Jake listened closely, getting a better understanding of the King. He had a strong feeling the King was aware of his stance on that whole slavery shit already and was the only reason he even bothered.

"So, how will this work?" Jake asked.

"A promise. There is no true contract, no compulsion. You will hold the ultimate power as you can terminate me if you so wish, but that is it. Our words should be enough, hunter. If you swear to assist me in regaining freedom, I shall swear to assist you till then and never truly become your enemy even if I do regain my freedom. The favor of giving me a second life is one never forgotten," the Unique Lifeform said.

Still standing within his Soulspace, as the King called it, Jake saw no reason to refuse. If it is temporary...

He didn't like it. He really didn't. This entire thing made his stomach churn, yet the thought of throwing away the mask and effectively killing the King again seemed equally fucked up. And no matter how much he hated the idea of forcing someone to serve him, he couldn't deny the potential benefits of the King as an ally. He was strong and clearly knew things.

"Fine," Jake agreed. He felt an almost palpable wave of relief from the King but paid it no mind as he asked. "But do tell... how strong are you now compared to back then? Can you fight as you are? What are your limitations?"

He felt the King almost smile. "Limitations... I am bound to you. In time, you shall know what limitations may be placed upon me, as we shall no doubt discuss this in deeper detail. How strong am I compared to then? Does the question matter? We never fought. Not truly. And finally, if I can fight? Please... I have observed you for a long time. Just ask the question you desire the answer to."

The King in front of him in the Soulspace suddenly began disappearing as it turned to mist and flew over to him as it landed on his face and formed a mask. At the same time, a mask also formed on his true body outside as the space shifted. Jake disappeared from his Soulspace of his own volition as he now stood on the grassy hill, the Unique Lifeform in front of him.

Jake just smiled as he waved his hand, his new bow appearing. "Up for a rematch?"

An ominous laugh echoed in his mind as he felt the area around him distort as he felt an aura be released from the Fallen King before him. The creature began floating slightly above the ground as the wisps of light in the holes of the mask lit up brighter than before.

“Come, hunter-that-is-not-so-little-anymore.”

Chapter 377 - Jake Vs The King (Rematch?)

A question Jake had asked himself many times since the tutorial was how powerful the King of the Forest truly was. A part of him feared that he had almost deified the being and made the King out to be stronger than he actually was.

Jake had only ever felt the aura of the King. He had never felt his full power. He had been played around with until he cursed the King with a black bead and then stabbed him with the Tusk to weaken him further. Jake had used so many items and done so much just to get a fighting chance.

Of course, the current Jake was incomparably stronger compared to back then. He had evolved, gained levels, skills, his arcane affinity... so many things. His power had grown more than tenfold. The current Jake could have killed himself from back then with a single arrow... but... the King back then could also have killed him with a single attack.

However, today, all of these questions would be answered. Had Jake overestimated the King? Had his constant comparisons of every other D-grade and his conclusions the King was stronger been wrong? The answer to that was simple...

It was a resounding no.

BOOM!

The fight began with an explosion as the entire area around them for over a hundred meters was leveled as Jake was forced to teleport back. He had barely landed as a wave of force made him teleport again, exploding the area he had just appeared at.

Jake snickered as he took another step and drew the string of his bow, feeling time slow down. He took aim as he fired the arrow as it split into five. The King held up his ivory claw as a wall of force appeared and was pushed forward, blocking all of the arrows and making them explode.

Refusing to be outdone, Jake drew again as arcane energy whirled around him. An Arcane Powershot was released as he took a step and circled the King, as he channeled another and fired.

The first was blocked by a blast of force, making both explode on impact, as the second one was dodged by the King moving to the side with unnatural movements. He manipulated his own body with telekinesis.

In that case, Jake would just kick it up a notch. Pride activated as mana began condensing all around him, dozens of arcane bolts appearing. He also continued his assault with his bow, not giving the King a chance to counter without exposing himself.

Or at least he thought he did.

The King pointed his ivory claw towards Jake and blasted a wave of force out as the arcane bolts landed upon him, only to encounter a small transparent shield. The same one that had stopped his other attacks during the tutorial and had been broken by the Tusk.

They were both far more evenly matched than Jake had believed, making holding back useless.

Jake's body exploded with Arcane Awakening in the balanced mode, boosting all his stats by 30% in an instant. With it, he had believed he would be superior... only to see the King respond in kind as a golden mist surrounded him.

"Back then, I could not control my energy at all... this time is different."

Another wave of force was released. Jake quickly teleported but saw where it had hit as the ground was cleaved up. The moment the blast hit anything, it was as if golden dust was mixed in, as a mist of gold appeared and disappeared in a moment.

"You have new tricks, too," Jake commented.

"Even in sleep, when deep within my soul, I learned. I had never had a desire or seen a need to improve. Why bother when none could challenge me?"

"Always strive to improve!" Jake yelled as he fired back arrow after arrow, seeing them all blocked or dodged as he also avoided the blows of the King.

"A sentiment I have grown to embrace," the King answered as the two of them slowly began closing in on one another.

Arcane energy and the golden energy of the King mixed as their attacks clashed and explosions sounded out on the otherwise peaceful area as they soon found themselves on the Insect Plains.

Jake began testing out some new methods as he focused on the inner space of his quiver. Inside, he already had over a dozen previously summoned stable arcane arrows soaked in poison made before he even left Haven. With a mere thought, he could summon them as he wanted, but what was more was the control he had in there.

He attempted to begin to summon an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter not on his palm but within the space of the quiver. Attempt... because he failed. Not because his idea of summoning it within the quiver didn't work, but because he realized... he didn't understand the King well enough to.

The Unique Lifeform was something he truly didn't comprehend. It was a mask but also the weird tree-looking creature before him. He wore a mask on his face, yet the body of the King was the same mask, meaning it now existed two places at once. The weird black flesh of the King was not any biology he had ever seen before, and the bark-like skin was of a material he didn't know. Same for the hands and feet... they were made of an ivory bone-like material but were not bone.

A part of him already knew the explanation... because there was no comparison. Comprehending the King well enough was not something he could study in a book or understand within a short while. It was a Unique Lifeform. There was one Fallen King, truly unique, to comprehend.

Something he would gladly strive to do.

Jake began pulling out the poisoned arrows and trying to mix them in but quickly found an issue... getting a direct hit was hard.

Jake also discovered another issue really fast. As he channeled and fired an Arcane Powershot from a good angle, he used Gaze of the Apex Hunter as he usually did to freeze the King. Yet the moment he did, he felt a backlash as if he was smashed with a hammer in his face, making him groan as he fired.

The King had still been frozen and was forced to block with the shield, but Jake had no desire to use Gaze again. Maybe it had been a bit optimistic using a soul attack on a Unique Lifeform whose most powerful skill was soul-related.

Luckily for Jake, he had way more methods to attempt. The King primarily used his telekinesis to fire waves of force and his passive shield, but Jake also knew he had more to show for himself. Both were feeling out the other party as they finally got within less than a hundred meters of each other again.

Jake stepped down once more as he appeared at the side of the King. The shield around the Unique Lifeform reminded him of the mana shield on the Altmar Census Golem, so he tried a similar tactic as back then.

His hand began glowing with Touch of the Malefic Viper as he tried to make contact with the shield but found himself blasted back by an omnidirectional wave of force – one he had predicted. He had barely been blasted back as two strings of mana stabilized him, and one more step brought him behind the King as he touched the barrier.

Instantly it began sizzling and corroding, and Jake knew he only needed a bit more time. Something he wouldn't get as his danger sense exploded in warning, making Jake back away as the King turned as he cleaved a golden claw upwards.

Jake's eyes opened wide as the warning remained even as he flew backward, and he landed on a hastily constructed platform teleporting him to the side just in time.

A bright explosion of gold enveloped the Insect Plains as five scars now marked the surface, each of them several kilometers long and dozens of meters deep. Jake had no doubt hundreds if not thousands of E-grades insects had died from that one attack, and Jake was completely certain he had no desire to tank it.

Back in the tutorial... the Golden Claw had been the attack that triggered his Moment of the Primal Hunter, and while he believed he would be able to take it without that happening again, he wouldn't come out unscathed.

Jake stepped down again as he repeated his attack and stayed close to the King, his scimitar in one hand and the other with Touch constantly active as he whittled away at the shield ever-so-slowly.

He was forced to teleport, again and again, finding his mobility higher than the Kings by a good bit. Yet as time passed, Jake's dodges got narrower and narrower, as he soon found it difficult to land anything more than a quick touch or a swing of his poisoned blade.

Finally, he saw an opening and took it as he attacked with his palm. The King blasted at him, but Jake managed to jump and avoid it, twisting his wrist and arm to stay in contact as finally, he got through. His hand landed on the bark-like body of the King as his poison was infused. The barrier could not repair itself with his arm inside it, giving him an ample opportunity to-

"I have been with you since you became a D-grade... I have been sleeping, but I dreamed. I know you, hunter."

A pressure suddenly fell upon him as Jake felt himself be pressed down towards the ground. He struggled as he dodged the swipe of a second Golden Claw, leaving another disastrous scar on the environment.

“Last time I held back... this time, I shall not.”

That is when Jake noticed... his feet weren't pressed down. The pressure was not physical but something entirely else. His head began hurting as his vision began blurring. A constant headache grew as Jake began feeling like he was half-asleep or drunk. His body was heavy... slow... unresponsive. His health was dropping... his mana... his stamina... everything was being drained out of him.

Soul attack.

Jake's survival instinct triggered as he stepped down and teleported back. He had only done it once as a blast of force hit him in the chest, sending him flying through the air as blood entered his mouth. He spat it out as he landed on the ground, rolling.

He was a good two or three kilometers away from the King when he fully stabilized himself. The effect of the soul attack was gone as quickly as it came, and the remnant effects disappeared within moments the second he was out of it. What was eerier was that he didn't see any indication of it being there.

Fucking soul attacks, Jake cursed under his breath as he decided that melee wasn't the way to go if that is what he had to deal with. Luckily for him, he was fine with not being in melee... it just meant he would play the long game.

Looking at the King, he now had a black imprint on his bark-like armor, and Jake felt that a bit of poison had entered the Unique Lifeform's body... but he had not come out on top in that exchange. While he didn't feel like he had taken any damage from the soul attack, the loss of mana, stamina, and health was unquestionable.

Jake pulled out an arrow as he switched to the good old tactic of arrow bombardment. He mixed in explosive arrows, poisoned arrows, stable arrows, and all sorts of magical arcane attacks. The King began giving chase as it tried to get closer, with Jake backing away.

With his danger sense, he could dodge all the blasts of force, but with the blasts of force, he couldn't get a good chance to channel his Arcane Powershot for more than a brief period. Their bout ripped apart the Insect Plains as neither held back, explosions abound.

"Are you ready to go all out?" Jake asked as he prepared himself.

"Come," the King answered.

Jake smiled as purple veins began covering his body. A fragment of skin flaked off as the energy burned beneath, and a small barrier covered his skin as he fully entered Arcane Awakening, boosting all of his skills by a massive 60% as his health began dropping.

He covered his his body in scales, Pride activated fully, and Jake took a stance and nocked an arrow as he took aim. At the same time, the golden energy revolving around the King began glowing more, and to his surprise, the mask itself began shining as the veins in the wood began burning golden.

Arcane barriers formed in front of Jake in preparation for what was to come as he charged the Arcane Powershot. The King lifted a golden claw and pointed it towards Jake as it began burning with intense golden power.

“This one is new... gained at level 140. I would be careful.”

Jake simply smiled. Same to you.

The King would make his move first. For a moment, the area dozens of kilometers around them except just around Jake gained a golden hue that soon gathered as an orb appeared in the palm of the King. It echoed with power as if filled with lightning within, crackling in an almost unstable manner. The King lifted it and aimed it towards Jake as he sunk his claws into it, crushing the orb.

BOOM!

A golden wave of energy was released in all directions, but more than ninety percent was sent in a focused beam towards Jake.

The King had taken five or so seconds to gather the orb, and it moved faster than a wave of force by a considerable margin. But Jake had just enough time to not only channel his Arcane Powershot to perfection but dozens of highly condensed bolts of arcane mana ready for release.

When the golden beam hit the area of Pride, Jake instantly felt the soul component of the attack. A component he found was partly blocked by the many arcane barriers as they were torn apart like wet toilet paper one after another.

Jake waited till the very last moment before he let go of the string, and at the same time, commanded the bolts to move.

The arrow encountered the beam immediately. Part of the beam was absorbed by his scales, while the rest clashed with the power of the Arcane Powershot and the many arcane bolts.

In a display that mimicked the fight during the tutorial, an eclipse of golden energy and purple arcane energy was born, mixing and fighting each other as no victor was found. Soon, however, it became clear no balance would be found, and all trace of stability disappeared from Jake's mana as only destruction remained.

A second explosion dominated the Insect Plains mere seconds after the first, as the power of both of their strongest attacks was released.

For nearly ten kilometers in all directions, the ground was scorched bare as destruction tore through. Yet, in the center of the explosion, two figures had never stopped clashing. Even as the energy died down and all that was left was what could only be described as a massive crater, the arrows kept flying, and the blasts of force kept tearing up the ground even more.

Every ability was pulled out of his arsenal as Jake and the King kept clashing with all their might. Jake kept at a distance at all times as he was clear of the limited range of the soul magic and the golden claw attack, while the King clearly knew all of Jake's skills and dodged the necessary ones while taking the weak with his barrier.

Neither had been injured by the huge explosion due to their respective defenses. Jake had his passive shield from Arcane Awakening, could summon a few extra barriers if needed, and what did get through his legendary scales absorbed and nullified.

Jake had learned that the King could easily blast apart arrows and even uses of Splitting Arrow, so most of his landed attacks were Arcane Bolts and condensed Arcane Orbs that he fired from all directions and manipulated using Pride and his sphere.

With neither able to land solid blows, it just turned into a battle of endurance. Both had used their best boosting skills, Jake assumed, and unless one party pulled out another new powerful attack, nothing would change till one party ran out of mana.

They both knew it as they stopped their bout, standing with several kilometers between them. The area more than fifteen kilometers in all directions was just a crater filled with smaller craters, arcane energy, and golden energy pulsing on the ground here and there.

"I wonder who will become unable to keep up first," the King questioned aloud.

Jake just smiled. "You know, as someone who has studied me for so long... you should know that I don't tend to lose a battle of attrition. Especially not with these."

He pulled out a mana bottle and chugged it down where he stood, almost tauntingly.

The King responded by laughing. "And I still have a mask to drop."

Jake remembered that final attack of the King very clearly... but he also remembered how slow it had been. "I can flee faster than it moves."

“Doubtful. As doubtful as it is something in the interest of either of us to try,” the King said. The boosting skill he was using faded, as Jake saw the mask still look somewhat damaged, though it was already repairing itself. “Let us end this second bout here. There shall be opportunities aplenty in the future.”

Jake responded in kind as he deactivated his Arcane Awakening and instantly felt a wave of weakness. His entire body was aching and hurting, but he just gritted his teeth and pushed through. Pushed through long enough to summon a chair and take a seat as he leaned back on it.

The King had also stopped floating and now just stood on the ground, seemingly inspecting his body.

“You enjoy being alive, huh?” Jake commented jokingly.

“Existence outside of a confined soul realm where I am forced to spend all my time on recovering and hanging onto a shred of consciousness is indeed a desirable state of being.”

“I can imagine,” Jake smirked. “Anyway... time for some battle evaluation.”

It would be foolish not to reflect on things, right?

Chapter 378 - Unique Lifeforms

The King and Jake’s fight had been equal in many ways, but in as many ways as it was equal, it was completely unbalanced. The King was stronger than Jake in some areas, that was clear. The King was also more durable than Jake for sure with that insane barrier, and had quite a few ridiculously powerful attacks... but he also only had ridiculously powerful attacks, outside of the usual telekinesis.

On the other hand, Jake won out big in speed and agility, as well as diversity. One could argue the King did not need it, but Jake would argue he did... because if it really came down to it, Jake would never lose to the King as he was now. Because if it ever got dangerous, he could always just leave. The King was like a mighty, almost stationary, tower that fired out telekinetic certain death, but was otherwise rooted.

Of course, the King still had that final soul attack, and if the King decided to use it with the intent to kill, Jake wasn't sure he would survive. If he was hit, that is. He had not lied when he said he thought he could outrun it, especially if it triggered Moment of the Primal Hunter, as it no doubt would if it was a lethal attack.

The overall conclusion of the fight... one they both agreed with... neither could beat the other, yet neither doubted they could lose. The King noted that while Jake could continue to attack from range, the King would be able to wait him out and block or just flee by flying away while dodging.

"I still think I could find a way," Jake commented, mainly to himself. If anything, a long enough fight would give him a chance to comprehend the King well enough to summon an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter... a level of understanding he was still not at.

"And I have grounds to believe I can find ways to avoid losing, and at worst, assure mutual destruction," the King countered, adding on almost smugly, "as killing you would be just that. Mutual destruction."

Jake just shook his head at their childish conversation. He sat back in his chair and just relaxed as he stared at the sky. "How are you that strong anyway? Like... how many stats do you get per level in D-grade in total?"

"300 total," the King answered, clearly seeing no purpose in hiding something like that.

“... what the actual fuck?” Jake blurted out as he sat up abruptly. “That is like... fucking insane.”

Jake got a total of 229 stats for his profession, class, and race put together per level. That is naturally not counting his “of the Malefic Viper” skills, but the King got more than he did even if he counted those. Heck... the maximum Jake could get – as his race was not upgradeable – was 249 stats total. And that was if he got a class giving a 100 per level and a profession giving 80, AKA perfection. His current ones that gave 74 and 86 were already fucking good. Heck, his profession was incredibly close to the cap.

Yet the King just had more. It was utterly bonkers.

Were Unique Lifeforms just so stupidly overpowered or what? But... even then... Jake still wasn’t sure how the King could match him. Maybe he had more stats per level, but Jake had all his titles, elixirs, equipment, and all of that stuff. That is why monsters gained more stats than Jake ever could as a human... because he had equipment to gain stats from.

But... 300 was the max, as in, the absolute maximum a monster could get per level in D-grade. It was one only a true pinnacle creature could get.

“This does make me wonder... do you have any titles?” he asked the King. He had to have some, right?

“A mere handful, only two of them of true consequence. One is naturally my title as a rightful King, and the other as a Unique Lifeform as the system has chosen to name me,” the King answered, really staying true to his politic of openness.

“Unique Lifeform is a title?” Jake asked, it actually making a lot of sense. It was maybe a bit like how the twelve Primordials were called Primordials due to their title, right? That all Unique Lifeforms were also united by that one title they all had in common. It did still make him wonder, though. “What does it do?”

“That, I will not answer, for there are secrets even I shall keep. But I will share that the primary function of it is the 50% bonus to all stats.”

And that confirmed it. Unique Lifeforms were just fucking bullshit. Best stats, an absolutely overpowered title from birth, and what else? The King had never learned to fucking fight and didn’t seem like he had struggled to upgrade his skills... yet he clearly rocked ones of incredibly high rarity. It just felt unfair.

“There gotta be drawbacks somewhere,” Jake said, more or less just speaking his thoughts out loud.

“Of which there are few, but they do exist. Such as the inability for those as I to obtain the blessings of gods,” the Fallen King explained.

“Not that bad,” Jake muttered. Sure, the King lost out on the stat bonuses from a blessing, but one needed a pretty high-level one to even get stats. Maybe he also missed out on some other titles too, but it didn’t seem that bad.

“Wait, you said you had the King title? As in, the actual nobility title?” Jake suddenly recalled. The entire 50% title had been a bit more important in his head, so he had kind of skipped over that part.

“Naturally,” the King answered unabashedly.

“... I didn’t even know anyone else except enlightened species could get nobility titles,” Jake admitted. Heck, he was pretty damn sure they couldn’t. He had tried to give Sylphie a nobility title for the heck of it – primarily because he thought it would be fun to have others call her Lord Sylphie – and that time, it hadn’t worked.

“I was born with the nobility title and skills related to nobility. I did not obtain it, but I did upgrade it as I conquered my weak world. I was known as the Lord of the Forest back then and only adopted the moniker of King after I gained the title. And while I am still a King, I no longer dare proclaim myself the owner of any domain,” the Unique Lifeform answered, explaining some things Jake quite frankly just found odd.

How the hell was one born a noble? Some Unique Lifeform bullshit? Also... how did he change his name like that?

“I’ve been meaning to ask, what exactly is the name of your race? Like, I know you are a Unique Lifeform, but what is on your status?”

“Fallen King. Do you not possess any identification skill?” the King asked admonishingly. “Or are you merely confused that I do not find myself constrained to a single name? Why does that concept confuse a human? Does your race not possess endless names for other humans?”

“Yeah, but my race is human. The name is something different... it’s just something we call each other. You know, to know the difference between people and know who we are talking about,” Jake answered, wondering why he was explaining the concept of names.

“And if there is only one of your race, then would the name you chose to adopt not merely be synonymous with your race? Does the distinction matter when there is only one, and can ever only be one?”

That... actually made a lot of sense to Jake. Huh. Wait... were gods the same? Was that why their names were more or less just their titles or what people called them or whatever? There was only a single god like them too, and as far as Jake knew, you didn’t just get simply get a “god” from identifying one.

“Good point,” Jake admitted as he asked the ultimate question. “So, what happens now? We have an agreement, right? No fucking with each other or the other’s business for unnecessary reasons, and we both agree to look for a solution to get you free.”

“That is indeed the core of it. As for the final part, I shall look into a solution on my lonesome. I forged the bond, and I shall be the one to find a method of breaking it. All it will require is your active participation and support to make it happen,” the King answered.

“Any idea how long it will take?”

“No... so you will have to continue progressing, as I fear it may be impossible while still in this grade. I am not certain of the effect of surpassing you in level or even if it is possible either,” the Unique Lifeform explained, adding on. “In the meantime, I see no purpose for us to stay shackled to one another in anything but soul. I have no desire to follow you around after being trapped for so many years on a useless planet and then within your Soulspace.”

“Fair enough. But can you? Aren’t we linked? What are the restrictions?” Jake asked for clarification.

"You underestimate the powers of the soul. We are linked through the mask which you wear, as it contains the most important part of mine, while this vessel before you is all of my power. The two masks are forever bound, space mattering little before a bond of absolute concept. But I shall keep my word and am not ignorant to that I owe you, so use the mask to bring me if you require my assistance. Additionally, I know the location of your city and can find you at any point if I require your attention, while you should be able to detect my location too."

"No way to communicate?" Jake asked after hearing the lengthy explanation.

"I believe neither of us would feel comfortable with such a constant connection of which I could influence you at all times. Invade your dreams, shape your thoughts, and influence your emotions. Such a connection holds a lot of power, which you humans seem ignorant to. But I guess the gods need you controlled through some method," the Unique Lifeform said mockingly.

"If my Patron is trying to control me, he is doing a pretty damn shitty job at it," Jake joked.

"Or a job so flawless you are unable to detect anything amiss," the King answered.

"In that case, all credit to him," Jake shrugged as he decided to change the topic. "So, as you plan on going on a bit of an adventure, where are you heading off to?"

"Unknown as of now... you must understand; It has been a long time since I was anywhere with anything worth battling. On this planet, there exist creatures I cannot defeat, armies worth of beasts with levels equal to mine. An endless path of growth lies before me, and I aim to claim it," the King said.

Jake related to that feeling as he nodded in encouragement. “Then go dominate some innocent place. Just don’t slaughter any human settlements or humans in general. The fact that we are connected will come out eventually, and I would prefer to avoid being known as someone behind a senseless genocide.”

“Tribalism I have a hard time comprehending. Why put more stock on the kill of a human over another race? Ah, I guess that is simply another trait of you ordinary lifeforms. But I shall take my leave and leave your ilk alone if possible. As for you, I would recommend that you recover before you begin the curse ritual. Additionally, take this as a safety measure.”

The King opened his palm as golden energy began to gather, and soon a small bead was formed, looking like a golden metal ball with black streaks running through it. Jake frowned as he identified it.

[Soul Marble of the Fallen King (Epic)] – A Soul Marble created by the Unique Lifeforms known as the Fallen King. When consumed, temporarily empower your soul, giving resistance to outside influence. The energy within the bead will be consumed as your soul comes under strain. This marble will disperse into the environment within a week.

“Don’t tell me you just made that,” Jake muttered, visibly annoyed.

“Do not think it a simple matter; I cannot make them often and use them myself to further empower my soul and attacks,” the King answered.

Jake didn’t even wanna comment on the level of bullshit to be able to have a skill to instantly summon what was essentially an epic-rarity natural treasure as he just took it and shoed the King off. The Unique Lifeform clearly took pleasure in his exasperation as he bid his farewell.

“Till we meet again, hunter. May your hunt be bountiful and your progress swift. Simply use the mask if you require my presence. And remember... I have a debt to pay. Do not hesitate to call upon me if it will be to your benefit.”

With those words, the Fallen King lifted himself off the ground as he took flight in a direction away from both Skyggen and Haven. Out into the unknown, where Jake had never been before or knew anything about.

“Enjoy your newfound freedom!” Jake yelled after the King as he flew away quite a lot slower than during their battle. Jake knew why... both of them were still weakened from their boosting skills earlier. Luckily, it would soon expire as neither of them had been boosting for very long.

As he waited, Jake decided to finally get a peek at the mask to see what had changed about it. Taking it off, he saw not a single change on it visually, and his Identify responded just as before, proving it was indeed still an item.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Unique)] – The Mask and vessel of the Truesoul of the Fallen King, a mighty Unique Lifeform. The mask is made of a wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from and does not obstruct vision when worn, and regenerates itself from any damage taken. The Fallen King has anchored his existence to this mask, and as its owner, you are the master, allowing you to summon the Fallen King to your location at any time. Enchantments: Vessel of the Fallen King. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.Requirements: Soulbound

There were quite a few changes to the description but firstly was the changed rarity. This was Jake's first time seeing a unique piece of equipment, even if he assumed they had to exist out there. The description also noted how the Truesoul of the King resided within, making Jake confused, as he didn't get how the King could move around without that.

Then again... was it a bit like a lich? Jake knew about liches, as they worked a lot like they did in usual fantasy. They had a phylactery with the Truesoul in it, and as long as that remained, they would be effectively immortal. This seemed to be somewhat similar, except the King mentioned how he could still potentially experience true death if he was killed in his current form.

Finally, on the list of changes was what the King talked about... he could outright summon him. When he focused on that part of the description, the system was kind enough to make him instinctively aware of how it worked... and it was just a straight-up summon. It took some time to “cast,” but it did not appear to have a range limit.

God damn Unique Lifeform bullshit.

First Transcendents and now bloody Unique Lifeforms. Jake was beginning to feel a bit less like a special little boy with his Bloodline every time he discovered another of these so obviously overpowered system elements.

Not to be discouraged, because Jake still did not hold a shadow of doubt in his mind that he would still come out on top above all of these admittedly supremely talented and powerful individuals. There was nothing he would not become able to hunt with time.

He was the Primal Hunter, after all.

Still feeling a bit weak, Jake closed his eyes as he leaned back further on the chair and entered meditation. Mentally, he began going over his plan for the curse ritual a few more times, still holding the golden marble in his hand, giving him a bit more confidence.

Jake was fully aware what he was about to do was reckless, if not downright stupid. When he focused his mind to his fullest, he faintly felt presences deep below him. All the termites in the upper layers of the deep underground network had either died or fled down due to the battle between the King and Jake. Down there, he felt auras of insectoid monsters or other dwellers of the deep, or as he would soon refer to them as, fuel to sate his hunger.

Chapter 379 - A Truly Cursed Ritual

As with most things, there were many different approaches to achieve the same result. This was also true when it came to transferring a curse from one vessel to another and when using a catalyst to empower the curse further.

Casper would most likely do it through a large ritual circle, using several items as buffers for the curse, maybe even spread out the curse energy and integrate it a little at a time, potentially taking days, if not weeks, to get it all done.

The Holy Church would potentially choose to spread out the curse energy to hundreds of people at once and then have them work together to tame it before infusing it in a new vessel or something. Jake wasn't sure; these were just some of the methods he had come across when it came to empowering a Sin curse and infusing it with compatible outside energy.

There were dozens of ways, but Jake had ultimately decided to go with one of the simplest ones, as he liked simple. It was also the ones that would lead to the least waste and likely also the one with the highest compatibility in this particular instance due to the nature of the curse.

Jake had been the one who transmuted the curse, to begin with, transforming it from a Sin curse of Debuchery into one of Hunger. Before all of this research into curses, Jake didn't really know the exact meaning and implications of such a thing, besides getting him an actually useful weapon that didn't require him to do fucked up shit to empower.

But after his research, he came to realize what he had done wasn't normal. Not with any stretch of the imagination. He had effectively taken a curse and whittled it down to its absolute core component, bringing it back to its base Origin, which was Hunger in this instance. One of the most basic of Sin curses in existence.

He had also begun to realize he had done similar things before. It was linked to his arcane affinity to simplify and make things into their most basic state. Stability and destruction were as simple as they could get, and the thing is, sometimes there was power in the Origin of anything, but it did require luck.

Sylphie had been a "victim" of Jake discovering this - victimhood that she gained significantly from. Jake had not fully formed his arcane affinity back then, but some parts of it had still been mixed in and helped her become a Sylphian Hawk. Villy had also helped a lot there, of course, but it had also in large part been luck. Not everything brought back to an Origin would make it stronger or more useful. Sylphie could just have easily have become the weakest basic hawk, like a "wind hawk" or something.

Without the Mystbone, Villy, and the many Cloud Orbs and all that, that may have just happened. All of this knowledge he had gotten partly by accident by studying curses would no doubt be useful when it came to the Pollendust Bee Queen and his plans for that. Because he could 100% see himself just try to use arcane affinity and make it evolve into a far weaker "Flower Bee Queen" or something.

Back at the whole making-a-cursed-weapon-thing, Jake was just about ready with his simple setup, which was actually just a small protective barrier he had prepared in advance. It was primarily to hide him away and make sure he was undisturbed as he went through everything.

As a final thing, he took out the vat of water he had prepared. It was little more than a larger than average barrel with a lid on it. Inside, it was filled to the brim with the rare Serene Water to hopefully allow him to keep his head calm throughout the process.

He also chose to trust the King as he played with the marble in his hand.

With everything ready, he took out the three main characters of this event. First was the scimitar, the current vessel of the Sin curse he wanted to use. Next was the ancient rarity Chimera weapon from the Treasure Hunt that would serve as the new vessel. Finally, there was the Root of Eternal Resentment, which is where the true lunacy of what he was doing stemmed from. The pure curse energy in it far surpassed the scimitar by more times than Jake could even estimate. But as it was directionless, it was also easily consumed.

The Hunger curse was perfect for absorbing all this curse energy. If it had been another kind of Sin curse, like one of wrath or tyranny or something like that, he doubted it would work. Without him having consumed the Root with Palette for a few months, he also wouldn't be as confident. Even if he still held some doubt, this should work out well.

Everything was ready as Jake did the only logical thing, which was to jump into the Serene Water with all three items. The first thing Jake would do was to transfer the curse, or at least begin the process. That would be the easy part and one he wasn't particularly afraid of.

He would channel the curse of the scimitar through himself and try to place just parts of it into the Chimera weapon. This would not work out as the Chimera weapon was frankly just too powerful, which is why once the link was established with him as a bridge, he would bring the Root into the mix. How would he do this? Well, the Root was originally designed to infuse its curse into whatever it was stabbed into, so he would naturally stab himself and forcefully absorb all the energy of the curse. Of course, this would again only work due to the passive nature of the curse.

Jake inhaled a bit of the Serene Water within the vat and felt his head cool down. Then he popped the golden marble into this mouth and honestly didn't feel much difference except a bit of energy entering his body and gathering around where his heart – and soul - was.

Then, grasping the scimitar in one hand and the Chimera weapon in the other, he began – the Root held by a string of mana just floating in the water.

The scimitar did not even struggle as Jake began pulling a bit of its energy out. It was a usual process that returned excess energy to him after all. But once he really began taking, he felt the resistance. Jake pressed on as he dragged and pulled, feeling the curse energy enter his body, just like the process had described. Then, Jake did something even more extreme.

With the hand on the scimitar, Alchemical Flame activated. The weapon almost screamed as Jake felt the effects of the Sin curse and the struggle of the weapon. It almost attacked him as an instinctive act of survival but found no purchase. So it listened to Jake as he directed it towards a new vessel. It had never been that attached to the scimitar, to begin with.

The Chimera weapon was also a weapon well-aligned with the concept of consumption and Hunger. It had been wielded by vampires and could drink the vital energies of others just like the scimitar, making the curse feel right at home as the curse began infesting it.

Jake felt the connection be established as he hoped for. His mind was still cool as he was now over the “hard” part, at least when it came to the skill requirement. Now came the part where he would probably lose his head.

With the string of mana, he controlled the Root as he stabbed it into his own back. It hurt only a little, and not much happened as he did. He knew why, as the curse energy was passive. It was just passively within the Root, doing nothing and being useless.

But the second Jake tugged, he felt his body be flooded with foreign energy. It felt odd, and it was as if his emotions were amplified, both bad and good. He gritted his teeth as he channeled the energy from his back and into the Chimera weapon.

It ate it up as expected. Almost too enthusiastically as it wanted more, the Hunger curse having begun to take effect and exert control over the former vampire weapon. The scimitar was still slowly being burned as all of the Sin curse energy in it was transferred, Jake's body little more than an intersection of different curse energy.

With every second, it intensified. Jake was still able to hold calm, feeling the effects of the Serene Water on his mind. The marble from the King had yet to be used, but he had a feeling it would come.

Seconds turned to minutes as the curse energy was transferred, but he felt like he had barely made a dent in everything within the Root. There was so much to absorb it was ludicrous. Yet, with the exponential increase in the absorption rate of the Chimera weapon, it was only a matter of time.

Nearly an hour into the process, something changed. Jake felt the hand holding the scimitar close, and it felt as if he had grasped a handful of sand. The scimitar had turned to dust as the last shred of the Sin curse exited it. It went through his body as Jake inhaled even more of the water, not just through his mouth but his pores.

The rest of the power of the Sin curse entered the Chimera weapon, and now it truly became hungry. Jake became hungry. He felt like he needed more. Jake began absorbing all the water into his body. He felt like he was famished, an emotion he hadn't experienced in a long time.

Yet just as he was about to break out of his state of concentration, a warm glow emanated from his heart and protected his sanity. Jake knew it was the marble that had activated, and Jake used that moment of relief as he pushed everything to go faster.

His soul and mind were protected as he felt clear-headed. With both hands free, he grasped the Chimera weapon and activated the final phase. Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Something had to bring it all together, and what was better than the method of transmutation that had created the curse to begin with?

The weapon gladly received his energy as he began transmuting and corrupting it, consuming the curse energy in the process, making it all embrace the power of Sin. All of the water was finally absorbed into his body, as the sheer pressure of the curse energy broke the water vat apart. The ground around him began cracking as atmospheric mana was also pulled into the weapon.

Earth, wind, water, all sorts of affinities were forcefully absorbed, weakening the stone and thinning the air. The light dimmed as dark mana took its place, only to also be absorbed. A black hole of nothingness appeared as the curse hungered for hundreds of meters around him.

Jake pushed on more and more, until it was over. Not the ritual, but the power of the marble had been used up, and Jake suddenly felt a flood of emotions. The first of which was hunger, but then annoyance and anger as the weapon dared to try and consume some of his own resources. When he was already starving? How fucking dared it?

It could drink the fucking curse if it wanted; he didn't need that. Yet it didn't help sate Jake's own hunger. He needed something more. He had already consumed all the Serene Water, so he ripped out a barrel of normal water and emptied it as he drank more than his own bodyweight... but it was as if all the water simply evaporated and the mana within consumed.

More.

Jake kept up the transmutation process, but he felt restless. It wasn't like Jake completely lost control; it was more an unfightable urge to do something about the sheer feeling of wrongness he was experiencing. Anyone with Restless Legs Syndrome trying to sleep or some other physical or mental compulsion pre-system would understand. He could fight it for a bit, but he needed an outlet, or it would become absolutely unbearable.

So... he found an outlet.

He smashed the barrier he had put up himself as he stormed towards one of the holes in the ground that had not completely collapsed after his and the King's fight. He ran down and through it, smelling, feeling, and intuitively moving towards anything with vital energy.

Breaking through a few barriers of soil with large arcane explosions, Jake found an entrance to the network of tunnels made by the termites, and soon enough, one entered his sight. It didn't even have time to react as Jake ran over and smashed it with the metal orb that was the Chimera weapon.

Jake growled as enough logic entered his head to transform it into a sword as he ran on, finding another termite. And then another. He tore them apart one by one as he dove deeper and deeper, their levels growing slowly the further on he went through their tunnel network.

He just couldn't sit still as he kept using Touch of the Malefic Viper and infusing the power of the Root while fighting and slaying everything. Jake felt so fucking hungry as he dragged out everything from his storage space that was edible and even went as far as tearing off the flesh of the newly slain termites to try and sate his hunger, no matter how disgusting it was. But nothing helped besides just killing and absorbing the vital energy of other lifeforms... it didn't even like his own life energy.

But, it was not simply the vital energy it drained. It took all the energy it could from those it killed.

With every kill, the weapon grew stronger, and with every moment, the curse's influence took more hold of Jake. It didn't attack him. It didn't necessarily force him to do anything. It just amplified an emotion he already had.

Shortly, he was killing larger and larger termites. Peak E-grades began coming out of the walls and towards him as the termites knew there was an invader. The more powerful members of the colony would come too. Jake didn't need to think to know this, as this was simply how weak prey like this operated.

More.

Jake invited it all as he stormed through the termites like a whirlwind of blood, killing hundreds within only a dozen seconds. Nothing was left alive as he dove deeper, feeling something more nutritious further down.

More...

D-grades came, larger than any other termite, as they met the same fate. The tunnel network expanded, growing larger and denser as every step forced him into the mandibles of hundreds of insects.

More!

He kept killing, and soon, he felt as if something fell into place. The Chimera weapon had accepted all the curse energy it would take for now. Touch of the Malefic Viper continued as the weapon was far from complete, yet that is when he truly felt it.

The Root of Eternal Resentment was emptied of energy as it entered Jake's body and soul, the weapon simply unable to absorb even close to enough of it. Jake had majorly miscalculated... he had been far too efficient. Far too greedy to not let anything go waste.

A "ding!" entered his head as he knew the weapon had reached legendary rarity, but it was far from done. Oceans of curse energy still resided untamed and directionless in his soul, just waiting to be consumed.

The final thing Jake managed to do before he completely lost himself was deposit the Root of Eternal Resentment in his storage as Jake felt himself fall into a state of absolute bloodlust.

Casper was standing within a large cave network beneath the undead city, surrounded by magical scripts as he studied them and made some corrections here and there. Creating a dungeon was not easy, but only he could do it. Perhaps on the entirety of the Earth, he was the one closest, at least.

The Dungeon Core was a godsend as it allowed them to make a real dungeon. It was not just a fake dungeon that was little more than a separate space to explore... it was pretty much just a trial ground, and if someone entered and killed everything, then everything would be dead in there. So to make a fake dungeon, you needed to create an ecosystem of sorts. One could just call it glorified zoos where one could fight the animals instead of merely viewing them.

With the Core, he could make a real dungeon. One that created different dimensions, different realities for every group entering. It was a feat that required levels of magic even gods couldn't manage as it was more or less infinite creation.

To do this, he would have to make the dungeon first. He would have to find the monsters to place in there, create the environment, make the scenarios, and a slew of other things while staying within the ruleset of the system. He couldn't just make it completely free-form, as if he could, factions would just use them as cloning factories for certain expensive items – something the system seemed very aware of and had checks and balances to avoid.

One had to make it balanced, as balance was important in all kinds of creations.

As Casper stood there, focusing on his profession as a Dungeon Architect when he suddenly felt something from his class. A response from a skill primarily used to track down treasures.

Lyra also felt it as she shared his sensitivity towards curses, making her exit her locket. "What, what is that? Wait... it couldn't be..."

Casper also frowned as he felt it. A wave of cursed energy rolled across the surface of their planet, undetectable for all without the specific skills or senses to detect it, but Casper sure felt it. Others would too, it would just be felt and manifest in minor ways few would link to a curse.

It was powerful. More so than Casper had expected. Jake had just made something Casper wasn't sure should ever have been made or was ever meant to be wielded by a D-grade. But... to make it worse, Casper didn't just feel the aura of the curse. No, the curse energy felt familiar in that it had traces of Jake's aura in it, meaning he had done something Casper would for sure have warned him about: linked the curse to his own soul. Unintentional or not, it had been done.

That was how you forcefully evolved yourself into a monster.

“Let’s hope he knows what the fuck he is doing...”

Or is powerful enough to remain in control, at least.

Chapter 380 - Hunger

Barry had worked in the service industry for thirty years before the system apocalypse, as some had come to call it, happened. He had believed such a momentous event would have meant the end of his life or at least have severely changed it, but honestly? It was much the same as before, just a lot more relaxed as he didn’t need to fear burning himself while working the grill and didn’t need to try and balance shitty work hours and trying to get enough sleep in between grueling fourteen-hour shifts.

The best part was probably that he now was his own boss and even had his own small restaurant, having upgraded from a booth. He was primarily just selling his signature meat skewers – a specialty that had even been enjoyed by the city owner Lord Thayne – both at the booth and in the restaurant.

Now, there were also issues with running a restaurant, mainly that people didn’t really need to eat much anymore, if at all. E-grades still had to eat, especially at the lower end of E-grade, and the few F-grades that somehow still existed needed quite a bit of food. Still less than pre-system humans, but a good deal.

This meant those who came to eat did it for the pleasure or for the temporary stat boosts from the food. A lot of crafters frequented his place, but it was rare he was more than at fifty or sixty percent capacity, and that only happened if big parties came.

But... that day, something had been different. Barry had been snacking on his own creations a bit more than usual as he felt a rumbling in his stomach he hadn't for months. It wasn't the usual "oh, I can take a bite" kind of rumble, but the "I need food" kind of rumble.

He was hungry.

And he was not the only one. People began coming into the restaurant almost immediately, ordering food and putting him to work. Barry frowned as soon over 80% of the seating had been taken, and people kept coming, all talking about how they suddenly felt hungry and had an urge to eat.

It wasn't just his restaurant either. He saw out of the window that the guy across the street selling that heretical vegan stuff was also at full capacity, truly proving the desperation of the masses.

Back at his own place, customers just kept coming as soon no more seating was there, and they waited all the way out the door as Barry had his best day of business ever since opening.

An emergency meeting was being held as the governing body of Sanctdome was under heavy pressure. Jacob sat at the end of the table as the man in charge of the food supply explained the situation, all while failing to snack on something looking a bit like jerky.

Jacob had also failed to hold himself back as he had eaten a sandwich just before this meeting, and even now, he failed to restrain his desire to grab another just after.

"We are under significant pressure from several groups and parties as the kitchens have run out of food. Even the private sector is facing a shortage due to the sudden influx of customers... what is happening? Are we under attack by something?"

“Sir, there is signs of civil unrest, and many complain at the lack of proper preparation from our side... we need to do something, and fast, or we may face a legitimate crisis,” the man in charge of security explained while snacking on some fruit on the table. They had actually just been there for show, but only a few berries remained by now.

Jacob wracked his mind as the same issue was playing out in every single settlement of the Holy Church. Some places had enough food by themselves, but the megacity Sanctdomo was simply too big. They could normally handle the food situation, but suddenly everyone became hungry and wanted to eat something, nearly simultaneously.

The timing couldn't be any worse either as the System Store had just disappeared, making easy acquisition hard. Merchants had already been pressed for everything they had to sell, but they hadn't exactly banked on such a situation happening either.

“All we can do is damage control,” Jacob finally said as he prepared to head out and try to placate the masses before any true rioting and looting began.

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Similar scenes played out all over the planet. Cities found themselves facing an issue none had predicted as suddenly food became a much-needed commodity. Some merchants became rich, others cursed their own luck, while everyone was hungry and needed to eat.

The only ones spared were the Risen... for as undead, they did not require food at all. They still lived off mana and felt like they wanted to absorb a little more than usual, but it was something they easily handled.

Even beasts were affected as they did something rare: actually ate their prey. Predators left their dens and sought out victims to sate their hunger as fighting broke out all across the world. The corpses usually eaten by weaker lifeforms meant that they now also found themselves struggling as entire ecosystems faced unprecedented challenges.

This entire crisis continued, with everyone wondering what the cause of this strange occurrence was. Cities struggled, the ecosystem was in an uproar as beasts killed more than ever before. Many theories were made, but only a select few knew the true reason.

That it was all because Jake wanted to make a cool new weapon.

Carnage was all that was left in his wake. The once sprawling colony had become a wasteland of death and destruction as Jake tore through it, killing anything that moved in his path. He went deeper and deeper as he delved further down than perhaps any human had ever been before.

Only D-grades stood before him as Jake killed them. Giant insects the sizes of trucks, mandibles able to tear any pre-system metal apart effortlessly slaughtered wholesale.

Jake himself was barely conscious as he growled and tore foe after foe into pieces. A particularly massive termite suddenly shot up from beneath, but Jake naturally reacted in time as he had seen it coming through his sphere a long time ago.

Yet he let it consume him, as he even accelerated himself downwards to dodge the mandibles. Scales covered his body, and he soon found himself in a stomach full of acid that failed to do anything to his body. Jake began hacking away at the inner walls of the stomach as blood mixed with the acid. Every slash absorbed the insect's energy as it tried to spit him out and get rid of him.

It managed to do some things as spike-like teeth appeared on its inner walls, but all the wounds it made only made Jake bleed poisoned blood, speeding up its death.

Jake tore himself out of the body of the massive termite when his blade stopped absorbing vital energy as he ran forward to kill more.

Occasionally, Jake would get glimpses of clarity if the curse was momentarily sated after a big kill. It was only for a brief period, but every one of them was spent usefully.

The killing was needed to sate the blade... but he needed more. Jake could not continue as he was currently with the insects getting stronger. The last one had been level 160, and even if he had killed it relatively easily, he had still taken damage.

So to make up for any downtime, Jake tried to keep the blade fed. Natural treasures originally used to create vitality-increasing elixirs, herbs of various kinds, and even a few beast cores he found compatible had been consumed by the weapon.

Now, it was time to part with some items he was rather fond of.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifevine (Rare)] - The Lifevine of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. The Lifevine is a part of the main body of the fungus. Contains intense amounts of vital energy and is incredibly resilient. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations.

[Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza Lifecore (Epic)] - The Lifecore of an Indigo Fungus Mycorrhiza. Contains a massive amount of life affinity mana and vital energy. Can be used in a myriad of alchemical creations. Will grant a permanent increase to the Vitality stat if consumed.

Originally the plan was to make elixirs with them, but he was out of options. Jake consumed a potion as he simply used Alchemical Flame to melt down the Lifecore and let it drip unto the blade, as he felt it revel in the intense life energy. If Jake had consumed this himself, he would have gained a permanent increase to Vitality, but now it was just a drop in the pond.

After that, Jake had it consume the Lifevines. All of this allowed Jake to get a good half an hour of meditation in as soon, the hunger struck again. Jake tried to sit still... he really did, but he just had to go again.

It had already been nearly two full days at his point, as Jake once more fell into a half-conscious state, his rampage continuing. His only remaining mental faculties were used to loot everything he could come across, primarily every single core he could get from the insects.

Everything was instinct as he was little more than a well-oiled machine. Jake felt like he was just a passenger along the ride as he killed everything he came across. The deep caverns were fields of death as Jake deployed everything he had as long as it didn't get in the way of cutting things up.

The wings on his back pumped out poison mist. His blood was used as a weapon. It went on the blade, he punched something with a bloody fist, or he simply splattered it on his foe. Mana burned all around

him as arcane explosions blew up the tunnels to make them collapse, sometimes giving him a bit more time to finish a meal.

But no matter what he did, it was not enough. It was never enough. The hunger refused to subside no matter how much he killed or how much blood he spilled. It just kept wanting... to the level that he could nearly not keep up anymore.

For every second, it worsened, and soon Jake began to have genuine moments of blackouts. Moments where his vision went black, for him to only be aware again when suddenly he found himself standing on a mountain of corpses lacking an arm. Focusing for a moment, he consumed a potion as Jake tried to find a solution.

That is when he noticed...

The weapon is breaking.

Microscopic cracks covered it as Jake became fully aware: the Chimera Weapon was not powerful enough to contain the curse. He didn't know what would happen if it broke, and he didn't want to find out. But he couldn't stop feeding it.

More.

He needed something. A method, a way out. Just... something. He needed to improve it. A transmutation, an improvement, something. He racked his mind, searching for a solution.

Make it stronger...

Jake refused to see himself lose as his body exploded with arcane power, and standing on a mountain of corpses began yet another crafting session. Two items appeared floating around him as he kept pressing on with reckless focus and sheer willpower, even activating Pride. The two items in question were in no way considered cheap either.

[Nalkar Vampire Heart (Legendary)] – The heart of a powerful C-grade Nalkar Vampire. This type of vampire is a rare variant with extremely high innate abilities in illusion and mind magic. It often possesses a larger reserve of blood energy than most other vampires. The rarity is higher due to the high innate talent of the Nalkar Vampire that left behind this heart. Has many alchemical uses.

[Supreme Carbonic Focusing Catalyst (Legendary)] – This item is made of a rare type of carbon and is known to be able to bond and mix with most other materials in existence, making it incredibly potent as a catalyst in most crafting endeavors. This Carbonic Focusing Catalyst is of extremely high quality and has absorbed affinity-less mana to allow itself to grow for countless years, making it reach legendary rarity. Has a wide variety of uses in alchemical creations and will increase the power of most crafts where this item is used as a catalyst.

These would not be sacrificed to sate the curse... but make the vessel that inhabited it powerful enough to contain the curse. Jake, with only one arm, did the only natural thing he could as he summoned his cauldron and tossed the two items into it as well as a shitload of his own blood as he began the alchemy.

Hunger tore at him as Jake bit his own lips, making them bleed. He failed to stop himself from drinking his own blood. Needing something more, he even began feasting on the disgusting bodies of the termites. It all distracted him as Jake needed some solace. He needed to ground himself somehow, but it was just so hard.

He tried to focus on memories of the feeling he got from the Serene Water. He tried to focus on the deepest part of himself as he sought somewhere safe. Somewhere he was in total control... and it was a place he had been recently.

Pride shrank in on his body as its affected area became limited to only encompassing his own body. Jake willed himself not to move as he fought every urge to act and simply shut out all there was as he forced himself to meditate.

This time when he felt his vision turn black, it was by his own volition, as he entered a deeper state of concentration than he had ever gone before. He sat down on top of the many corpses, the sense of touch slowly disappearing. There were no smells, no taste, no hearing. Every single sense slowly faded and became nothing.

His body was torn and broken, and yet he felt calm for the first time, for there was nothing else to feel. When there were no stimuli... the hunger was suppressed. All that was left was focus as he entered a deeper state of meditation than ever before – both figuratively and metaphorically.

Skill Upgraded: [Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)] --> [Serene Meditation (Rare)]

Skill Upgraded: [Serene Meditation (Rare)]--> [Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)]

Jake found himself sitting within the empty space all by himself with only a cauldron between his legs. The cauldron was brimming with energy as the two legendary items mixed.

He held the Chimera Weapon in his one remaining hand as he willed it to become a ball of metal once more. He placed it carefully in the cauldron as he focused all of his attention on the crafting session, Touch of the Malefic Viper active on the cauldron as he merged the items, a relaxed smile on his face.

In the outside world, every action of his was mimicked, not by physical movement but through magic. He did not feel the outside world, yet he was aware even if every sense was cut off. He could not move his body in the outside world, yet his magic still responded. However, inside his Soulspace, he felt everything, even if he also knew the items were merely conjurations of his imagination.

The hunger was not gone... he could just handle it. It felt as if it was just someone else's hunger, and when he looked up inside his Soulspace, he saw the energy hanging above. Jake had never really explored this space, but he still felt intimately familiar with it, despite not knowing what he was actually there.

It was just bare ground with nothing anywhere. Except in the sky. Up there, curse energy whirled and dominated the atmosphere, yet it was unable to come down and truly influence Jake. It was also unable to influence a single item that was little more than a blip on the infinite landscape – a single drop of blood.

Needless to say, it was the drop of blood he had gained from the Malefic Viper and was the cornerstone of his Sagacity of the Malefic Viper skill. However, that drop was not what he cared about right now. It was all the curse energy above. Just by looking at it, he knew it was not meant to be there and that its existence within his Soulspace was proof he had fucked something up badly during the curse ritual. Which meant he needed to do something.

So... he would get rid of it.

Simply by willing it, the energy hanging above, pulsing in a dark red color, began slowly being pulled down as a whirlwind of power emerged. It touched down right in front of Jake, and into the open cauldron, he was sitting with. Jake was in perfect control as he began an odd mix of transmutation and crafting, unlike anything he had ever done before.

Back in the outside world, Jake just sat perfectly still with not a single muscle moving. His one hand on the cauldron subtly glowed with the effects of Touch of the Malefic Viper as his magic moved. Everything he was experiencing in his Soulspace was merely metaphysical references to what he was actually doing. Metaphors of reality, one could also call it. But when it came to magic, such concepts often had blurred lines, as it was difficult to determine what was and what wasn't truly happening.

The only thing that was certain was that the aura of the cauldron was growing with every second. That a weapon with an aura above anything their planet had ever seen was being born. That Jake's act of creation was affecting everything globally. That what was doing was so dangerous that not a single creature dare get near.

Not even the C-grade dwelling deep beneath in the bottommost chamber of the hive.