

## Hunter 381

### Chapter 381 - Eternal Hunger

The feeling of absolute control was exhilaration, yet Jake barely felt anything from it. It was an odd paradox that even his own feeling of happiness and sense of power was suppressed by his own skill, but perhaps it was ultimately for the best as it allowed Jake to stay focused.

All perception of time disappeared as Jake simply worked on creating the weapon. Within the cauldron - both on the outside and inside his Soulspace - the curse still grew in power as it absorbed the energy of the Root that had been transferred into Jake's own soul.

Jake had quickly realized his mistake was to absorb the power of the Root into himself rather than pour it directly into the Chimera weapon, but in his defense, he had been very, very hungry and wanted to consume everything and anything. So with the curse energy of the Root had been right there, he hadn't really been thinking.

He was not afraid anything bad would happen from having it in his Soulspace. This was within his soul, where actual power did not matter anymore. The power of the Soulspace and the power of a person were not directly linked but had more to do with the total level of one's Records.

If one used the same comparison that the Records were the cup and experience the water used to fill it, Jake had a really fucking huge cup. This isn't to say Jake's soul was "stronger," as this strength was still based on his own total power.

That is why the King could still damage Jake's soul. Because he never damaged the Soulspace directly. The Soulspace was the Truesoul, untouched by anything and anyone. Only the user themselves could possibly affect it, and even then, it was ultimately the domain of the system itself. All Jake saw was his own perception of his Truesoul.

If everything around the Soulspace was shattered, leaving only the Soulspace itself, then there was no Jake to dwell within. His Truesoul – or this Soulspace – would still exist; there would just be no one to perceive it besides the system itself. Without this Soulspace’s connection to the outside world through Jake himself, none would be able to find it. In fact, this space likely didn’t “exist” anywhere at all, and if it did, it was somewhere only the system itself could see and was aware of.

But... back at Jake and his work, things were progressing as expected. The curse energy floating in the sky of his Soulspace was being pulled down faster than before, which translated to Jake infusing more of it into the cauldron in the outside world.

A part of Jake knew that what he was doing would not necessarily end up leading to an ideal outcome, as while he was calm right now, he would have to face the brunt force of the curse upon exiting meditation. But, as with all other things, Jake would handle that when it became relevant.

Days passed as Jake just sat there, the bodies rotting all around in the real world. Jake’s poison mist mixing with the corpses created a toxic atmosphere that kept away other would-be predators while even giving Jake a bit of mana regeneration.

Not everything was fine and dandy, though, because the curse of hunger still drained Jake as he sat there. Without outside energy being given, Jake was constantly having his vital energy absorbed too. Under usual circumstances, this would mean certain death with his inability to exit his current state of meditation... but Jake was a cheat.

Every single one of his senses were cut off. Every connection to the outside world was gone – at least every connection that could be cut off. Because just like when he spoke to the King in his Soulspace, he could still feel the outside world courtesy of his Sphere of Perception. The fact it was unaffected by the meditation skill was one of its hidden bonuses, and now that his meditation had become even more extreme, the bonus just got better.

In summary: Jake could use his sphere to still chug down a potion every single hour to not have his own transmutation kill him.

As time passed, the sky in the Soulspace began clearing up. The curse energy had soon entered the weapon wholly, and Jake felt that the weapon had fully integrated – or eaten – the legendary Nalkar Vampire Heart, all with helps from the Catalyst that had made this entire process possible. It had truly been a wonderous item and had even helped smoothen the curse energy absorption.

Everything finally came together as Jake felt the moment it was complete.

Energy suddenly exploded out of the Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity as the black metal orb flew out of it. A loud crackling was heard as the cauldron distorted and now had several cracks in it, with Jake himself being blasted back and hitting the wall like a ragdoll.

He didn't even react as he was still within his Soulspace, where a transformation was also happening. Gone was the cauldron as only the black metal ball floated there, now giving off an entirely new aura. At the same time, he felt the influx of energy not from inside the space itself but coming from the outside.

During the ritual, the curse had been powerful enough to send a wave of pure curse energy across the planet, and now that energy was being returned and absorbed. It had been amplified by the many people it had affected during the time the ritual had taken place.

The feeling of hunger from over a billion humans, tens of billions of beasts, and creatures in the trillions entered the black metal orb - entered directly into Jake's Soulspace. The sheer energy and the weapon itself seemed to come alive within Jake's soul as something entirely new was born.

Suddenly, out of the ball grew an entirely black sludge-like appendage, followed by another as the weapon floated up in the air, as more sludge-like growth appeared. Arms, legs, mouths in the millions, a creature out of a horror novel was slowly being given form within Jake's Soulspace, already growing larger than any mountain on Earth within seconds.

It was a figure so vast and so powerful Jake would have no chance to fight it in the real world. If it had been an actual creature, he did not doubt it would have been B or maybe even A-grade. It sure held the power of one as it finally stopped growing, now larger than even some smaller celestial bodies like the moon.

Jake understood. The abomination was Records given form, a representation of the curse itself. All of the hunger, all of the influence it wished to exert. Jake knew it had come to devour him and make him one with it, just like it consumed everything else eternally.

This was the final part of the ritual. The one where the curse was either given its own form and life, becoming an independent creature... or the part where it was suppressed and made part of Jake. He had created the soul connection to the curse himself, and now it tried to use that connection to become him.

"I guess this is where I am forcefully evolved into some cursed monstrosity as my own Records are overwhelmed by that of the curse and the weapon," Jake muttered, still sitting on the ground, staring up at a figure infinitely larger than himself.

At least, that is how this would usually go. The thing is... Jake had been in this kind of situation before. Back then... when he fought scale-Jake as he called him. Back then, it was the exact same scenario; this one was just a little more dangerous.

Jake had gotten stronger since then - his Records had grown. Not that it mattered.

It wouldn't have been able to do shit to him even back then.

Because, sadly for the monstrosity, it had met an even more frightening monster within his own domain. It had met the Primal Hunter within his own territory.

“Sit.”

The monstrosity was forcefully dragged to the ground as it smashed into the empty landscape, lying prone as it failed to move. It was still evolving even now, and soon it began taking on a form that made a bit more sense to Jake as he smirked.

“I guess there is some of that Chimera DNA in the weapon with Chimera in the name after all.”

Jake saw it struggle as he casually stood up and walked closer, the form of the Chimera shrinking every second. It did so as its power was compressed from trying to fight back, though Jake guessed “trying” was the wrong word. The apparition before him didn't really have an ego. Maybe it would have one after a long period passed like the anti-vampire curse in Yalsten, but that was never going to happen now.

Actually, it was never going to happen as it would just have hi-jacked Jake and distorted him as a person to create a new ego. Quite insidious, but such were cursed.

Back in the real world, the orb was still hanging in mid-air, giving off a frightening aura, almost waiting for the confrontation to be over as Jake lay prone at a wall. The scene was juxtaposed with the domination happening within the Soulspace.

Jake began walking forward, every step creating mounting pressure as the Chimera got weaker and weaker. It began trying to consume the ground below itself but failed. It then tried to find something else to consume, and finally, its eyes landed on the one other thing besides Jake in his entire Soulspace.

“Bad call, buddy,” Jake commented as he allowed it to run for the singular drop of blood floating far above. He wanted to see what would happen, but honestly, it was a bit disappointing as the Chimera just closed its largest of over ten maws on the drop, only to harmlessly phase through.

At least he thought it had just harmlessly faced through until the entire thing began being eroded by just what little remnants of Records the curse managed to touch, forcing Jake to quickly intervene.

“No ruining my curse,” Jake said as he simply willed for the erosion to stop. The drop of blood was without will and didn’t fight it as Jake put a stop to it - only for the moronic curse Chimera to try and eat the drop again.

Jake stomped down as the entire creature was smashed into the ground. Jake then opened his arms as strings of arcane mana fired out from everywhere and bound the Chimera up in a cocoon of highly stable arcane energy.

He considered if he should do anything more but decided against it. To crush this apparition would potentially have negative side effects. So instead, he simply walked over to it and made sure it was well and nicely sealed.

Having the cursed creature within his soul was maybe a bit unsettling... but Jake was fine with it. Especially with his new meditation skill, which he finally checked out.

[Serene Soul Meditation (Epic)] - Enter a state of meditation, separating your soul from your physical body as you enter your Soulspace. While in meditation, regenerate stamina and mana significantly faster. While in meditation, all connections to the outside world are entirely cut off, and no outside stimuli can force you out of meditation. While in Serene Soul Meditation, you are calmer than usual and have far better control of your own emotions. Increases control of all energies while in Serene Soul Meditation. Beware that spending too long within your Soulspace may have adverse effects.

Jake read it over and nodded along. Him not upgrading his meditation skill before this was a travesty. Honestly, it shouldn't have been that hard if he had just focused on it, but he had just been fine with Thoughtful Meditation.

Now, this new version was quite the upgrade, but it also had downsides. Compared to the normal meditation and even Thoughtful Meditation that only limited perception severely, this one just cut it off entirely.

Someone could walk up to someone meditating with this skill and kill them without them even waking up. Jake had to assume those with a variant of it had to use advanced arrays or have someone with special skills to contact them while in any kind of Soul Meditation.

He could only assume, as naturally none of that applied to him. He could still see outside with his sphere, and he was pretty sure his danger sense would also still activate to wake him up. One really had to love Bloodline shenanigans.

Closing his eyes, Jake prepared to shift himself back to the real world once more, still minding the warning to not stay in the Soulspace too long.

Once he did so, all Jake's emotions, perception, and, more importantly, hunger returned.

In front of him still floated the black ball that was his new weapon. Jake gritted his teeth as he motioned for it to come to him. Before, Jake had been entirely dominated by the curse energy, but now? Now Jake could deal with it somewhat.

Holding it in his hand, he transformed it into a black sword the same design as his Nanoblade had been – with a long thin blade and a small handle. He admired it as he felt an intimate connection with the blade as he knew it hungered.

And after identifying the blade, it became clear:

It always hungered.

[Eternal Hunger (Mythical)] – A weapon born of eternal hunger - a living sin of consumption, forever starving, forever seeking sustenance. Given form by the [Redacted] Hunter, this new myth still holds properties of its Origin as a weapon created by vampires from the core of a Chimera, allowing it to change shape and adapt to the will of its master. This weapon is forever bound to its creator through their souls and will grow as it consumes. Any attack made with this weapon will absorb energy from the target. Foes slain by the owner of this weapon will have their souls absorbed. Can consume absorbed souls. Take pride as you wield hunger incarnate. Enchantments: Curse of Eternal Hunger. Soul drinker. Soul Consumption. Requirements: Soulbound

After reading it, Jake cackled a bit to himself, not entirely sure if it was because of the curse still influencing him or if it was just his genuine reaction. “Isn’t this just more evil than before?” he muttered.

There were a lot of things to address. This was the highest rarity Jake had ever seen outside of non-godly items was the most obvious one, as he guessed mythical was what came after legendary. There was also the fact that it directly mentioned he was the maker in the description by calling him the Primal Hunter – even if it had somehow redacted that part. Then there was the fact that it could now consume souls, something the original Scimitar of Debauchery could also do.

Honestly, the description didn’t look that complicated, but by just holding it, Jake knew that what he was wielding was a catastrophe given form. The sheer curse energy sealed within the weapon, and Jake himself, was enough to threaten the entire planet if released.

It was also clear that Jake could in no way use the weapon to its full power. Far from it. In fact, him sealing the Chimera inside his Soulspace was the only reason Jake could form coherent thoughts in the real world and not be busy trying to consume anything and everything in existence.

Being done with initial inspections, Jake finally opened his system messages. He saw the notifications of the new Meditation skill, but before that, he saw the weapon be upgraded to legendary rarity. He had not gained anything special from that one besides experience. But finally, at the very bottom of his notifications, he saw what he had been looking for:

The notification of when he had completed the weapon. With it came the usual experience, and to his delight, a title.

But when he read the title in question, Jake wasn’t sure what to think.

[Myth Originator] – Successfully bring a Mythical rarity weapon into existence while still in D-grade. A new myth has been realized through you, and henceforth, all creations made by you will be by one who gave birth to a new myth.

“What the hell does that even mean...” Jake muttered. He had hoped for a stat-giving title or something like that but had just gotten this vague-ass stuff. Was it good? Probably... but it wasn't what he had been hoping for or even expected.

Then again... it wasn't like when Jake had made his own skill. This was just him transforming an existing one. Jake could compare it to the difference between when Jake upgraded a rare skill to a legendary one through his Bloodline to make Moment of the Primal Hunter and upgrading an ancient-rarity “of the Malefic Viper skill” to legendary. Both upgraded skills, but one was done entirely by Jake, while the other was not.

Jake wanted to keep examining his gains, but his restlessness grew as he stood there. It had been a long time since the weapon had killed anything, and Jake quickly became aware of exactly how long he had spent inside his Soulspace.

Eighteen days had passed since Jake entered it, and Jake was hungry. Eternal Hunger was hungry, and to fully sate it, there was more killing to be done.

Thus Jake stormed forth, this time his head clear enough to make it an efficient hunt.

Jake had naturally gained levels but didn't go through them right away. He just quickly tossed all his points in Agility as he put off everything else to kill and consume.

Chapter 382 - Progress Through Cursed Slaughter

For over three weeks, a crisis had shaken the planet. It quickly became known as the Great Famine, where suddenly all living things on Earth felt unbearable hunger. The first few days were the worst by far before many became more used to the feeling and found ways to cope.

The predominant opinion was that it was some part of the system. A trial or a hidden event or something to test humanity. The only problem with this theory was that it had affected every living being and not just humans. When it then suddenly just stopped one day, people were just left more confused.

Only a select few people on the planet actually knew what had happened. Casper knew but didn't share with anyone, and Miranda had an inkling as Jake had informed her of his plans before leaving. As for everyone else? Well, it was difficult to figure it out. All kinds of divination into the issue were met with a wall, and no gods gave any information to their believers, only strengthening the belief it was system-imposed. Some did figure out it was related to a curse, but the only high level curse mage anyone knew of was Casper, and all their probing found him busy with the dungeon.

In the end, with it disappearing, it just became another oddity of the new world. As these weeks passed, the many factions had begun to find ways to deal with the curse with time. However, the economic and reputational damage to many of the larger factions or those who had mismanaged the crisis was unquestionable. The hardest hit had been the Holy Church by far.

Any strategist would agree that if this entire scenario dubbed the Great Famine had been an attack on the Church, it was one excellently done.

As for the true culprit? Well, he had been busy playing with his new weapon.

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Jake sat leaning back against the cave wall as he breathed heavily. He looked down at his legs – or what was left of them – as he groaned a bit while waiting for them to heal. Asshole termites had drilled up from below and attacked him while he was already fighting two massive termites, one of them level 181 and the other 183.

He had no idea how far down he was by now. Probably a few hundred kilometers? It was hard to say, and the tunnel network only kept expanding. Each tunnel was more than twenty meters in diameter, the walls magically reinforced by the termites.

Entire biodomes found below the ground had been consumed by the termites, leaving nothing behind. Jake went through them as he left death in his wake, and by now, he was beginning to feel a bit more like himself. The constant hunger subsided both because Jake had learned to cope and due to the weapon beginning to be sated.

The curse's influence was still there, and Jake had a feeling it wasn't going to go away. Eternal Hunger was never going to be fully sated no matter how much he killed. However, it would become sated enough for Jake to ignore its constant nagging for more sustenance.

Jake also learned that after it had been fully created, it had become a lot easier to feed. It ate borderline anything. It consumed his own mana, health, and stamina, it absorbed mana from the environment passively, and any natural treasure or useless item he found was also happily eaten.

But... the best way to feed it was still killing. After the upgrade, it now didn't only absorb vital energy, but all kinds of energy. Stamina, mana, health, probably even unique resources that something like the Risen had. But the absorption rate did not only increase because of the energy it absorbed during the killing but also because of what happened once a foe was slain: the Souldrinker effect.

Jake had wondered how someone like that man Donald had managed to bring the Scimitar to epic-rarity and made it as powerful as it was. He was pretty strong for his level, but only due to his weapon, and clearly, he had made it a lot stronger since the day he got it.

The explanation had been the souls all along. Jake had happily seen that effect gone when he transmuted it the first time, but he could see the worth in it now. Souls contained a type of energy that Jake couldn't quite identify, but he knew it was good for the weapon.

Now, this led Jake to another discovery. To absorb energy, Jake had to use the weapon. But to absorb a soul? Nothing specified he had to actually use Eternal Hunger to do that. As long as Jake slew a foe, the soul would be absorbed, and Jake had only learned that just now as he had been forced to pull out his bow when the situation got tricky.

It was an awesome discovery and greatly increased the viability of Eternal Hunger. Another thing that improved the viability was the fact that he could "get rid of it" entirely by storing it not within his storage space but his own Soulspace.

Maybe it was because the mythical weapon was intricately tied to his soul, but he could put it in there with no problem. Jake also discovered he could do the same with the mask, though that didn't have any practical applications as he could already make it invisible. Well, maybe it could be a defensive measure against the King in the future if the Unique Lifeform could influence him through it, but that didn't seem like a danger at the current time.

When Eternal Hunger was in his Soulspace, he didn't feel anything from it as it was utterly suppressed. It merged with the large Chimera thing in there, which was nicely sealed up in arcane strings. He was fully aware that the Eternal Hunger Jake used now could barely display a fraction of its true power, partly because he kept the Chimera suppressed, and that was just fine.

That just meant he had a worthy weapon for a long time to come as it could grow with him.

Jake shook his head as he felt the potion cooldown expire, and he downed a health potion before closing his eyes to relax, entering meditation. Just the usual kind of meditation, not Soul Meditation. As with other skill upgrades, he could still use prior versions, including the Serene Meditation he had gained and briefly skipped over. That one just allowed him to be far more relaxed while in meditation and even regenerated more resources than Thoughtful Meditation.

He checked the time and saw it had now been around two weeks since Jake made Eternal Hunger. The thought of returning to Haven soon was still there, and Miranda had even contacted him using her special skill only to confirm he was fine. She had apparently tried to do so a few times earlier, but that had been during Jake's crafting, so he had not even noticed. Jake had told her that he would return soon as long as he felt like he wasn't a danger to the city.

Even now, he still felt a sudden compulsion to consume at random times when he wielded Eternal Hunger, and if that happened while in the middle of Haven with humans around? Jake didn't know if he would lose concentration and casually kill someone. This was why he stayed... to hone his control. It got better for every day that passed, so soon he would return.

He also needed to return because he had a major issue... his Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity was damaged. It was still useable, but it had cracks in it and leaked mana, making it dangerous and wasteful to use. He was amazed at somehow having broken the item that seemed completely unbreakable, but that was mythical items for ya. He wasn't sure how to fix it, but he would have to look around if it was possible once he got back, and if it wasn't fixable, Jake would have to switch to the epic rarity cauldron he had also bought. The one with the ability to transform into other affinities. It wasn't as good, and Jake hadn't really used it much because of that, but it was still a viable option.

Focusing on more positive things, he opened up his many notifications gained during this long period. He saw tens of thousands of kill messages, the majority of them done on insects that did not give any

experience, but the further he got down into the hive and on the notification list, the more he began to gain something.

Most termites gave shit experience, but he did encounter some variants who put up a good fight, primarily through some gimmick.

Swallowers did as it said on the can and were giant versions of the termites like the one that had eaten him before. Jake had a feeling the primary objective of that termite was to bring food deeper into the hive.

Next up, he had the soldiers and workers. Both basic termites and what he killed primarily. Then there were ones that shot acid called Spitters and finally the type he had just killed two of called Queen's Guards.

\*You have slain [Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 181] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*You have slain [Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 183] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

Both were larger versions of the normal termites with wings on their backs. Killing them, Jake knew he was closer to the true heart of the hive, and once he was recuperated, he would head in and explore. The C-grade he felt somewhere below was still a good distance away, so he wouldn't risk running into that one. But one could still take a peek, right?

With all of these kills came a plethora of cores. The cores these insects gave were not Beastcores, but were instead called Ectognacores.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard Ectognacore (D-grade)] - An Ectognacore left behind by a D-grade Isoptera Queen's Guard, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs.

While the name was different, it was the same shit. Of these cores, Jake now had well over a thousand from slain d-grades. One also had to consider many D-grades didn't even drop a core, proving just how much of a rampage Jake had gone on.

And such killing had naturally also resulted in levels for Jake's class.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 144 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

...

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 149 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

Jake had gained six levels, and while that didn't seem like a lot, one had to consider how little time total Jake had actually spent killing as well as the relative weakness of his foes. Jake had spent less than three weeks actually slaying things, which was still more than a level every few days. That was good considering how "low risk" this entire thing had been. Shit, the only reason Jake had ever been in trouble was due to his reckless approach due to the hunger and nearly only sticking to melee. That sentiment had begun to change recently as he got lower, and he had a feeling things would be more interesting from here on out.

Now, one could argue the gains in his class were disappointing. Jake wouldn't even necessarily disagree as a good fight less than an hour long could reward a few levels against a worthy foe. Truthfully, the fights against the termites were not fun either. No, the only true fighting Jake had done was the internal one with the curse, and maybe the most recent one.

But... it wasn't progress for his class that had been the true gain from this adventure. It was inarguable that what Jake had done was ultimately a transmutation. He had made Eternal Hunger... and the system recognized that with the title and experience.

\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 139 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

...

\*'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 148 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

Ten levels were gained from transmuting the mythical item. Well, eight of them came from the mythical item, and two of them had come when Jake made it legendary rarity. The many levels in his class and profession naturally resulted in plenty of race levels too.

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 141 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

...

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 148 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

Eight race levels total. Jake had progressed through nearly a tenth of D-grade incredibly swiftly. This was the kind of thing Villy had warned him about doing: grinding out fast levels and making an unstable path. The thing is, that was not what Jake had done at all; in fact, he had probably gained more Records for future growth than experience points and levels.

As mentioned, all of his Free Points had already gone into Agility. All in all, this investment had resulted in Jake getting a lot stronger in every way, and all the levels also naturally meant one other thing... he could now use his cool new pants from the Treasure Hunt.

[Trousers of Second Wind (Ancient)] – A pair of trousers created for a noble son of a King of Blood once upon a time to keep his child alive. The trousers themselves are made of powerful leather of an unknown origin but are incredibly resilient to all kinds of attacks. The enchantments placed upon them only serve to protect the wearer. In a time of emergency, the trousers can trigger a Second Wind, infusing the body with extremely active vital energy to heal wounds. If damaged, the trousers can self-repair by absorbing blood. Enchantments: +300 Toughness, +300 Vitality. Second Wind. Blood Absorption. Requirements: lvl 145+ in any humanoid race

Jake had put them on already a good while ago and had even used the enchantment once. It was still recharging now, which was fine with him. As for the effect? It was a bit like just consuming an extra health potion except worse in every way. Still, a worse extra health potion was better than no extra health potion.

This meant Jake could now use all the equipment he had gained from the Treasure Hunt, which felt nice. He could also now fully use all the Agility he got from his equipment as his old pants had Agility on them while his new ones didn't.

He still got 800 Agility from his gear, the second-highest after the 975 in Perception.

Finally, as he sat there and regenerated, he chose to address another elephant in the room he had held off doing anything about.

\*Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper profession skills available\*

He had waited with it till now through sheer willpower. He could have picked it earlier, but he had waited very purposefully as he wanted to pick it while in a more stable condition. Also... it was honestly hard for him to just sit down and go through the options for long enough to not feel like he was rushing it and just hurried to pick a skill in frustration. After initiation of the process, he had to pick a skill after all.

So, without further ado, it was skill selection time.

Chapter 383 - Skills & Paths

The methodology had been established, and there was nothing to explain related to Jake's approach as he began the process of selecting a new skill. As dictated by proper practice, he would begin from the first – and lowest rarity one – on the list.

Firstly, he was faced with one related to contemporary happenings but with a disappointing rarity.

[Condense Curse Marble (Uncommon)] – Make the intangible powers of curses material as you forcefully condense their energy into a physical shape. Allows the alchemist to create Curse Marbles of curse energy. Must be able to fully control the curse energy in order to condense it into a curse marble. Be aware that based on the nature of the curse, it may be harder to restrain and keep sealed within the marble. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Condense Curse Marble based on Willpower.

Jake wasn't sure what to think about this one besides... why would he ever want that? Not to be misunderstood, Jake understood why someone else would want it as it allowed them to condense curse energy and add it into alchemical creations, but why would Jake want it?

The answer is he wouldn't, so he moved on.

[Distill Powder (Rare)] - Sometimes, poison can be more than a liquid. Perhaps it is in the air itself. Allows the alchemist to distill a concocted poison, creating powder with similar effects. Mixing the powder of different distilled poisons will work synergistically if possible. If the powder is burned, release the poisonous effect into the air. The poison powder's effects and nature depend on the poison distilled and potentially powder-mixes. Adds an increase to the effect of the powder based on Wisdom.

Another blast from the past. Jake had passed over this skill back the first time he was offered it as uncommon-rarity, and to be honest, not much seemed to have changed except he could now mix powders to make new kinds of poison. Kinda neat and definitely something he would consider looking into doing.

He just didn't need a skill for it, as he already had Sagacity. Due to that, he decided to move on down the list. The following skill jumped from rare to ancient rarity and was the first interesting one.

[Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Ancient)] – As a master of your own path, the power of your Soulspace and authority of self is unquestionable. Grants knowledge of and allows the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist to perform rituals pertaining to the soul. Soul Rituals must be performed both within the Soulspace and the real world. As a forger of your own path, Records infused during any soul ritual will hold more weight. Effects of the ritual are based on the nature of the ritual performed as well as the materials used during the ritual. All rituals will scale with Willpower in addition to other stat bonuses applied according to the nature of the ritual performed.

Soul ritualism was a term Jake had met a few times during research, but he still wasn't entirely clear what it was about. Well, basic deduction dictated it had something to do with the soul, but soul magic in itself was just an incredibly broad realm of magic if it could even be called that. Mental magic was technically a form of soul magic but was most often not classified as such.

Curse magic was, too, due to how it affected the soul. Yet, again, it was often not put in the same classification as pure soul magic. Soul magic, when actually called soul magic, tended to be unbelievably pure and messed directly with the soul without any intermediate layering. The King directly draining Jake's resources and breaking down his soul layers was an example of the purest form of soul magic.

Interestingly enough, the classes that most often used soul magic were healer-variants. Many of them had ways to directly shield souls, and with the soul shielded, it could also block other magic that interacted with the soul through some intermediate means. Heck, as health points were part of the soul, one could argue anything that did damage interacted with the soul.

However... perhaps the purest form of soul magic was contracts or unions. Like the Union Oath Jake had made with Sylphie, the bond created between an individual and any Soulbound item, the bond created between Jake and the King, or anything in the same vein. This skill would allow Jake to probably make bonds like that... though he would for sure make it more like Sylphie's. To be fair, he probably wouldn't do them at all. Unless maybe it was in relation to the next type of customary soul rituals:

Soul Nurture rituals.

Jake had already participated in one such ritual before when he helped Sylphie. Of course, that one had been directed by Mystie using her own magic, but Jake had been a big part of it. Jake had actually considered asking Mystie for help when he wanted to awaken the Bee Queen and maybe still would, but he was also aware he would have to take the lead on that one.

It wasn't that Jake didn't think Mystie would be helpful... he just didn't think she was strong enough. The Bee Queen would be born at level 100 and already be a fully-fledged D-grade right out of the egg, and the one doing the ritual had to be able to really influence it, and Jake believed he was the only one capable of that.

This did not make the skill a necessity. Jake did not know many things about the skill, and even if the rarity was good, it wasn't exactly legendary. Also, everything it did, he could learn himself by studying and using Sagacity down the line. It was a hard choice, but there was some pull, especially the thing about his Records holding more weight.

Either way, he moved on, and next up was...

Okay... this just seems like a big no-no.

[Supreme Curse Assimilation (Legendary)] – To others, a curse is a restriction and a demerit, but to you, it is merely another method to grow your own power. Embrace them as they embrace you. Allows the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to assimilate curses with his soul, gaining far more control of the curse energy related to any curse assimilated. Increases the potency and effect of all curses wielded by the alchemist when infused into Soulbound items. Allows the alchemist to consume curses to rejuvenate himself. Strengthens the bond between the alchemist and assimilated curses, allowing either part to affect the other more effectively.

If Jake read that correctly – which he was pretty sure he did – then this skill would allow Jake to far better use curses in any aspect of his life... but it would also allow the curses to use Jake in far more aspects of their cursed lives, making this solidly a bad idea to pick.

He was certain someone like Casper would absolutely fucking love a skill like this and probably even had one similar to it. Jake would find it a bit funny if he were offered a better one than his mate, though, even if this wasn't really related to actually using a curse, but just getting better at merging with them.

Jake already had enough problems dealing with the influence of the curse, so bonding with it further seemed like a great way to lose control.

Hence, he moved on... to more curse stuff.

[Curse Attunement (Unique)] - You have shown yourself able to control and remain dominant over the harsh emotional energy of curses, allowing you to far more easily manipulate it. Transform a portion of your mana, health, and stamina to permanently become curse energy, empowering and reducing the cost of all curse-related skills and abilities. This energy intrinsically feeds off and amplifies emotions while often doing soul damage to your target. Also allows the user to more transform all other energy sources into pure curse energy far more easily.

This was Jake's second time seeing an attunement skill. The first time was all the way back during the Forgotten Sewers dungeon, where he had been offered the Dark Attunement skill. Back then, he had not chosen it, and he wasn't going to take this one... but the implications of it even being offered mattered.

One can only be offered an attunement skill to an affinity one has an incredibly high level of compatibility with. Jake could, as an example, easily use a bit of fire magic and even some water and

earth magic if he tried, but he did not have high compatibility with any of those affinities. The only one Jake had experienced he had such a high affinity with so far was dark... and now apparently curses?

Was Jake really naturally talented with curses? What did that even mean? Curses weren't really an affinity as much as they were a concept. There was no curse mana or curse stamina or such like with other affinities. There was just curse energy.

To pick this skill would be Jake permanently choosing the path of a curse user, which was something Jake had no intentions of doing. Even if it was a path that Jake was compatible with.

A part of him understood why he was compatible. Jake had spent his entire life learning to control his own emotions and impulses due to the Bloodline. His approach had been to simply mute everything, which honestly hadn't ended very well as Jake had only a handful of positive memories of his life before the system. Shit, he had muted huge aspects of the entire Bloodline at some point to the level of it needing to be awakened in the tutorial.

This seemed to have led to high compatibility with curses. However, this compatibility also came with risk. Perhaps Jake could become a damn strong curse user, perhaps even become able to utterly dominate curses somehow, but right now, all it would lead to was issues.

Oh, and also, Jake really didn't like curses. They felt a bit icky to him. Arcane magic was way better anyway.

Jake looked over the entire list a bit and considered a few skills he had been offered prior but ultimately decided to just go with Soul Ritualism of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist.

The moment he picked the skill, Jake felt the knowledge begin to enter his head as Jake closed his eyes and reveled in the influx of information for a few moments while also waiting for his body to fully heal.

Once he was back in top form, it was time to explore a bit further down the hive and maybe, just maybe, take a little peek and stab at the C-grade lording over it.

Vilastromoz and Duskleaf stood together, both having diverted a bit of their attention to what Jake had been up to, as the Viper had failed to hold back his curiosity. Usually, people would be careful when performing risky experiments or rituals, and if they discovered a flaw or it went in a direction that was too unexpected, they preferred to abandon it entirely, lest they risk long-term consequences or even death.

This was doubly true when dealing with something as volatile and dangerous as curses.

Yet, as always, Jake had acted without hesitation and refused to abandon what he was doing. He had taken a huge risk and come out on top yet again. The Viper was beginning to think it truly was happening a bit too often to be a coincidence, and once more, the only explanation he could find was the Bloodline... or perhaps more accurately, the insane level of synergy between Jake's entire personality, mindset, drive, ability, and Bloodline. As with most things, it was hard to determine if these traits came courtesy of the Bloodline or if they were simply who he was.

"A novel but effective application of his Soulspace to suppress the emotional aspects of the curse. Most certainly risky, but after the suppression and successful absorption of a drop of your blood, it should not be surprising he was able to," Duskleaf nodded along as he had observed Jake as he transmuted and created the weapon.

"You see no cause for concern? Merging with such a curse while only in D-grade isn't generally recommended," Vilastromoz asked his disciple.

“Perhaps, but I doubt it will ever result in a complete takeover of his Records,” Duskleaf shook his head. “At worst, he would temporarily transform, resulting in a less than fortunate path to C-grade for those around him. Maybe he would do something a bit akin to what you did to your own planet? Such a path holds a lot of value, and it isn’t like the loss of a minor planet like the one he is on would affect anything in the long run.”

The Viper smirked. “Not sure how Jake would feel about it.”

Duskleaf just shrugged. “He’ll get over it. Those powerful enough to matter would survive, and those too weak or unwise to avoid him would be no loss of consequence anyway. Doubt any but a few on his planet will be alive in a few thousand years anyway.”

“You keep forgetting, Jake is only a few decades old. His perspective is still narrow and grounded in how he perceived reality before the system,” Vilastromoz chuckled. “But I do agree, it would be of little consequence in the long term, even if the effect on his path would be interesting. He is already far more emotional and impulsive than most so-called geniuses out there. He takes risks with glee.”

Not that the Viper necessarily saw that as a bad thing. Hesitation and doubt were some of the biggest threats to one’s path, no matter how powerful one became. The moment you believe you can’t do something, the chances are you can’t... but the opposite was also true - If you genuinely believed you could do something, the chances of it happening increased. Not only due to psychological reasons but also simply due to how the system worked. Willpower was a wondrous stat, and the system had a tendency to reward those daring.

“Making a mythical item in mid-tier D-grade is indeed not something done without risk,” Duskleaf agreed.

The title wasn't going to do him any harm either. It was one of those titles most would get with time anyway, but there were always benefits to getting it early. Its effects weren't the most tangible but were more linked to the nature of Records than actual power.

Well, there was a slight bonus. When creating an item, it was effectively just a collection of Records given form and function. The total level of the Records would be determined by the materials used during the creation and the creator behind it. The creator's skills, stats, methodology, but also Records as in what kind of person he was. This was both a curse and a benefit in some ways.

Vilastromoz would never be able to create equipment Jake could use, as an example. He simply wouldn't be able to craft something with a level requirement low enough for Jake to equip, so all he could possibly make was auxiliary products without level requirements, like alchemy puzzle cauldrons and such.

The reason he couldn't was because of the sheer level of Records involved in anything he made, simply because he made it. The same was true for anyone who got stronger. There were some methods, like creating a Legacy item or such, purposefully made worse with system assistance, but that was honestly just much harder than making an ordinary item.

That it worked this way did have some consequences but also opportunities. Firstly, it meant that items of any level requirement had value as a god could not simply create a million legendary rarity swords with a level requirement of 100. This, in turn, made craftsmen able to craft a level 100 legendary sword more useful to another level 100's than a god if they wanted a new sword.

Needless to say, this was one of the reasons why factions even existed to begin with. An ecosystem was needed to uplift those worthy of uplifting – a support system. This was part of the reason Vilastromoz had bothered with an Order and even an Academy.

But what did this mean for Jake? Well, it meant that every single item he made now was made by someone who had shown the capability to make a mythical rarity item – or at least transmute and merge items into one. So from now on, extra Records would be present in all of his creations if he wanted them to be or not.

Overall, that was a good thing, but it could be a bit annoying, as now all creations of sufficient quality would begin to refer to Jake as the creator with more than just a vague descriptor. It also meant that him transmuting anything to be useable for anyone below D-grade at his current level would be a miracle.

Talking so much about Jake, he suddenly recalled something.

“By the way, when is the next enrollment?” Vilastromoz asked Duskleaf.

“You asked me to hurry it up, so it is scheduled for in two weeks,” Duskleaf answered, clearly not happy with it.

“No way Jake is making that.”

“Should we postpone it?” Duskleaf asked concerned. Vilastromoz knew Duskleaf only really cared about Jake entering, so he could see him create an administrative nightmare just for Jake. Not that the Viper had any regrets putting his disciple in charge of the academy, even if it had forced him to “come out” as a god and be a bit more in the spotlight. It was good for the old hermit.

As for postponement?

“Nah, no need to. Transfer student tropes are also fun.”

Chapter 384 - Fumigation

Jake shifted the form of Eternal Hunger a few times, from a dagger to a sword, to a two-handed blade, and even into a spear and an exact replica of the old Scimitar of Eternal Hunger. He had also transformed it into a bow or, at the least, the body of one, which was effectively just a curved stick.

The problem was that the metal had low flexibility, and while Jake could make some changes to the form to make it better, he couldn't make a string. He also couldn't really see it be useful as all of its power was in hitting things with it.

In the end, he settled on a shape similar to the Nanoblade as he had used these last few days. In the other hand, he wielded the Bloodfeast Dagger from the Auction, getting a good feel for both of the weapons.

“Yeah, this is good,” Jake muttered to himself as he made them both disappear to take out his bow.

Jake had no intentions of taking the following hunt too lightly. The last two Queen's Guards had shown these termites were not to be trifled with, and he had a feeling the ones in the area ahead were even stronger.

So, for now, he pushed everything related to Soul Rituals to the back of his mind as he ventured forth into the hive. With his high perception, sphere, and Sense of the Malefic Viper, he sensed the path forward, feeling intense mana density not far ahead. He even got some responses from his boots, alerting him to earth-bound natural treasures.

He had a feeling what was up ahead, considering termites called Queen's Guard had guarded it. During the fight, Jake had retreated from where he had originally encountered the guards, and he was now making his way down the tunnel, scouting ahead.

Soon, he came to a mound of dirt blocking the path. He placed his hand on it and felt it was enchanted to keep it stable and isolating. It didn't really work that well as a barrier, though, as Jake channeled arcane mana into it, seeing it slowly break apart as it eroded and turned to nothingness, forcing a new tunnel into existence.

Jake walked forward through it until he came out the other side, and the moment he did, he felt the influx of mana. He had just entered another overtaken biodome that was now filled with a slime-like substance on every surface.

White eggs lined the walls and edges of the biodome, as he on the far side saw a massive form rise to regard him. It looked like a regular termite with its huge mandibles and six legs, but its backside was absolutely humongous. Before he even identified it, he knew what he was looking at.

[Isoptera Queen – lvl 191]

Three other figures suddenly unburrowed from the ground between Jake and the Queen, having been alerted to his presence when he broke through the wall. All of them with wings on their backs and powerful bodies. Unless you counted the eggs, there were no other living things within the dome than those three, the Queen, and Jake.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 185]

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 184]

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 179]

More Queen's Guards, huh, Jake thought as neither party moved right away. The biodome was large, at least a few kilometers across, and Jake counted thousands of eggs, each one likely containing E-grades or perhaps even weak D-grades. It was hard to tell as not all eggs were the same, with some having far more resources invested in them. The mana density had been for them to grow faster, and he felt several natural treasures spread throughout, like valuable metals, rocks, a few herbs, as well as a lot of cores taken from killed prey. All to assist the next generation. Moreover, he had a feeling this entire biodome was like a big Nurturing Ritual circle.

The entire dome was cut off with no exits or entrances besides the one Jake had just made, likely to keep this mana trapped.

Jake, standing there with his bow, suddenly smiled. "You know, I just remembered my grandfather once complained about getting termites in his barn... he invested so much in pesticides and whatnot, but when they got into the house, he was forced to disinfect the place to get rid of them. They used poison gas on the entire house by enclosing it and then pumping it in. Fumigation or something, I think they called it. Not a bad tactic, don't you agree? Ah, but I will mix in some more, let's say, explosive methods."

With those words, he fired a blast of arcane mana down the tunnel he had just made and entered from, making the unstable structure collapse, effectively sealing off the only exit of the biodome, or perhaps more accurately, egg chamber.

His act of aggression became the impetus for the termites to attack. In less than a second, two truck-sized termites were at either side, but Jake had already taken a step forward to avoid their blow, leaving a trail of arcane energy and poison mist as Arcane Awakening had activated on the balanced 30% along with two wings springing from his back. The third termite attempted to smash him with its large leg, but Jake avoided it as he went straight for the Queen.

The Queen was far larger than the guards, being as large as a two or three-story house. It regarded him as he fired an arrow towards it. A barrier sprung up between Jake and the Queen, making the arrow explode along with the barrier itself.

Jake reacted by stepping down on a platform and appearing to the side of the huge termite where he shot again. The arrow split into seven as they all impacted the massive body of the Queen, making the insect screech out in anger. Jake felt the poison infect the termite, but it quickly was challenged by some kind of cleansing magic. He also saw the wounds he had just inflicted begin to heal at a rapid pace with energy glowing around them.

It's a healer, Jake confirmed, having already had a feeling that was the case from the barriers.

Meanwhile, the Guards were more classical warriors. Jake was once more made to dodge as they attacked. Their movements were fast as he vaulted over one, kicking the air as he released an arcane explosion to send him flying backward while spinning in the air, firing two more arrows off.

More explosions rocked the cavern as Jake tried to stay on the move, pumping out poison. Jake was fully aware it wasn't that effective against any of the stronger termites, but those weren't the ones he was aiming for anyway.

Because when Jake began blanketing everything in poison mist, it was indiscriminate, including the thousands of eggs. The Queen made a loud screeching sound in rage as all the eggs got covered by faint golden barriers keeping his mist out.

Jake just grinned as he kept kiting and occasionally fired an arrow at the Guards, knowing that he was forcing the Queen to consume obscene amounts of mana to try and protect the eggs. He had already confirmed early on that these insects were not the smartest, but the Queen did seem to hold some level of intelligence and emotions as he heard evident anger in the screech.

The arena was not to his advantage when it came to archery, but it was beneficial when using all his poison and explosive arcane attacks. To up the potency of his attack, Jake even took out the Bloodfeast Dagger and cut his own arms to spray blood on the protective barriers.

This proved very effective as the Queen had clearly not been prepared, and instantly a dozen of the basketball-sized eggs were splashed as the barriers were eroded. The outer shells instantly disappeared and out crawled some non-fully formed termites that died in seconds.

Immediately, Jake felt the killing intent focused on him. "That really made you mad, huh?"

A golden aura spread throughout the cavern as the ground beneath his feet began moving. Jake knew it was the Guards using their earth magic, and it appeared that the Queen was spreading an aura that empowered them further.

Deciding to fuck with the Queen's concentration, Jake went ham. Pride activated as dozens of arcane orbs and bolts appeared and were flung all over, exploding close to a hundred eggs that the Queen failed to protect in time. Jake fired another salvo but found that one blocked as the Queen upped the intensity of the barriers. All fine by him, as that just meant more mana consumed.

Spikes of earth shot up beneath him, but he just stomped down and sent a wave of destructive arcane mana through the ground, breaking much of the mana the termites had activated. He then turned and stormed straight for one of the Guards, bow still drawn.

It tried to chomp down on him as Jake began drawing his bow. He stepped down and teleported beneath the large body of the Guard as he fully drew the string. Jake felt time slow down as he began channeling Arcane Powershot, and just before the Guard could move away, he released the string, firing the arrow straight up at the abdomen of the termite.

An arcane explosion rocked the cavern as the Guard was sent flying up as it smashed into the ceiling, leaving a large crack on the reinforced stone. There was now a large hole of sizzling arcane energy where Jake's arrow had hit, with a good bit of poison mixed in for good measure.

The Queen reacted by using healing magic, but all that did was give Jake the opportunity to fire off a Splitting Arrow towards one side of the cavern, blowing up over a hundred eggs again. Once more, the Queen reacted with an angry screech, and Jake believed he had found a good tactic... until the insects switched tactics.

He felt the change as the two unhurt Guards suddenly began almost burning with energy as vein-like cracks of golden energy appeared all over their bodies. The damaged Guard also reacted soon after, and when Jake saw the Queen, he understood.

Given up on the eggs... or at least decided that killing me is more important than this batch.

Jake was still smirking as his danger sense reacted, forcing him to swiftly dodge back as a pair of mandibles tried to make Jake into two Jakes. The speed of the insects had increased significantly, and when he felt the movement of mana beneath his feet, he knew that they had also gotten stronger.

Huge spears of earth flew towards him from the ceiling, as literal pillars shot up from the ground, trying to impale him and impede his path. The two undamaged Guards were the ones who stayed in melee as they chased Jake with the damaged one using magic.

He tried firing a few arrows but found them all blocked by barriers, and what little he did get through was healed as the Queen now completely ignored the eggs. Jake saw many of them melt from the poison mist, and even if it was the Queen's choice, her rage at what was happening couldn't be more apparent.

For a moment, Jake felt like he was on the backfoot. But he also knew it was not like he couldn't change it at will. His opponents were strong, nearly at the peak of D-grade... but honestly, Jake had beaten worse. He had come into this fight with full resources and a far more stable mind than before, so he decided to get serious and see what he was now capable of after getting a few levels.

The two Guards closed in on him as walls of soil rose to limit his movement, mixed in with magical barriers. Just before they managed to close their mandibles around Jake's body, they were both blasted back by an explosion of pure arcane energy as Jake's body began glowing with power; Arcane Awakening now fully activated.

Jake had not even moved as he began channeling his Arcane Powershot. The two Guards closed in on him again but were once more repelled by a second arcane explosion as Jake fired his shot. The Queen tried to defend but was struck and blasted away, smashing into the back wall.

Once again, Jake dodged away as the Guards refused to give up. However, the game had changed, with Jake now going full power.

Eternal Hunger appeared together with his dagger as he engaged one of the Guards, tearing into it with two poisoned weapons. With every slash, it had its energy drained, and it was at a time like this that Eternal Hunger showed its true power.

Even the golden aura that boosted the Guard was consumed by the blade as it indiscriminately ate anything it hit. Healing energy injected into the Guard was also merely something to be consumed. The only thing not consumed was the energy Jake himself had injected, meaning his poison had free reign as the energy normally used to fight it off also had to contend with the powerful curse.

Oh, and a final thing. Eternal Hunger specified it was all attacks made with the weapon that drained energy, and the system counted poison attacks made with the sword as attacks, meaning all his poison injected with a sword blow also had an extra energy-draining effect. It wasn't much, but everything counted.

Naturally, the curse also activated when Jake extended the blade with any skill or magical effect, so he could safely coat it in arcane energy without losing any effectiveness. This meant when Jake shattered the outer carapace of the termite's head and plunged his sword through it with Descending Dark Fang, he also got a good deal of energy restored.

It struggled but wasn't dead as the two other Guards attacked him, including the still slightly injured one. Jake responded as he tossed Bloodfeast Dagger into the air and opened his palm towards one of them, firing out a massive blast of pure arcane mana as he stood his ground and blocked the blow of the other. He was pushed back, but with a string of mana, easily retrieved the dagger and went on the offensive again.

He kept switching targets, not really finishing one off right away as, frankly, there was no reason to. The Queen was struggling to keep them alive, just slowly tiring itself out. It seemed like the insect did not have any real offensive powers itself, as all its strengths revolved around healing, creating eggs, and protecting those eggs – all the healer powers likely related to the protection of the hive.

Another reason he did not finish them off was due to Jake still experimenting. One area he was experimenting in was with his new quiver. He had theorized that since he had control of the inner space, he could do some fancy things with it outside of just storing poisoned arrows long-term, and that theory turned out to be correct.

Jake blasted away a termite as he vaulted back, fishing out an arrow from his quiver. It was far larger than any he had shot prior, seeming to be made out of white wood. It looked almost fragile at first glance, but it was far more powerful than any arcane arrow.

What Jake had learned was that as he had control of the quiver, he could summon arrows directly into it. It worked with his Arcane Arrows, but he didn't really have to do it with them due to how the skill worked. He only used it with those if he wanted to store poisoned versions.

No, where this truly came into play was with his still most powerful attack: Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Back when he got it in late E-grade, it had required all his attention and focus to summon it, but now? Now, he could focus on summoning it even while fighting others. It took far longer, around five minutes, but the result was just the same.

Arcane Powershot channeled with slowed down time, as Jake activated Gaze of the Apex Hunter on both Guards coming at him as he launched the arrow towards the one he damaged early on in the fight. Just before releasing the string, Pride activated again and shot a barrage of arcane bolts towards the same target.

Still frozen by Gaze, it failed to react. Arcane bolts shattered the barrier made by the Queen to try and save the Guard as the arrow impacted the winged termite and sank into its body. A pure rush of pure damage entered its body as it was blasted back, leaving a trail of blood.

Before it could get up, Jake activated Mark of The Avaricious Arcane Hunter on it, making it light up in a flash as he got a kill notification.

“One down.”

The Queen and one remaining Guard able to move regarded him as Jake just took out his melee weapons again, spinning them in his hands as he smiled and charged the last Guard able to fight properly. It tried to resist, but Jake cut at it and severed a leg, leaving it unable to move, just like the one where he had stabbed the head.

Still trying in vain to heal them all and protect them with barriers, the Queen struggled. Jake changed his target as he once more switched to his bow and began bombarding the Queen with stable arcane arrows, shattering its barriers over and over again, leaving more and more wounds.

The plan had been for him to wait five minutes and then finish off another Guard with it, but it turned out he didn't even need to. Both of them began glowing more than ever before as they charged him. The Queen then summoned an almost solid-looking barrier around herself as the termites flanked Jake.

“How original,” Jake muttered as the two Guards blew themselves up.

An explosion enveloped the biodome as every single egg that somehow survived till now was reduced to nothing. All the natural treasures were blasted into the walls or broke, as the Queen's shield cracked but held.

As everything subsided, the Queen lowered the shield, clearly exhausted... too exhausted to react when a fully scaled figure leaped over and smashed a blade through her head.

Jake's body was burned and damaged in many places but was not truly hurt. An arcane barrier, the passive shield of his Arcane Awakening, and his Scales of the Malefic Viper. All of these separately would make Jake incredibly durable, and together, they gave Jake a formidable shield against any magical attacks, allowing him to more or less shrug off the suicide attack of two insects more than forty levels above himself.

With no Guards alive, Jake began tearing apart the Queen as he fed Eternal Hunger. At its final moment, before the massive insect died, a new kind of screech was released.

He at first thought nothing of it until he faintly detected movement. Lots of movement. Hundreds of insects within the range of the Queen had been alarmed to his presence and were now rushing towards him, trying to swarm him.

Jake just chuckled as he lowered Arcane Awakening to 30%, still not experiencing the period of weakness as long as he kept it active, as he prepared for a bit of a prolonged fight. If it had been a month ago, Jake would maybe have been a bit scared, but if there was one thing Eternal Hunger offered, it was sustainability and endurance.

Come one, come all, Jake smirked as arcane magic began burning around him as one of the sealed-off entrances to the biodome was broken down, and the swarm entered Jake's fumigation chamber.

Chapter 385 - A Path From Inferiority

Chris worked with fervor as he cleaned and rearranged a few of the pillars, stones, and metal pikes. It had to be kept perfect at all times as the materials absorbed the necessary energy from the celestial objects above through the ritual.

The entire area was walled off and sealed away behind several one-way barriers to keep everyone out but still allow energy in. This entire project was a fickle one that required a lot of precision, and Chris had needed help from several talented builders, including Hank, to assist him.

Even Neil had come by to help calibrate and make sure everything with the magic circle seemed correct and helped Chris finish some parts he did not have the expertise to do himself. Not that Chris really had any idea what the fuck he was actually doing; he was just following directions and doing what he was told. All in the name of the Malefic One.

After he had received the blessing from the Malefic Viper and learned of Lord Thayne's identity, his life had entirely changed. Before, he never really had any direction but was just another faceless survivor in his own mind. It was hard to establish yourself as "someone" in the new world, especially as every person of note was just so different from him.

Abby and Donald had both been utter shitbags, but they had also been powerful and rather talented in their demented ways. Miranda was extremely good at her job; Lillian was this weird, overly neutral person who never really displayed any emotions but just performed her tasks flawlessly. Honestly, she was the only other woman in Abby and Donald's gang who was not elderly who had managed to avoid his attention, probably because of that personality and the face she herself had chosen to scar and never heal. Even now, she chose to keep it scarred for some reason.

Lord Thayne was not even worth mentioning when it came to outstanding individuals; he was the Chosen of a Primordial, after all. Neil and his party had once been enemies Chris had chased together with Abby and were individuals who had stood up to her. Neil had even beaten her in sheer talent with space magic to get the legendary item they had been fighting over.

Hank was a good builder... but out of everyone in Haven, there was one individual that stood out in his mind more than anyone – besides Lord Thayne, of course.

That was Arnold. Chris did not get the guy, but he was a savant who continuously created new things without any pause. Having helped build parts of his workshop, Chris had seen some of the things he had been up to, and it was just ridiculous.

He had launched a fucking satellite or something a little while ago, for fuck's sake. Chris had no idea how the hell he had managed that with how their new planet worked and especially what was in the sky. Chris knew the sky was another world in its own right, with monsters up there none could beat. The atmosphere should also be able to destroy most things that tried to pass through it, yet the guy had seemed to get through and launch something into space.

Chris was thrown out of his train of thought as he got a response from one of his skills, making him aware one of the stones was fully charged and had to be moved. He did so, and while Chris had no idea how the monument or ritual circle or whatever he was making did what it did, he knew what it was meant for.

It was a gate. A way to establish a connection between another universe and their own, or in simpler terms, it was a way for the Chosen to leave Earth and go to the Order of the Malefic Order, and only to the Order. Well, he could go where he wanted from there, but this monument would only connect to a corresponding ritual circle or something on the other side. This was not a teleportation circle per se but was more like an odd kind of ritual only created for the Chosen, making use of his connection to the Malefic One as a Chosen. This had lowered the requirements significantly, apparently. Lord Thayne would be able to function as a beacon and allow the circle to activate to teleport anyone within. Chris had tried to understand it at first but had given up long ago.

Many people would probably be a bit miffed at getting forced into creating something so tedious as this monument, but Chris was happy just to get the opportunity. It made him someone... it made him feel useful. Also, while it was a bit selfish and had nothing to do with his task, it allowed him to get closer to his crush, Louise. No one had told him who he could ask for help, right? And he sucked at drawing, so he needed someone to draw the plans anyway.

It is a great excu- eh, reason, the young builder affirmed to himself.

He had no regrets as it had landed him a date with her later that day so they both could take a break. Chris had always been a bit scared of her father, Hank, but that fear had disappeared the day after he had gained his blessing. Okay, he was still a bit afraid, but for different reasons than the man's power.

The day after he had been blessed, the Malefic One had spoken to him directly. Chris could barely remember the words as he still recalled the mind-shattering pain he felt at the connection that was made between them. The command had still been received, but for a moment, Chris had felt the true aura of the Malefic Viper, and it was something he was in two minds about.

On the one hand, he had never felt something so awe-inspiring. He did not know if it was because it was his first time feeling a god or if it was due to the blessing. Chris wanted to experience that feeling again from the bottom of his heart. However, at the same time, the lingering fear that came afterward and the feeling of being so insignificant couldn't leave him, like he had been a moth before the sun itself. It was an insurmountable difference Chris had no hope to ever overcome.

But... now that sun had given him a purpose; one he would strive his fullest to make a reality. To pay back Lord Thayne, Haven, and the Malefic One.

Once more, he was thrown out of his thoughts as his skill responded again, making him do the final rearrangement of the day. He smiled as he placed a hand on a large pillar and felt the response.

Soon it will be ready, he grinned as he prepared to head off for his evening date with Louise. He looked down at his clothes and saw them stained and dirty from not having left this monument site for the last three days.

But first, a shower and some new clothes... I should also get her something...

Jake sat in meditation as his body recovered, the hole to the small tunnel he had carved himself sealed off with the corpses of termites. Another two days had passed since his first encounter with an Isoptera Queen, meaning yes, there were multiple.

So far, Jake had killed three of them and a few thousand weak D-grade termites too. By now, Jake was beginning to realize truly a “feature” of the system, if you could call it that. It was something he had believed was there but had never really confirmed: diminishing returns.

Clearing the first biodome had earned him a level by killing the Queen and the three Guards there, but since then he had only gained two more levels even if he had killed two more Queens, ten Guards, and thousands of the weaker variants of termites, about a hundred and twenty of them having given experience as they were above his own level.

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 150 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 149 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 151 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 152 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 150 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

Jake felt uncertain if this lack of experience gained was solely because he kept killing the same type of enemy or because the fights got progressively easier as he now knew how they acted and took advantage of that.

The first Queen had been the “hardest,” if one could even call it hard at all. This was also considering the two next ones had all five Guards in their chambers. Yes, Jake had confirmed that each Queen had five Guards each, and he had a feeling they were spawns or summons of the Queen herself. Ectognamorphs, as these termites were classified as, were a race with many unique properties, and their natural build-in social structure was one of them, giving them some special abilities.

As he meditated, he focused on pure regeneration as he went over his status and placed his Free Points, now having decided to go back to investing in Perception again. As he looked over his status page – something he rarely did - a single skill entered his eyes.

[Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)]

Why hasn't it been upgraded yet? Jake wondered as he stared at it. Was it perhaps to do with his other melee skill?

[Basic Twin-Fang Style (Uncommon)]

He had both of them, but did they even interfere with each other? Jake wasn't sure; he just knew it was weird to still have an inferior rarity skill. It was his only inferior rarity skill, and with how well he managed to do in melee combat, it really shouldn't exist from his point of view.

Considering he was still just meditating, he entered his Soulspace. He felt his presence shift, and his senses disappeared as he opened his eyes within it. After giving a wave to the sleeping cocoon of arcane strings containing the Chimera, he summoned a blade of pure arcane energy.

Jake stood with it in his hand and swung it a few times, but it just felt off. He then switched it up and summoned two arcane daggers. With those, he had some idea how to move, a few easy combos and feints, and he knew some generally good ways to stab people. All that knowledge was no doubt from Twin-Fang Style.

Back with a sword again, it still didn't feel right. Jake kept swinging it and making some moves, but he felt stiff. He knew he was just swinging the sword, and his combos were more based on movie choreography than any real fighting technique.

He imitated the methods of Twin-Fang Style with two swords next, but that also felt a bit off. Wondering what was wrong, he suddenly got an idea.

With a mental command, he unwound the string of mana binding the Chimera of pure curse energy. It was still just sleeping when he did so, so Jake was forced to poke it. He made the ground around it move as he created an encapsulated arena with him and the creature within.

Finally waking up, it quickly identified him as it disappeared. The massive form appeared right in front of Jake, and finally, he reacted. He dodged as he swept his blade up and cut the Chimera. It didn't really do anything besides making Jake frown.

It kept trying to eat him as Jake dodged and attacked again and again, purposefully not actually doing anything harmful to the Chimera as his weapons just phased through. This kept going as his frown deepened more and more until finally, he got it.

“Thanks, mate,” Jake said as he waved his hand and trapped the Chimera again. Dispelling the arena he had created, Jake went back to standing with the blade himself.

He had recalled something the best melee combatant he had ever met said to him. During the first phase of the duel with the Sword Saint, the old man had said something that only really clicked now. He had commented on how it was evident Jake had no experience with cold weapons, which was true, but he had also added:

“I must admit... seeing you fight and facing you is very different. It is like being hounded by a beast that turns into a specter just when you think it has overextended.”

Put together, the intent was clear: “You do not know how to fight, but you fight well regardless.”

The problem was that Jake was not fighting with skill. He was fighting with instinct. He knew where to hit when an enemy attacked him. Not because he was a skilled fighter but because he sensed the weakness in his enemy. He knew when to dodge because he felt killing intent and saw the attack with his sphere, not because he had studied footwork or read and analyzed his opponent’s style.

There was no knowledge involved. No skill, hence no skill rarity. It suddenly made a lot of sense that Jake genuinely felt awkward just standing there with a sword. Deep in his mind, it was because it felt off. It was like shooting his bow into thin air without a target or a goal - like manipulating mana without intent... like beast swingings its claws into empty air.

Beasts did not need to learn how to fight by practicing their weapons. They knew how to fight by default, and they improved by fighting. Jake was the same. He had gotten better at fighting, but that was his decision-making and control skills, not his instincts, and him just adding more fighting methods. It was related to the final part of what the Sword Saint said had said: “-hounded by a beast that turns into a specter just when you think it has overextended.”

This was because while he fought like a beast, he still had the mind of a human, able to know if he was baited or feinted – at least most of the time. Even if he didn’t catch the feint, one also had to remember that there perhaps was no beast out there matching Jake’s bestial instincts.

Jake also remembered something that made him feel dumb for not thinking about it earlier. He recalled his D-grade class evolution and one of the options there. Bestial Alpha Hunter. He searched his memory as he remembered the description of it.

Bestial Alpha Hunter – You stand before the beasts like their kin and show yourself the alpha. You do not need the finesse and techniques developed by the enlightened ones but are more than happy to rely on your instincts. A class focused primarily on melee combat, you prefer to use basic weaponry, if any at all, relying on your high perception and reaction times to dominate the battle.

The system had directly told Jake that he was not using techniques or finesse. Told him he had disregarded the very basis of human fighting techniques.

This also made him reflect on Villy’s words when Jake had asked about melee combat after his fight with the Sword Saint. Villy had recommended Jake to switch to shorter weapons, making them closer to his body... probably to make them closer to natural weapons over external ones.

Jake also began to understand why he couldn't "feel" the weapons at all. His recognition of what was his body was simply too intimate for him. Perhaps Jake would do well as someone like Carmen, who used her fists. But that would only work if he didn't also use poisons, which made stabbing and cutting attacks borderline mandatory parts of his arsenal.

But... even if he understood why the Viper had said what he had said and even saw the logic in his words, Jake liked the shape of the Nanoblade. It just fit in his hand, and even in moments of being heavily influenced by Eternal Hunger, that is the shape he had defaulted to. A long, almost overly-thin single-ended blade without any real noticeable handle just appealed to him.

He kept experimenting a bit more within his Soulspace but found no real progress. However, at least he had a path now and a direction to explore. It probably wasn't something he was going to "fix" in a day, but the realization was not any less critical nonetheless.

Jake exited meditation as he stood up within his makeshift hiding place, his resources fully replenished after meditating for a few hours. With a blast of arcane mana, he blew away all of the dead termites blocking the entrance to hide him as he headed onwards.

The reason he had been adamant about being in top form before the next area was because of the aura he felt from it. It was the same intense mana density as other biodomes but at a higher level, making him certain it was a breeding chamber.

But more importantly, he felt the aura of a C-grade.

Jake went forward as he prepared himself for his first real fight with a real C-grade, barely able to contain his excitement at the prospect.

Chapter 386 - First Contact: C-Grade

The gap between grades only grew larger and more challenging to overcome the higher one went. For a decently talented E-grade to beat a weak low-tier D-grade was only to be expected, while the same could not be said for a D-tier killing a C-tier.

This did not mean it wasn't possible or even considered relatively commonplace among those classified as geniuses. In fact, Jake had a high level of confidence he would be able to kill plenty of C-tiers before he eventually reached the tier himself. But even with this confidence, he was still not sure if being level 150 – only halfway to C-tier – was quite good enough.

However, some things did give him a chance. What Jake was walking into was the area of a C-tier Isoptera Queen variant based on his own estimates. He did not hold doubt in his mind it would be significantly stronger than the late D-tiers before, but that honestly mattered less than it should.

If the C-tier Queen acted in the same vein as the D-tiers, there were many things to exploit. The fumigation-stratagem would likely still prove effective, and even if it didn't, then the Queen was a healer with little-to-no offensive capabilities.

Jake did not think it would be a short fight either way, but he had high confidence in waiting out even a C-grades mana pool if he could force it to waste mana on trying to protect hordes of eggs for an extended period of time.

He also assumed there would be more Guards, but it should be possible to maybe kite them out of the biodome or also use them to consume the mana of the Queen. One thing was certain, though, it was going to be a marathon, and Jake would try to hold back on using any boosting skills unless absolutely necessary.

The thought of getting a bit of melee weapon practice in did occur to him, but he ultimately decided not to as it would be too risky.

Before entering the next biodome, Jake prepared everything. He poisoned stable arrows with his best Necrotic Poison and even had some with Hemotoxin Poison on them in case that proved more effective, as well as a third bunch with Blood of the Malefic Viper.

Without seeing his target, he could not make an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, so he would have to go in without that.

As a final moment of preparation, he did something he rarely even considered: planned a path of escape.

He had located narrow tunnels the large Guards could not fit through, and with some Alchemical Flame and arcane beams, he made them longer to allow him to connect to tunnels further above him, effectively giving him shortcuts through the maze that was the termite hive.

With everything ready, Jake made his way over to the sealed-off entrance to the biodome. Jake assumed these termites simply dug their way through and sealed it back up whenever they needed to leave, which was probably rarely. They did not have to eat, so all they needed was to bring in natural treasures and open the hatchery up when a new generation was born.

A path was burned before him as he went through the nearly ten-meter long wall of soil, dirt, and stone, breaking the final enchanted barrier as he entered the biodome. The moment he did so, the mana washed over him as his senses spread out all over the biodome. This one was far larger than any he had ever seen before, spanning perhaps fifteen kilometers in diameter and with more than a kilometer to the ceiling.

There were no eggs right around where he had entered, but he felt them further in as he saw movement. A massive figure milled across the ground, looking like a moving warehouse. The huge thorax of the termite swayed as some magical mist was expelled onto some eggs, and Jake instantly used his Identify.

[Isoptera Hive Queen – lvl ???]

It was a true-blue C-grade monster - the leader of the termite hive and likely the mother of all the other Queens Jake had seen so far.

Jake scouted the room as he felt its defenders too. Ten figures rose from the soil not far from the Hive Queen, all of them familiar ones as one of Jake's predictions had been true.

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 193]

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 195]

...

[Isoptera Queen's Guard – lvl 199]

They were all towards the peak of D-grade, but there were no C-grade Guards. Jake had hoped and assumed the Hive Queen was only early C-tier at best, probably between 200 and 210, so it was likely it would not have been able to make any C-tier Guards yet.

But... he knew not to underestimate the ten Guards. He had beaten five at once two times, but these were stronger than any of the others had been, and their supporting Queen far more powerful than anything Jake had ever fought.

With a motion, he made a small barrier of soil at the hole he had just entered from, making a mental note of where it was in case he needed to flee. Focusing on one of the Guards, he began summoning an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter within his quiver.

From the beginning, the Queen had been aware of his presence but had yet to move. If it was aware Jake had slain three other Queens was questionable as the termites so far had only shown surface-level intelligence, with none of the non-Queen ones displaying any signs of having actual egos. They were nothing more than biological cogs in a machine.

Jake prepared his starting attack as he cut his own arm and willed for the blood to seep out as it formed globes in the air. He then condensed arcane mana around the blood. Simultaneously, he took out his bow and began charging Arcane Powershot.

Displaying clear acts of aggression, the termites finally moved. Five Guards charged Jake while the rest stayed defensively around the Queen. The arcane bolts with blood were fired at an upwards angle not targeted towards any termite, while he released the Arcane Powershot straight for the Guard at the front.

The arcane bolts summoned had been of the stable variant with only a sliver of destructive energy, so when he triggered them, the resulting explosion was just them shattering, sending bloody shards of

arcane energy flying everywhere. This was a tactic he had used against prior biodomes to great success, and this time too, it made the Hive Queen instantly react as barriers were summoned around all the affected eggs.

His Arcane Powershot was also blocked by a golden barrier, as the Guards kept charging unbothered. Jake fired a few more salvos only to get them all blocked before he was forced to dodge away. Unfurling the wings on his back, Jake flew away as he spread poison in his wake.

They chased him with great speed as Jake just kept fleeing, not even having time to land potshots. He had been prepared for the Queen to summon barriers to cut him off, but no such thing happened. Jake just kept flying as the poison mist began permeating the room, with Jake making it worse by spraying a bit of his blood here and there.

Arcane bolts were also still being flung out, with nothing having done any damage to anything so far. The Hive Queen protected everything from his attacks, no matter how minor, and as the poison mist began spreading everywhere, that became a lot of surface area to keep protected.

To begin with, Jake was being chased by only five Guards, but soon another three joined them. He was lucky in that they had no real strategy to their movements but just chased him directly, meaning that as long as he was faster, he would avoid getting pincer-moved.

Jake was not truly fighting the C-grade but just trying to tire it out. He tried a few times to damage a Guard, but it was honestly a waste of time. Barriers would pop up instantly, and Jake would waste his time. Due to this, he focused on attacking the eggs and sometimes even the Queen herself with cost-efficient attacks.

Flying a bit lower and closer to some eggs, Jake took out Eternal Hunger as he changed the shape to be similar to a rake. He swung it down towards some eggs and met a barrier as he kept flying, raking across the golden shield, sending up sparks of energy. However, more importantly, he absorbed energy.

Smiling, Jake was confident for now. He would not change things up too fast, and he even purposefully allowed the Guards to get close on many occasions, even making one scratch him with its mandibles. It was all in an attempt to avoid the Hive Queen deciding it needed to finish him off faster. He wanted it to think it was a moment away from victory at all times, and doing more would be a waste of energy.

He was more or less hoping the Hive Queen would fall into the sunk-cost fallacy and not throw away the mana it had already spent by sacrificing a few Guards or eggs to take him down.

Jake even made some “desperate” attacks towards the Hive Queen to really sell it, all of them utterly useless. After around fifteen minutes of this, Jake noticed that his mana pool had barely depleted as he smiled.

The environment and high mana density to feed the Queen mixing with the poison mist made the environment absolutely optimal for Jake. Coupled with the increased mana regeneration from the mask and his already high pool, he could wait with a potion, maybe even consume a stamina potion instead.

Time kept passing a minute at a time with Jake just training his ability to dodge. The Queen had begun doing some different things and had even slightly done something to empower the Guards, which had resulted in Jake finding less time to do damage, just prolonging the “fight” even more.

It was now a competition of resources. The Queen was far more powerful than anything else but did not have any true offensive abilities as far as Jake could tell. Considering this was his first encounter with a C-grade, he honestly was a bit in two minds about it.

But... this was a different kind of challenge, and he would take it. As it was currently going, Jake had no idea when the fight would end, but considering he felt like he could do this for a week straight, and that he was sure the Guards expended more stamina than he did, that would never become relevant. Jake barely had to think when dodging the uninspired blows of the Guards, as he just kept flying, kiting, firing out arcane bolts and orbs while occasionally striking barriers with Eternal Hunger to drain a bit of energy.

Jake was not delusional enough to think this would keep going until the Queen ran out of mana, and he didn't need it to either. He still had many tools in his arsenal to pull out. So as long as he could keep it going for a good while, the Queen should have wasted enough resources for him to win even if she got serious.

All ten Guards were now chasing Jake as he kept up the act. He looked at the Queen as he got an odd feeling. Normally he could get some kind of read of an opponent. Anger, annoyance, impatience... at least something.

Yet all he felt from the Queen was apathy: like his presence was barely of any consequence. He was confused... as he felt something. Movement below...

Fast...

Something was com-

Suddenly it entered his sphere, and Jake barely had time to use One Step Mile as where he had just stood erupted in an explosion of dust and soil. Jake's instincts went on full overdrive as his danger sense exploded, and without any hesitation, his body was covered in scales as Arcane Awakening jumped to 60% right off the bat.

As he looked up the ceiling of the hatchery, he saw a figure. A sleek termite, smaller than even Jake when on all six legs. Its legs looked like black spears of metal, its body covered in a reflective dark carapace. There were two menacing mandibles at its mouth, but the two black compound eyes on its head were more disturbing.

That is when Jake remembered something he had once learned from his grandfather. A little factoid he had completely forgotten until today:

Termite hives had kings.

[Isoptera Hive King – lvl ???]

And this one was not made for breeding.

Every cell in Jake's body screamed, and for once, he listened as he did the only wise thing: he ran.

Or, he tried to run.

His danger sense exploded again as Jake did not even have time to step down before the Hive King leaped at him. Like a bullet, it reached him instantly as Jake held up Eternal Hunger to block as he instinctually stabbed down with the Bloodfeast Dagger. He felt the impact on his arm as he hit the carapace of the insect, and it felt like he had just hit metal. The impact from the blow of the Hive King came at the same time, and it wasn't as bad as expect-

With a swift motion away from Jake's blade, the termite bit down again before he could react as his chest exploded, sending scales and blood flying everywhere.

Wha-

A deep cut had been left from his shoulder to his groin, tearing through everything. The mandibles of the termite moved again, but Jake managed to step down as he teleported away, his mind yet to fully register what had happened. He fled straight for the tunnel he had entered through as the ten Guards also arrived.

Jake did not have time to think as he pushed Pride to its fullest as a mental attack on the Guards as he also used Gaze on all ten of them. Blood spilled out of his eyes as they all froze. Jake's danger sense reacted again as the Hive King moved, and Jake managed to step down again and teleport.

The moment he appeared, he tried to sway, but a black termite leg penetrated through his chest and pinned him to the ground. Before the mandibles tore his head off, Jake exploded with arcane mana out of his one hand and managed to blow himself to the side, ripping out his own flesh as a deep hole was torn in the ground with the termite's mandibles.

He gripped the ground and pulled as he launched himself forward with another arcane explosion. Another black leg came down and penetrated his thigh, but he kept his momentum as his entire leg was shredded.

While in the air, he turned and saw the Hive King nearly upon him, the mandibles only a few meters from his face. Jake reacted as Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated again, freezing the Hive King for a

fraction of a moment. Jake's eyes popped, and his vision turned black as he nearly lost consciousness from the strain of using the skill.

Yet he kept moving as he got into the tunnel that he had entered through. His one leg was just shredded meat, and his entire body was bloody and broken, but his wings had managed to stay intact as Jake landed on the ground to teleport one more time.

He went straight for one of the emergency tunnels he had made before. Just before he reached it, his danger sense alerted him just in time as he flapped a wing to dodge. It moved him slightly to the side as a black termite-shaped bullet passed him, tearing off his left arm and wing in the process.

With his one remaining leg, Jake slammed it down as it exploded with arcane mana, and with his one remaining arm, he held it up before him as he channeled pure destructive arcane energy in front of him to make sure he would create a path.

Jake flew upwards like a rocket as the Hive King followed again. It simply tore through the ground towards him, but at least it was slowed somewhat, allowing Jake to dodge out of the way just as he entered another large tunnel.

I need to thi-

The termite attacked again, and Jake pre-emptively dodged the charge but still had the wound on his left side worsened. Jake tried to find a solution as an idea struck him. Mana began moving around him again, but it was not of the arcane variant this time. Black mana began condensing with the help of Pride as the Hive King charged again.

He did not move as it reached him in a flash... as time slowed down.

Moment of the Primal Hunter activated, and Jake blew up the dark mana all around him to mask what he planned to do. At the same time, he swayed and dodged the charging termite, making it fly past him. Above him was the next emergency tunnel, while the tunnel the termite had just come through was below.

Jake dropped down in the hole as a bow appeared in his one remaining hand. He positioned it, so he held it with his one leg as a large white arrow appeared – Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

However, he did not fire it towards the termite but straight up through his next escape tunnel as he dropped down into the hole just as time returned to normal and Arcane Awakening was disabled. He put back his bow as the arrow flew upwards, and Jake covered himself with his half-broken cloak and willed it to camouflage him – everything he had just done hidden within a bubble of dark mana.

He fell into a small crevice in the tunnel as Jake hid, focusing on his stealth skill as much as possible. He dispelled all signs of magic, and he felt incredibly weak all over as he huddled up.

Above him, he felt the Hive King through his Mark he had instinctively placed on it and knew it had chased the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter up through the escape tunnel. Jake held his breath and focused on making his presence as invisible as possible. He focused on suppressing everything to make himself completely invisible.

He felt the termite move around above as it inspected the area. It stood still for a moment before it turned back. Jake felt it move slightly upwards before it leaped again.

Jake nearly had a heart attack as the Hive King tore through the soil, less than ten meters to his side as it dug downwards again towards the hatchery. Luckily, he managed to keep his focus as he hid away, not even daring to take out a health potion in fear it would reveal him.

Needless to say... Jake's first encounter with a C-grade did not go as expected.

#### Chapter 387 - Underground

Fifteen minutes passed without any movement before Jake dared to take out a healing potion and consume it. His Mark made him aware the Hive King had returned to somewhere deep underground again before the Mark expired, so he felt relatively safe.

His entire body was aching as he drank the life-saving liquid and just laid back on the ground. He was missing an arm; his one leg had been torn apart down the center, leaving two flappy slices of flesh, and his entire midsection was a fucking mess.

The initial attack had ripped through his entire ribcage, one lung, several other organs and only narrowly missed his heart. The stab with the leg after that had torn out his entire stomach, too, making it all just a bloody mess.

Finally, his face was filled with blood and some gross gooey substance that had once been his own eyes. Even while waiting, his body had begun healing, but these wounds would not be fixed immediately, especially not while he was still experiencing the period of weakness after Arcane Awakening.

Jake would not say he had been lucky... because he had only survived due to his reactions. The only reason his heart had not been torn in two was that he had narrowly swayed. He had avoided getting his head torn off on more than one occasion in the exchange that had not even taken half a minute, and in the end, he had escaped by using dark mana, hiding, and quick thinking. His equipment had also helped immensely, even if it didn't look like it. Chances are he would have been ripped in two without his chest armor right off the bat.

Fuck, it was strong, Jake thought to himself as he shivered a bit when he recalled how the Hive King had moved. Strong, fast, durable... it was a living killing machine designed to do only that. If the Queen was the caretaker of the hive, the King was the defender.

Like humans and everyone else, different people and creatures had different specializations. The Queen had invested all her evolution points in being better at laying and hatching eggs as well as nurturing them with barriers and healing and such. It was all to protect them.

Meanwhile, the Hive King had all points focused on killing anything that tried to destroy the hive. Jake also had a feeling the Hive King was probably around level 215 or 220, but he couldn't be sure... it all depended on how good the stat growth and natural power of Isoptera Hive Kings were. However, he had a feeling it was not weak for its level. Far from someone like Jake or the King of the Forest, but perhaps about as strong as someone like a party member of Neil if they fought at equal levels? Either way, it was no scrub.

Jake wanted to punch himself in embarrassment the more he thought about it. How the hell would a C-grade Hive Queen make sense if all she had was far weaker defenders? Any other C-grade would be able to kill her just by tiring her out like Jake did, putting the entire hive at risk.

He knew insect monsters like these that formed colonies were incredibly dangerous in the multiverse, to the point of dominating entire regions of space the same as enlightened empires. They even had other lifeforms live with them.

Ectognamorph Queens at high enough grades could spawn entire armies of powerful soldiers. However, it was rare for them to have a King, even if they did have protectors. This was also when Jake recalled his only other time encountering a similar structure to this hive: the ratmen in the Forgotten Sewers.

The Nest Watcher was more or less the Hive King in this scenario, defending the mothers of the next generation. That case had been even more lopsided with the Incubators back then not even able to defend themselves, being little more than breeding machines.

Jake shelved the thoughts as he just focused on healing himself, but also to stay hidden. He felt the movements of termites not even ten minutes later through his sphere. He knew he had killed far from all of them, and it seemed that with Jake gone, the Hive Queen had ordered them to get back to work and repair the damage inflicted by the pesky human that had ravaged their hive.

Needless to say, this was bad news for Jake. Termites began running both above and below him as he saw them through his sphere. Thankfully he was hidden well in the makeshift tunnel dug by the Hive King, with none of the workers walking his way quite yet.

Focusing as much as he could, Jake very carefully mobilized a tiny bit of mana to try and hide better. A small barrier covered the outside of his cloak as Jake mixed a bit of dark mana and his stable arcane mana. Nothing was visible as far as Jake could tell, as he saw if he could somehow make his barrier invisible and meld himself completely with the background.

The camouflage of the cloak already did this, but it was not perfect, and if something came close, he would be discovered. Hence he tried to create a shell around him that was solid to not only make him look like a part of the tunnel but also feel like one to the touch.

He was pressured as soon a few termites noticed the hole he was in but only briefly inspected it before moving on. Jake held his breath as he hoped none would make its way down into it. He would no doubt be discovered if one did as he blocked a good part of it with his body, and the workers were about as large as the Hive King, meaning they would one hundred percent bump into him.

A few workers began gathering in the vicinity as they luckily chose the tunnel only five meters to his side – the one made by the Hive King when it returned to the biodome. They began patching it up and filling it again with earth magic and physical labor, several running through it as they worked.

One of the termites running through the other tunnel suddenly stopped halfway through... right next to where Jake was, with only a five-meter wall of soil and rock separating them. It began touching the walls, and he faintly felt a pulse of mana go through it as the termite scanned the ground.

Jake focused everything he had as the wave of mana reached him and the stable shell of arcane mana mixed with dark mana. It hit the barrier and was absorbed as the termite on the other side looked confused. Another wave came as Jake realized he had made an error. In a moment of clarity, he chose to instead absorb a little of the environmental mana into the barrier, fully dispelling the black mana there.

He had created a barrier a bit like a window with two layers and air in between, except the air had been dark mana. This had made him “invisible” to the termite’s scan, but that in itself was suspicious. A black spot on a map was suspicious in its own right, so trying to hide by making it look there was nothing at all was stupid.

At Jake’s behest, the environmental mana gathered between the barriers, and just in time as the second scan of the termite worker hit him. It just ran across the barrier like he was a big stone and continued through the rest of the tunnel unaffected.

On the other side of the wall of soil, the termite made some weird movements as it scurried off. Jake breathed out a sigh of relief as a bit of tension left his body after it disappeared. He had been so tense he hadn’t even noticed that he had gotten a notification halfway through his hiding attempt.

[Expert Stealth (Uncommon)] - The deadliest blow is the one not seen coming. You have proven yourself an expert in the arts of stealth, as you have learned to become a shadow that is only seen when you

wish to be so. You find it easier than ever to blend into the environment, making your presence, mana, and nearly all traces of your existence hidden as you wait for your prey to be vulnerable. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Perception while successfully remaining undetected.

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[Arcane Stealth (Rare)] – An upgraded version of the Expert Stealth skill, retaining all benefits while infusing in additional abilities related to your arcane affinity. You find it easier than ever to blend into the environment, making your presence, mana, and nearly all traces of your existence hidden as you wait for your prey to be vulnerable. You have enhanced your stealth capabilities through magic, allowing you to mask your physical shape to become one with the environment, even to the sense of touch and most magical scans. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility, Perception, Willpower, and Intelligence while successfully remaining undetected.

I feel like the system helped me out a bit there, he thought. It had been easier than expected to absorb the mana to make him blend in. Probably because the system had believed it high time for him to upgrade the skill, and when he was on the right track to improving it, the upgrade came, thus making it easier as he now had a skill and did not use freeform magic.

It was lucky, too, because Jake doubted he could even beat a few workers in his current state, much less if the Hive Queen was made aware of his continued presence and decided to send a few Guards.

Well... at least Jake had gotten something out of this shitty situation as he entered meditation again while keeping himself hidden. Soon enough, the termites began running through the tunnel he was in, stepping on the barrier, and one of them even decided to move it slightly to the side, likely just seeing it as a stone.

He did not respond as he was buried in soil and stone deep within the hive, just continuing his recovery.

Miranda found herself with an unlikely group as she experienced her first-ever dungeon dive.

Roman, Felicia, Sultan, Miranda, and Lillian stood within the dark Undergrowth as the nearly faceless monsters kept coming at them. The Deepdwellers threw their spears as the Fungalmancers cast their magic. At least they tried to as a vortex of frost and flames enveloped one of them.

A second Fungalmancer attempted to intervene as Felicia suddenly appeared behind it and stabbed it through the face. Miranda herself threw out bolts of Verdant energy as a shield protected her from attacks, a constant ritual in place making green wisps of light land on the Deepdwellers, making a moss-like substance grow on them.

The many Deepdwellers kept charging them as the group of humans had come to raid their small village but were simply too weak as they kept getting killed. Out of all of them, Sultan was the most frightening as he made the Deepdwellers kill each other, and when one of the Fungalmancers began mutating, he took out his black book and spoke a chant as the monstrosity just began punching and tearing at the air and ground until its energy expired and it died by itself.

Lillian was the final member of their group and the weakest by a fair margin as she had only recently evolved her class. Yet she did do well as she shot out small beams of light from what was essentially a laser pistol – made by Arnold, of course.

After the Auction, Jake had given Miranda the Lucenti Mage Akashic Tome, and they had decided to give it to Lillian, who had what Jake had called a “dogshit” class. She had graciously accepted it and began power-leveling it. She had chosen to forfeit the Perfect Evolution and evolved to D-grade a little over a week ago as her profession was already way higher level than her class.

Miranda knew her assistant had likely out-leveled her due to Miranda going for the Perfect Evolution if one solely discussed profession, and now she was beginning to catch up in class levels too. They had discussed a lot if Lillian could even evolve her race and keep leveling after the incident with Phillip and many others who appeared to have simply stopped getting levels, but Lillian had just breezed forward.

The Lucenti Mage class was... odd. Miranda did not quite get it herself yet, and while Lillian had been relatively open about what she could do, she also kept some cards close. She had always been reserved and private, and Miranda respected that.

Lillian could do a variety of light magic, but it wasn't only light. There was the Lucenti concept mixed into everything, giving her magic a mystical feel. It even allowed her to do some healing magic despite not actually being a healer at all, which was quite odd.

As for why she used a gun? Because Miranda had come to learn that Lillian was damn good with one for some reason. She still had no idea about her assistant's history before the system, how she ended up with Abby and Donald, or anything really about her background. What she did know was that Lillian had only shown loyalty and gratitude so far towards both Miranda and Jake, and that was good enough. The fact she had signed a contract also helped.

Miranda and the party continued through the Undergrowth that Jake had cleared long ago as they followed the vague guidance given by Jake when he recounted his experience doing it. They cleared the villages, got a few Golden Mushrooms when safe, and applied safe strategies where possible.

They overpowered many of the early villages, but they began to get pressured as they got further in. Sultan had to step it up more, and when several Fungalmancers and a Warlord appeared at the same time, Sultan had to pull out his ship and use that.

Without a tank, they did face some difficulties, but luckily Felicia was fast and good at grabbing attention in melee range, while Roman had some serious area of effect magic as well as incredibly potent elemental blasts that mixed frost and fire magic.

Finally, they employed a tactic Jake had insisted on as they went towards the place where Jake had said there was a Cave Troll.

[Undergrowth Cave Troll – lvl 149]

As they got there, they waited a bit before intercepting a fight and helping the troll by healing it, and Roman even went and made friends with the kid trolls.

It slowly began being more friendly, and ultimately Sultan told them he would stay there for a while to complete a task given by Jake. Miranda wondered what it was about, but did as he said. However, only upon him swearing he was telling the truth. She did probably need to get back to Haven again soon, so she headed back out of the dungeon together with the four others, leaving Sultan behind with the troll.

Sultan stood before the troll that kept scratching its back with its own weapon while making cooing sounds at the small trolls. He began communicating with the beast but found it difficult for it to understand. At least Lord Thayne had been correct in it not displaying too much hostility towards humans and how if they saved it, the troll would not attack.

Sultan sighed as he prepared several catalysts to enact the binding ritual. It was millions of Credits worth... but oh well.

A good while ago, when Lord Thayne had become aware of Sultan's abilities, he had given him a job. It was an odd job Sultan did not quite see the purpose of, but one he would do anyway: to get the Undergrowth Cave Troll out of the dungeon by first binding it to his own soul as a slave and then releasing it outside. He was even ordered to get the small trolls out with it.

This was an oddly sentimental request from the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, especially considering these were not the same trolls Lord Thayne had encountered when he did the dungeon. They were a different version of the same troll, but when it got outside, it would have no memories of anyone but Sultan's party.

To make it worse, this would even weaken the dungeon a tiny bit by removing a monster. Then again, perhaps it would help a bit as the Cave Troll tended to kill quite a few Deepdwellers, but it would for sure remove a scenario within the dungeon.

A part of Sultan could not help but question if there was something special about the troll from how Lord Thayne had emphasized getting it out. Perhaps it had some hidden skill? Unique powers? It was hard to say, and ultimately, Sultan did not dare disobey as he began the ritual – the troll willingly agreeing, partly through ignorance.

This is going to hurt, Sultan groaned as he already felt the strain on his soul from binding a creature higher level than himself, and he knew instantly he would be in a rush to get outside the dungeon and release it.

“What one doesn't do for their bosses.”

Chapter 388 - Onwards! To Haven!

Honestly, if there was one convenience the system had brought that Jake could not see ever living without again, it was the Self-Repair enchantment. That, and other enchantments allowing armor to

repair itself, like the Shadow Mend on his chest armor, just made life so much easier when you were someone like Jake who was prone to having whatever he was wearing destroyed.

Still hidden deep underground and surrounded by not-so-friendly termites, Jake took nearly two full days to get back in his best condition again. It was a lot longer than expected, considering his potion usage, proving that he had truly taken a lot of damage. What is more, was how hard the wounds felt to heal... like the Hive King had infused some energy into every attack to make it harder.

The problem was that he felt no such energy, just that healing was more problematic. That is until Jake really looked and found what he at first had thought was just small pieces of stone or dust mixed into the wound. He was wrong, as it turned out to be minuscule black splinters. In the end, Jake had to focus a lot of energy to push them out and even used his dagger to pry a bit to speed up the process.

Jake felt how much easier the healing got after, and he soon recovered fully. With his armor also mostly repaired, he prepared to leave. Jake kept up his stealth technique without being discovered throughout this entire period, making him feel quite good about that part. The fact the termites had chosen to just outright bury him had also helped, though he did feel the occasional scan of a worker pass through where he was. Probably just maintenance work or something.

Mobilizing mana, Jake released a small explosion of arcane energy around him to destroy the soil, instantly getting some attention from nearby workers. He did not give them time to do anything as he fired a beam upwards through the soil to create a path up to the main tunnel network above.

Jake climbed up and began running through the maze of tunnels as he went upwards and out of the hive. A few termites chased him, but Jake just avoided them as he kept getting the fuck out of there. He didn't know if the Hive Queen would call for the King again or something like that, and he had no desire to find out.

It took him hours as he made his way up. He was amazed at how many termites had already appeared again, as Jake began to realize how little of an effect his attack had made. Jake had killed tens of thousands of termites in E-grade, thousands in D-grade, and yet he had barely made a dent in their population.

How large is this hive? Jake questioned.

Moreover... how deep was it? The King dug downwards after it believed Jake had gotten away, almost as if it was in a hurry. Was there something going on down there that needed its attention? Also, if he was right, it was 220 or so; didn't that mean it had likely killed a lot of enemies that gave experience? AKA other C-grades?

What if there are more Hive Queens... more Kings... he suddenly thought. What if the area Jake had invaded and wreaked havoc in was only the upper layers of their hive. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed possible and the scarier the thought became. He could only hope that other powerful creatures in the subterranean world would keep the Isoptera hive occupied or that whatever restrictions were on C-grades would remain active long enough for Jake to become powerful enough to kill them.

Because for a hive such as the Isoptera to take over an entire planet was not something new to the multiverse: far from it. And Jake had no desire to allow Earth to turn into a termite colony. Not that he truly thought it was a possibility. He was there; other powerful factions existed, as well as many other scary things on their planet.

Soon enough, Jake only saw a few E-grade termites within the tunnels, and within a couple of hours, he found himself able to spot the surface through his Sphere of Perception. Picking up the pace, he zig-zagged through the maze of tunnels before finally spotting a hole with sunlight shining through.

Jake jumped and summoned his wings as he finally felt the warmth of the sun upon his skin. He had emerged a good distance away from where he had entered, by at least a hundred kilometers. He knew this due to still seeing the destruction left by him and the King of the Forest before he dove underground.

It made sense, though. Jake hadn't exactly been the most aware after he made the cursed weapon and had spent weeks in a haze as he got the curse and his own emotions under control.

After basking in the sunlight with a light smile, enjoying being out of the stuffed underground – especially being trapped inside his own cloak for two days - he set course back to Haven once more.

Reika stood at the helm of the floating barge as they flew across the plains at a respectable pace. The entire vessel was as simple as it came in design and nearly thirty-five meters long and ten meters wide without any real construction on it besides a large engine and control room.

On the barge were close to a hundred members of the Noboru clan. About twenty of them were D-grades like herself, with the rest towards the peak of E-grade. The only thing nearly all of them had in common was that all of them were alchemists, with the only exception being seven D-grade guards who were there in case they encountered trouble and two D-grades in charge of flying and maintaining their transportation vessel.

They had begun the journey by teleporting to the city under their control closest to Haven, and using a spatial compass, had taken off. Reika would have left earlier, but her great-grandfather's weakness after the Transcendent skill made her stay until he had stabilized and begun reclaiming his power. A part of her had feared the political ramifications of this weakness, but luckily none had dared make a move. This had been partly due to ignorance of how weak he truly was and, moreover, if he could somehow temporarily still display his full power.

Returning her thoughts to the present, Reika stopped dwelling on the past. He was better now and maybe even fully recovered. It had already been many weeks since they set off, with no one wasting any time as they all kept up their practice. They even stopped at a few minor settlements along the way.

One of the guards had a class called Pathfinder, allowing him to identify the best way to go and avoid areas and territories of dangerous beasts and monsters. Such a talent was invaluable for a journey like this, as without him, they risked ending up in the middle of the territory of powerful D-grades or, worse, a C-grade. Though the chances for that were incredibly low as one more or less had to go look for C-grades to find any.

That did not mean they had avoided dangerous situations, but they had been lucky so far. They had even met some interesting people on their journey and had some people travel with them between settlements. A few merchants, missionaries from the Holy Church, a party associated with Valhal, and even a solitary mage wearing a full-body suit of armor. Reika had not spent much time exploring the new world and had very much enjoyed this period and spoken to many of these travelers. A few of them had also given them things to bring to Haven. Mainly letters or magical letters to get in contact with the faction.

“Mistress, we are approaching the closest settlement to the place known as the Fort according to the map,” one of the guards said. He had likely been told by the captain of the barge, and Reika nodded in acknowledgment.

“ETA?”

“Four days till we reach the place known as the Fort at this pace, and from there, it should only be a swift teleportation using their internal magic circle,” the guard explained. The last part was a bit unnecessary, as Reika already knew, but she would not shame diligence.

Reika glanced out over the many alchemists, all working in different ways. Some used cauldrons, others used more scientific tools, and a few didn't really use anything as they mainly worked on transmutations. A few had even walled off areas as they made magic circles to keep progressing during this period of travel. It was indeed lucky that the barge was so stable all of them could work undisturbed.

“Good, make sure everyone is fully rested and put on their best performance. This is not a play-trip but as much a diplomatic excursion as it is anything else. The way we present ourselves may as well be the basis of the future relationship between the Noboru clan and Haven, and our entrance will mark how the regular citizens of the city view us,” she said in warning.

She had spoken loud enough for a few dozen on the barge to hear her, and she was confident they would spread the word of her expectations.

Soon, Reika thought as she was both excited and nervous. A lot of weight was on her shoulders, and she would do everything to not disappoint. At the same time, she also really wanted to explore the opportunities Haven had to offer. As annoying as it was, she had to admit that the last truly thrilling and enlightening discussion related to the field of Alchemy had been months ago during the Treasure Hunt. That conversation had only made her problem of finding worthwhile peers worse, so her desire to discuss with the one other person on the planet she recognized as more skilled than her – at least in some areas – was exhilarating.

Something told her Haven would hold many learning opportunities for ambitious alchemists, and she and everyone else there were more than willing to learn.

Feeling stat growth was always fucking awesome. Jake didn't usually notice it as everything was relative, if that made sense. You didn't feel a lot faster when you fought foes who also got a lot faster. So to truly get a feel for growth was difficult even if you knew you got stronger.

While in the hive, Jake put many points into Agility. He had gained levels and put on new equipment giving him even more too, so when he finally got above ground and began flying, he felt the difference. He felt how he got further with every One Step Mile and how every beat of his wings gave him slightly more thrust than when he had left Haven.

This ultimately meant the return trip to Haven was several hours faster than the way to the Insect Plains. He soon spotted the outskirts of the forest far in the distance and knew he would soon be home. He flew up a bit higher than usual and, making full use of this Perception, got a good look at the massive forest before him.

How big is it? Jake wondered. It was larger than any other forest on Earth before the system, that was for sure. It was likely larger than any forest had ever been and most certainly larger than the majority of countries had been. It spanned into the horizon, where Jake saw trees reaching up further than he could even see, like grand pillars holding up the sky.

Larger than continents?" Jake questioned. It wouldn't surprise him... the forest was just ridiculously massive. It was a lot like the underground of Earth and the entire world that existed down there. Jake knew that while he had gone a few thousand kilometers deep, he had barely scratched the surface of the subterranean world.

Needless to say, Jake was looking forward to fully exploring both the underground and the surface of the planet in due time. But for now, it was time to return home to his cozy little cottage. Jake already felt Sylphie was there, so that was a lucky coincidence as she was usually within the massive forest.

Jake flew down and over the trees as he spotted the valley. When he got closer, he felt the presences within the valley. He felt Hawkie and Mystie were there as well as Sultan and Miranda... but... there was also something else - a powerful aura that Jake recognized as he headed over faster, a bit excited.

“Are you sure it is a female?” Jake heard Miranda ask as he got closer.

“Seeing how it cares for the young, that would only make sense,” Sultan answered confidently.

“Fathers can also be responsible parents, you know,” Miranda countered. “It may be the mother died.”

Jake used One Step Mile as he landed and appeared nearby as he chuckled. “Or maybe Cave Trolls procreate through parthenogenesis?”

He had come with the intent to joke but did not get the expected response. Before anyone could say anything, the Undergrowth Cave Troll yelled and hid the small trolls behind its back in a panic as it tried to make threatening screams towards him.

Jake was taken aback but remembered that this was not the same troll... well, it was, but also wasn't. It was weird, but he chose to just see it as the same one he had encountered, but with permanent amnesia. Its demeanor was exactly the same, and Jake couldn't help but smile as he lowered himself a bit and controlled his aura to appear non-threatening.

“It's okay,” he said to the troll many times larger than himself. It stared at him for a few moments as Jake got an idea and fished out a few vitality-giving elixirs.

The troll stared at them as Jake offered one. The giant creature just kept looking as Jake chucked one towards it. The troll managed to catch it and sniffed it before tossing it in its mouth, eating the bottle. It reminded Jake of the troll eating his health potion during the dungeon, making him smile even more.

“See? Friend,” Jake said as he stood up. Sylphie also flew over and made some “rees” at the troll, which it seemed to understand as it wobbled over and sat in front of him. The small trolls also came over and began bravely touching and poking him. The only place they stayed away from was his head with Sylphie on it, and from their reactions to the hawk, he had a feeling she had already established dominance before he returned.

“Have you ever considered beast taming?” Sultan asked off to the side. “It took us over an hour to make it calm down and trust us just a little bit when we first met, and it took me over a full day to convince it I was trying to help take it out of the dungeon.”

Jake shook his head as he threw the man a glare. “I think I made my stance on that subject clear.”

The merchant put up his hands defensively as he muttered something unintelligible.

Jake ignored him as he turned back to the trolls. One of the small Juvenile Cave Trolls plopped down right next to him as it began playing with the ground while the other was trying to climb a tree, having likely never seen one before.

The adult cave troll was looking up towards the sun. Jake just smiled as he noticed something. The grass around the Undergrowth Cave Troll had turned greener than it was before. Jake’s Sense of the Malefic Viper activated as he felt the potent life affinity energy coming out of the troll as he smiled even more. Looking at the large troll, he asked:

“Now, I may not be into beast taming, but how would you like to get a job?”

No one had said anything about beast employment.

#### Chapter 389 - A Good Eye For People

Haven had a lot of land around it. Especially between the Fort and Haven existed a vast plain of nothingness. Jake had originally wanted to have the trolls live in this kind of area but quickly found out that wasn't a good option.

The Undergrowth Cave Troll clearly didn't like the vast open space outside of the forest, and Jake could feel its hesitancy. The small trolls were also hugging their parent closely when they got to a more open area, making Jake reevaluate.

They appeared to have something akin to reverse-claustrophobia, something Jake was informed was called agoraphobia by Miranda. With that in mind, they settled on the Cave Troll going back into the cave close to the dungeon entrance. The biodome was pretty large and mostly unoccupied by now, and the troll did seem to like the area. Probably also felt familiar with the passive mana output of the dungeon entrance nearby.

Once the troll was in there, it instantly began making a new cave in the wall, Jake seeing it use some earth magic of some sort to dig. By now, he had also fully confirmed the troll's mere presence encouraged growth in plant life nearby as if it had a life affinity aura.

Thinking a bit more about it, that was perhaps the reason the troll had been in the dungeon originally – to ensure the growth of plants down there. That, or it was because a life affinity troll just fit well into a life affinity-themed dungeon.

Jake had plans of turning the biodome into a garden, and he proposed this to the others who agreed. He then asked the troll and tried to communicate his intent, and after a bit of gesturing and motioning as well as Sylphie making bird noises, the large troll seemed to get it.

Now, there were some concerns about having a level 149 D-grade chill right below their city, especially as they really didn't know much about trolls, but so far, it had been perfectly calm around others. Shit, the large troll seemed more afraid of humans than anything, with the small trolls just acting like curious children. A few D-grade workers had even come by and seen the troll. They had waved at it, and the troll had just done a big wave imitating their actions before going back to making the cave.

The next day or so was spent with Jake talking with the troll and beginning to plant some stuff in the biodome. He would primarily place life affinity herbs there, so he had no plans to make it a mushroom-filled place... well, except if it was life affinity mushrooms.

After he had done some initial work and was sure the troll was nicely settled, he went through some other things he needed to get done. Well, and some things he wanted to do, like spend some time with Sylphie and hear about the adventures she and her parents had been on as they explored the forest.

The three of them had really been busy. A lot of Haven seemed to have as the dungeon had finally begun to be used, not just by Miranda and the others, but also Neil and his party, who were still in there. He even heard from Sylphie she and her parents wanted to go in there at some point too.

It was nice to touch base and get a lay of the land of how everyone was doing.

He also talked with Miranda about what he had been up to and his recent adventure, his respect for her ability to hold back judgment improved afterward as he saw her manage to hold in her words when Jake talked about making Eternal Hunger.

She, in turn, told him that his lab was done as of last week, and he was excited to check it out. They still needed his input on furniture, but that wasn't a rush job. He was also told to go check out an area at the Fort where Chris, that guy Villy had blessed as a semi-joke, had done something and asked for Jake's

presence. Miranda emphasized how he hadn't wanted to hurry him but that he still clearly wanted Jake's presence there soon.

He then talked to Sultan about getting his Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity fixed, but the man was clueless and did not possess any wares that would be of help. A bit disappointed, Jake just handed Sultan payment for getting the troll out of the dungeon and reimbursed the materials he had spent to make it possible.

Anyway, with Sultan not able to find a solution to fix his cauldron, Jake did the only other logical thing: he went over to the Fort to ask Arnold. At the same time, he could check out what Chris had been up to.

With a teleportation circle getting to the Fort was only a matter of seconds. When he passed through it, he went straight for Arnold's workshop, which had once more expanded as the man had taken over the entire citadel and courtyard at the center of the Fort. A metal dome now covered all of it, and the magic circle once placed within the citadel had been moved just outside into a new building designed to house teleportation circles.

When he went to enter the dome covering the workshop, hexagonal metal panels just slid away to give him entrance. To see how it worked, he moved upwards and saw the hole in the metal following him as he felt a subtle pulse of mana touch him. Some kind of scanner and malleable metal?

Once more, Jake had to admit that Arnold was some weird mad genius with all of the shit he was up to at all times. Inside the dome, it looked much the same except everything was more well-lit, and he also saw that drones and robots were still working on the dome itself, so it appeared to still be a work in progress.

Jake walked in and had already detected Arnold's location. The man also clearly knew he was coming based on the many cameras and drones flying around. The central citadel had been even further

reinforced, and by now, Jake wondered if the inside of this dome wasn't the safest place in the entire city... well, besides inside his lodge with the shield from the Pylon.

Inside the central building, Jake headed straight for Arnold, who was currently working on a sleek-looking drone. The rotors were all gone, and it looked more like a surfboard of metal than anything else.

"Yes?" the man said as he kept working. He wore an odd pair of glasses Jake had not seen before, and he felt clear magic from them, making him know they were an item.

"Two things," Jake said. "First of all, thanks for the help with the alchemy lab, and secondly, do you have any advice in fixing this?"

Jake took out the Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity from his inventory and placed it on one of the tables.

[Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity (Ancient)] - Sometimes less is more. A cauldron made by the Altmar Empire's expert crafters, it was created with the express purpose of efficient alchemy. Given to the royal alchemists in training, it often becomes a cauldron for life for even the most talented. The runes inscribed are easy to use and greatly enhance mana efficiency and conductivity while also making the entire working process far more transparent for the user. Enchantments: Mana conductivity (Supreme). Mana Transparency (Supreme). Durability (Extremely High). Requirements: Soulbound

His Identify still worked as before, and the cauldron only had a few cracks in it... but he wasn't sure if it was fixable. He had thought it was indestructible at one point, but the sheer power of the curse had still managed to damage it when he finally completed Eternal Hunger. In fact, it was likely due to the cauldron Jake had not accidentally blown himself up.

Arnold went over and inspected it, and Jake stood there nervously. Arnold turned it over and looked at the bottom a bit as he nodded.

“You have refrained from using the Altmar Alteration Rune?” Arnold asked.

“What?” Jake asked, confused.

Arnold turned it to him and showed him a rune inscribed on the bottom. “A rune made to allow the user to progressively strengthen, repair, and maintain the cauldron. From preliminary research, it appears this is standard practice to implement on most high-value Soulbound items in the Altmar Empire.”

Jake looked at the man weirdly as he was nearly afraid to ask. “So I can just infuse mana into that rune and repair the cauldron?”

“No,” Arnold answered, making Jake feel both a wave of disappointment but also relief that he hadn’t been so dumb to not know he could hav-

“You need to infuse all energies directly from your soul at once using the Soulbound connection, and the process will both strengthen and restore the cauldron in accordance to its original design.”

“... has that rune always been there?” he asked.

“This bottom plate holds the majority of the item’s properties and is the core, so yes, that is reasonable to assume. Moreover, this plate appears near indestructible as far as I can tell and is made of a metal I have yet to uncover the nature of... the same is true for the rest of the cauldron. Would you mind me studying it for a while?” Arnold asked in return, Jake feeling grateful there was no one else around to see how stupid he had be-“

“Haha! Finally! I have been holding my laughter for months and already won four bets with Duskleaf on how long you would take to figure it out! My poor disciple had so much faith in you, but I guess no amount of Perception can make you truly perceptive,” he suddenly heard Villy’s voice roar in his head as he felt the delight and schadenfreude of his patron god.

“This... huh. So I just do it like this?” Jake asked rhetorically as he picked it up and began channeling energy into it, purposefully ignoring Villy. He felt as all his resource pools were depleted as he focused on the rune. “What are the consequences of not having done this sooner?”

Arnold was busier observing the effects of the rune than listening to Jake but still spared Jake a look. “Based on my estimates, none.”

“Kind of rude to assume the Altmar don’t make foolproof cauldron. It is one of supreme simplicity, so I guess it is purposefully made so even the simplest of men can use it,” Villy’s voice came again, Jake trying so damn hard to ignore him.

Jake nodded in acknowledgment as he kept infusing his energies, Arnold watching on with interest. The guy even took out some measurement tool or something and began recording, Jake naturally letting him. As Jake infused it, the sillier he felt about not realizing there was some innate way to fix it earlier.

The description of the Altmar Cauldron of Supreme Simplicity said it sometimes became cauldrons for life for even the most talented alchemists, and based on Altmar standards, Jake assumed that was

better than D-grade by a fair bit. If Jake could break the cauldron now in mid-tier D-grade, he sure as hell would be able to in C-grade, so for it to be so “fragile” didn’t make much sense with the description. He didn’t think it was one he could use forever, though, but it should still hold up for now.

He was a bit miffed the description had not mentioned the rune, but Jake wrote that off as the system sometimes being annoyingly selective with such things, probably due to how the Identify skill worked. Whenever Jake investigated a plant, he would often get a feel for its properties within seconds with his Identify, including what kind of properties it had and what alchemical creations the item was useable in.

Meanwhile, if he used Identify on most metals, he would most often just get the name. Considering he didn’t have any skills giving him direct knowledge of runes or crafting of something even adjacent to cauldrons, it probably made sense it didn’t tell him. Ultimately, it was his own fault for not properly investigating his own tools.

“Is this kind of rune really that normal?” he asked Arnold as he infused energy.

“No. It requires the item to be Soulbound, and the materials and skill required in crafting it are not to be underestimated. By my assumptions, the creator of this cauldron must be at least B or A-grade, with it being purposefully made weaker for one of any grade to bind it initially,” Arnold explained as he kept recording Jake’s use of the rune.

Jake nodded as he kept infusing it with energy. It was slowly being repaired, but it also quickly became clear this was not something he could do in a single infusion. It was tiring work, and soon he was down to half in all resources with only a few of the cracks being sealed off again. At that point, he stopped, took out a health potion, and decided to continue later.

Arnold looked a bit disappointed at him stopping but didn’t say anything as he took out his tablet-thing again and began taking some notes.

Getting an idea, Jake took off another Soulbound item he had been wearing for a long time, wondering if that too contained some hidden secret. It was the very first epic rarity item Jake had ever obtained and perhaps still one of his most valuable. However, it was also an item that he had begun wondering why was Soulbound a while ago.

[Prodigious Alchemist's Necklace of Holding (Epic)] - An amulet awarded to a prodigious young alchemist upon completion of a trial. An ornate creation of high craftsmanship made of metal attuned to the space-affinity, holding a spacegem in place. Allows the user to store items in a small pocket dimension found within the gem. Due to the nature of the gemstone used, living, non-sentient entities can be stored without harmful side effects in temporal suspension. Enchantments: Alchemist's Spatial Storage. +25 Wisdom. Requirements: Soulbound

The spatial storage ring he and the others gained after they solved the Rubik's Cube had not been Soulbound as an example. It would still be bound to someone through the usual mana connection, and one would have to empty it before being able to unbind it and hand it to someone else, but it could still be handed off. Jake had once believed spatial items maybe just had to be Soulbound, but that clearly wasn't the case.

Jake showed Arnold the necklace, and the man frowned a bit as he inspected it. "I apologize; this seems to be out of my expertise."

"Damn," Jake said. "So no obvious enchantment to strengthen it or something?"

Arnold just shook his head. "Not self-evident ones, but I can take a deeper look?"

He had to admit he had just gotten his hopes up. The spatial storage on the necklace was damn great, but he did have to admit the 25 Wisdom were beginning to feel a bit... sucky. Like, he got hundreds of stats on everything else that gave stats, and yet his Soulbound spatial storage gave a measly 25.

So, needless to say, Jake would like a necklace upgrade. He had seen many other necklaces throughout the Treasure Hunt and even the Auction but had skipped all of them. A lot of them even contained spatial storages, but Jake liked his current one too much to switch it.

It was perfectly made for alchemists, and overall just worked great. It was also Soulbound, meaning killing him or somehow getting it from him wouldn't allow someone to steal all his stuff. Even if he didn't get it upgraded, Jake still wanted to keep using it... but he wasn't going to say no to improving it.

"Please do," Jake agreed to Arnold, hoping the oddball in front of him could figure something out.

Jake knew he wasn't an expert judge of character or even good at all that social stuff in general... and yet when he reflected on the day, he thought that he had actually managed to gather a lot of interesting people around him. Miranda, Lillian, Hank, Arnold, Neil and his party, the entire hawk family, newly added troll, and in some ways also the former King of the Forest and Sultan, who he had more of a pure working relationship with. So maybe he did have a good eye for people?

Oh... and of course the most important friend of them all.

"You know I can feel that you receive every single message, and you also suck at hiding that twitching in your left eye whenever I say something you disagree with, so I know you understand it. Even if you don't answer me, at least acknowledge your failure to poor Duskleaf; he is down more resources than your planet is worth many times over."

His Patron god, the respected and revered Primordial known as the Malefic Viper, currently acting like a teenager who had just gotten away with a prank.

#### Chapter 390 - A Monumental Monument

Jake looked on as the scientist worked.

Arnold kept looking at the necklace a bit more and took out some measurement tools again to try and take a few more looks. He frowned a bit more as he did so and just shook his head again. "I can determine this is also a case of an item purposefully downgraded by design to allow it to be used at a lower level. Sealed off effects and features exist within, and I would assume a skilled jeweler would be required to unlock it as well as catalysts and items to facilitate an upgrade. I theorize someone familiar with the crafting method would be beneficial to accomplish this, if not mandatory. I must, however, emphasize these are mere postulations."

Jake nodded again. That kind of made sense. Jake had gotten it at a low level, and it would have been overpowered if it gave a shitload of Wisdom right off the bat. The spatial storage was already pretty damn great to begin with, even if he had started to run into some limitations. Examples such as how it was unable to store liquids, not in containers, or how he couldn't store certain items that were too large or too heavy, like the Suncore Fragment. That last one could also be due to it having mana that radiated out of it.. but he wasn't sure. All he knew was that the legendary storage box could store it.

"Would you mind me investigating this rune a bit further?" Arnold suddenly asked, already having turned his attention back to the cauldron. "I find myself fascinated with the methods of the Altmar."

"Sure, go right ahead. I can even come back a bit later and do another infusion for you to observe," Jake agreed. Arnold had already helped him a good deal, so this was the least he could do.

The mad scientist nodded and barely acknowledged Jake's presence anymore as he went over to what looked like a large MRI scanner and placed the cauldron within. Jake just smiled as he headed off towards other engagements.

But... he did not fail to address a certain someone, as he finally answered Villy.

"Totally couldn't have told me about that rune at any fucking point?" Jake sent towards his dear Patron god.

Clearly still amused and clearly knowing Jake would answer eventually after fucking with him long enough, the Viper answered, half-laughing, finding the entire situation far funnier than it was.

"I could," Villy answered. "I just didn't."

"Rude," Jake commented.

"But funny," Villy countered.

"This is why I am a heretic, you know that, right?" Jake communicated as he exited Arnold's workshop.

"But also the reason you are my Chosen," Villy joked back. "Anyway, you have had a lot of fun recently. Big fan of the cursed weapon, very on-brand for my Chosen to walk around swinging a cataclysm given form."

“Thanks, I do like it myself. But, now that I have you, how do I upgrade my damn necklace? Was Arnold on the money with a part of it being sealed?” Jake asked, guessing it only made sense to ask the source itself.

“Partly, but I guess you will find out when you enroll, then you can go to one of the jewelers and ask them to help you,” the Viper answered, Jake, catching onto one of the words.

“Enroll?”

“Soon, the gateway between worlds shall open as the stars align, and the monument stands complete. As the void bends to your will and you find yourself in new lands, may you find the path towards greatness as an opportunity unlike any other is now before you!” the Malefic Viper said in a holier-than-thought kind of tone, being all dramatic.

“What the hell are you on about?” Jake asked, actually confused.

“I think it’s time you go check out what that little builder I blessed a while ago has been up to.”

Jake got an ominous feeling from those words, as he could only fear the worst as he took flight towards where Chris was.

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Jake didn't know what he should have expected. Miranda had already mentioned that Chris was making something, so he wanted to check it out anyway. He had known it was related to the Viper due to some vague words Miranda's Patrons had told her, but she had no details. Was it a surprise of some sort? Something Villy had purposely not wanted to share?

But when he saw Chris excitedly explain the monument he had spent months of blood, sweat, and tears on – a monument Jake had never asked for or wanted – he could only stand there and nod while being happy the mask was hiding his true facial expressions.

It looked like someone had taken five Stonehenge's, stacked them on top of each other, put metal pillars down randomly throughout, as well as drawn magic circles and runes that covered all surface areas. The entire "monument" was spread out over an area more than fifty meters in diameter, and to Jake, the placement of all the objects held no rhyme or reason.

Not that he could voice any of his thoughts with the young believer at his side.

"Once the final part has been charged, and the connection gets just a little bit stronger, it should be activatable and be used to establish the gateway! You should be able to travel to the Order and even bring others with you easily using this!" Chris explained, incredibly excited.

Jake just nodded. "Good job, I had not expected to see something like this made so soon... did the Viper direct you on how to make it?"

"Not only that, the Malefic One gave me a skill to allow me to!" he said with a starstruck attitude.

Oh god, why did you corrupt such an innocent one, Villy? Jake asked himself as he saw Chris truly was awe-inspired by the Viper. Definitely not in heretic-territory, that was for sure.

"I am sure this will be useful... when is it ready?" Jake asked.

"Oh, I don't know, only the Malefic One does; I just made it," Chris answered unbothered. "I am certain our Patron will tell you when it is time for you to use it."

"Yeah, honored Patron, do tell me when it is time to use this damn monstrosity you had this innocent young man build? And why was it built? Are you that excited to see me again?" Jake asked Villy through their connection.

"That is indeed the reason. For every moment we are apart, my heart aches, and my only consolation is that you have a part of me inside you at all times..." the Viper answered creepily. "Okay, okay, anyway, this was the easiest way to establish a connection between your universe and the Order. Pretty complicated magic that I won't even bother to explain to you, but just know that you being my Chosen allows me to tap into that blessing's innate power."

"Still doesn't answer why it was needed to begin with. Like, I get it is nice to have a way to travel, but didn't you say most space mages would figure it out anyway with due time? Why the rush?" Jake asked again.

"Oh, for you not to miss too much of the school year and get too far behind in your classes," the Viper answered with a serious tone.

“No,” Jake answered back.

“Yes!” Villy answered, cackling. “Are you really going to give up on a chance to study at the illustrious academy run by the Order of the Malefic Viper?”

“I will need a lot of information before answering that question,” Jake countered. Was Villy being serious? Jake didn’t even remember the Order had an academy. Not that he knew anything about the Order to begin with.

“Sure, sure, it isn’t fully ready yet anyway; we got time,” Villy answered dismissively. “But I am just going to say, I think you will like it; it isn’t like the institutions of learning you are used to, and the Order of the Malefic Viper is one of the premier schools of alchemy in the entire multiverse. Always has been, always will be. I don’t see any negatives from you attending at least, and with the teleportation circle, you can come and go as you want to.”

Jake sighed. “Fine, we can discuss it a bit more later.”

“You should go either way just to chill and get your necklace upgraded,” Villy added convincingly.

Once more, Jake agreed, finding Villy oddly dedicated to convincing him. It wasn’t like Jake was entirely against going; he just wasn’t really sure it was something he wanted. His studying days hadn’t exactly been the best, and while he doubted an ancient order of poison alchemists would be like the finance faculty at his old university, he was still confident he would be forced into meeting a lot of other people.

Jake didn’t like meeting other people that he couldn’t just avoid, ignore or at the very least keep at an arm’s length. Especially when it was people he had to get along with whether he liked them or not.

I'll deal with it when it happens... Jake just told himself as he moved on with his day.

He kept chatting with Chris a while longer, hearing all about the young man's crush on Louise and how they had gone on a "date" that even Jake was pretty certain was just two people eating together while discussing work. Not much different from what he and Miranda were doing.

After talking with Chris, Jake headed back to Arnold for another round of cauldron reconstruction, the entire process naturally meticulously recorded by the scientist.. or engineer... machinist? Robotics expert? Jake wasn't sure what Arnold actually was besides being a bit of a madman.

The good kind of madman.

He stayed at the workshop to look through stuff as Arnold researched before heading back to Haven again, leaving the cauldron with Arnold to study a while longer. Even after two infusions, it was still not fully repaired. During the repair, Jake even discovered a bit of curse energy embedded in the cauldron, forcing him to extract it before he fixed it. That, or see the cost skyrocket as the rune sought to outright destroy the curse energy, which was no simple task.

Back in Haven, he got kinda busy. Jake checked in with the troll, went out and got something to eat, played a bit with Sylphie, who showed off some new wind magic tricks, and even found a magazine of sorts with furniture ideas for the laboratory. After finally checking by Sultan's boat and having him be on the lookout for some herbs, he headed back to the lodge again. The merchant himself was going to the dungeon again with Miranda, Lillian, Roman, and Felicia, which was quite an interesting party. Finally, he could settle down and begin some preliminary research into the ritual to properly hatch the Pollendust Bee Queen after all that other stuff.

Reika had changed her clothes and taken a shower as she knew they were soon at their destination. The others had also cleaned up after they had stopped by a lake on the way to make everyone presentable. It was fortunate they had found it, for even with the system and armor with Self-Repair, people still got dirty and needed a good cleaning once in a while.

Taking a look out over the barge, the alchemists looked presentable, and the guards stalwart. Their group was powerful, and on this final trek, they had picked up another merchant who wanted to travel there. The diplomatic work this journey had already done was staggering, and they had even charted the entire way between Haven and the Noboru territory.

As a final thing, she inspected the goods they had brought as gifts, including several herbs to give to Jake directly. All of this was naturally to make the best first impression. Many items brought were also naturally for the de-facto leader of Haven, Miranda, whom she knew held most of the formal power, so getting in her good graces was in her best interest.

"I see it in the distance, I believe," the Pathfinder said to her side as he used some skill to see further. Reika turned and looked forward but saw nothing quite yet due to the rolling hills of the plains blocking her view and them flying only a few meters above the ground at most times.

"Is it the Fort?" Reika asked the man as she noticed his expression being a bit off.

"I... am uncertain. It appears to be, but there is also a giant dome of metal of some sort? It looks like an old observatory, perhaps?" the Pathfinder said, confused.

"Based on our information, the Fort should be an old medieval citadel that used to be a tourist attraction; I have heard nothing of there being any old observatory on the grounds," Reika answered, equally confused.

“No, this looks newly built, and I think smaller buildings are surrounding it,” he said after using his skill a bit more. “I do not have the ability to discern what is inside the dome; powerful enchantments are blocking all of my skills.”

Reika considered his words for a while as she suddenly remembered something. Jake had mentioned during the Auction event that he was getting a laboratory built to do alchemy in, and even a bit on how as an alchemist focusing on poisons, he would need it to be a sealed-off space.

That must be it, she thought. There was still a lot of uncertainty, but as they got closer and the Fort entered her line of sight, she became absolutely confident in her assertion. The metal dome was huge and using her identification skills, she could detect the sheer level of craftsmanship required to construct the entire dome.

Jake had mentioned it was close to his home but was also a bit hidden away to avoid killing the trees and nature around it. To place it here did make some sense, even if she didn't agree on putting it in the middle of a population center... then again, it was a valid strategy to openly display the level of power of the city owner.

For similar reasons, the courtyard belonging to the Sword Saint was placed in the middle of Saya. When he trained, the ripples of mana and pure energy would vibrate out to the surrounding area occupied by many high-level officials. It served as a constant reminder, and of course, being next to the true city leader made work easier.

“Head straight for the Fort; I believe that may be the property of Lord Thayne,” Reika said, the Pathfinder leaving to relay it to the captain of their vessel.

Reika remained as she made sure everything was ready. She did wonder who had constructed the laboratory before her, but she wasn't that aware of all the notable people in Haven. If she had to guess, then the man known as Arnold was likely involved. He was quite a famous figure in many circles due to being the premier supplier of communications tools through the System Store and subsequently through merchant caravans.

She smiled as everything was ready, and they soon crossed into the area surrounding the Fort and were spotted by a few guards on duty. They stopped the barge where they were upon being sure they had been seen as they waited for the welcome party to arrive.