

Hunter 501

Chapter 501 - Girl Time & Guy Time

Irin took the lead as she led Jake and the others toward the location of the dungeon. It wasn't as simple as Jake had thought it would be to get there. He had kind of just assumed it would just be another gate, and then boom, they would be teleported straight in front of it.

However, reality was a bit different. They went through a gate and appeared in a small waystation of sorts within an utterly massive damp cavern with the gate itself within a structure carved into the stone walls.

"We are currently within the first layer of Primordial-4. This part of the layer is usually safe in this area, and we shouldn't expect any C-grades to appear. The dungeon itself is placed deeper within this cavern. In case any of you are wondering, then not placing the dungeons in natural environments more suitable for the dungeon in question would just be moronic and waste resources unnecessarily. You need the mana density to reach a certain level, too, for the dungeon core to operate properly. This dungeon is also on the older side, making its placement a bit more inconvenient than usual," the succubus explained once they made it out of the small waystation. Jake saw that only a single person was present there, inside a hidden meditation chamber of sorts. While he could not be sure, he had a feeling this person was firmly in the C-grade and acted as a defender of sorts.

Not thinking deeper about the issue, Jake followed Irin as they began making it deeper into the cavern. The place was utterly huge, and when they made it out of a small cave system, they came to an even larger chasm-like cavern where Jake couldn't even see the ceiling. Below them were blue pools of water with beasts and monsters of all kinds everywhere, fighting and bathing in the water.

Jake felt that the water was some kind of natural treasure or perhaps the by-product of one. But this trip was not to collect water or fight beasts but to head to the dungeon. Besides, the beasts below were only around 120 to 140, so they were not worth his time at all.

“The blue water in the pools may look attractive but is actually completely useless by itself when it comes to alchemy. Instead, we allow the beasts to soak in it and refine the energy so that when they are killed, their cores can be harvested,” Irin explained once more, as both Reika and Bastilla looked curiously at the happenings far below. “Ah, but some members of the Order with heritages that allow them to make use of the pools also come by once in a while, so do watch out if you ever go hunting here. Would be unfortunate to kill another member of the Order.”

Irin gave a few more explanations of the local environment and what one could expect to find there if one decided to go exploring at one point or another. Jake considered if he should go at some point but probably wouldn't.

On the topic of getting to the dungeon, they had chosen to fly there as that was faster. There were some flying creatures in the cavern too, but none were threats. Hell, none of these flying monsters even bothered the party for one simple reason – Jake wasn't trying to hide his presence at all. The beasts all avoided them as they instinctually knew not to mess with them. Not that it was necessarily even needed for Jake to be the one to scare them off. Draskil's aura was plenty scary all on its own.

“The dungeon is located at the end of this cavern, pretty much just straight ahead. It shouldn't take us more than half an hour to an hour to get there,” Irin said with a smile. “I do not expect us to meet any beasts or foes that are of any danger to us.”

Draskil turned to Jake once he heard this and smiled. With a toothy grin, he spoke: “So, how fast is your flying speed?”

Jake wasn't surprised in the least as he smirked in response. “Are you looking for a race?”

The dragonkin didn't even respond as his wings began glowing with energy. Jake, in response, slightly raised his foot and got ready to step down. “No one says it needs to be flying, right?”

Draskil shook his head. "Loser owes a drink."

With those words, he exploded with power and took off. Jake threw a glance at Irin and got a nod in response as he stepped down and warped through space. He appeared over half a kilometer away before stepping down again. Slowly building up momentum, he chased after Draskil, who had a small headstart.

Irinixis sighed as she saw the two of them run off like two children let loose. She had been working in the Order for a long time now and had managed many individuals... but this was her first time getting such important people as two black tokens that even had a Malefic Dragonkin with a Divine Blessing among them.

Quite honestly, it was all luck. Then Humanoid Resources assigned managerial staff to those from the ninety-third universe; the groups they would manage were chosen entirely at random. Most others who handled groups from the new universe had gotten mediocre to slightly above mediocre groups. Having a few gold tokens would be considered exceptional, and a few of her colleagues had bragged about it.

So when Irinixis had been assigned two black tokens, she was ecstatic. Not to misunderstand, she still was ecstatic to be their primary contact person. This was a huge opportunity for her. There was just the minor issue that she felt completely out of her depth with both of them. She was used to powerful young masters throwing their weight around and caring about face above all else, but these two just did whatever. They were more like children than highly talented geniuses blessed by the Malefic One.

Perhaps their laidback attitudes are part of the reason for their growth, Irin thought, unsure if that could be the case. Either way, understanding Draskil seemed impossible at the current time, but as for the human? She had a great opportunity right there and then.

“So girls, I guess it is just us till we reach the dungeon. Better get going so we don’t make those two wait too long,” Irin said to the two of them with a smile.

“Let us,” the woman called Reika agreed. She began condensing a board of ice that she stood upon as a mode of transportation, having just flown using pure mana before. The beastfolk woman followed as she primed her wings with energy, Irin doing the same.

The three of them set flight, Irin being the fastest, but not by much. She was surprised at the level of magic deployed by the human, especially considering her limited time to train. She will advance to a silver token within not that long simply due to her talent in magic, Irin reckoned. I should not doubt the judgment of a black token... Jake believed she was worth bringing along and knows things I do not.

As for her beastfolk companion, she clearly had an Agility-focused race due to her feline heritage, making her on the faster side. She was about as fast as Reika, which in reality was just proof of Reika’s talent, considering she was firmly in the mage category.

While flying, there was no reason not to get to know one another as they would spend some time together in the dungeon anyway. It wasn’t like they were in a real hurry either, as Jake and Draskil could just spend some guy time together while they spent some girl time.

“Man, those two sure are something,” the beastfolk woman commented as she looked at Irin. “I am called Bastilla, by the way; a pleasure to meet you. Are you one of those management demons?”

“I am,” Irin replied, not thinking it worthwhile to further elaborate.

“Damn. That dragonkin one of those you help manage? What is he anyway, a gold token like that Jake guy?” Bastilla asked, confusing Irin.

“Neither of them has gold tokens?” she exclaimed, noticing Reika looked a bit embarrassed.

“Wait,” Bastilla said, glaring at Reika. “You said he was gold, though. With his own residence and all that.”

“I... didn’t want to... you know...” Reika muttered, Irin finding it a bit endearing as she smiled, fully understanding the situation immediately.

“She didn’t want to come off as a braggart and downplayed her connections. To clarify, both Jake and Draskil have black tokens and are both blessed by the Malefic One, the dragonkin – as you rightly pointed out – a Malefic Dragonkin carrying a Divine Blessing,” Irin explained.

Bastilla looked weird for a moment before she opened her mouth. “For real? Isn’t that like... a big deal? A super big deal?”

“Anyone with a black token is considered extraordinary and big deals, as you so eloquently put it,” Irin said in confirmation.

“I am beginning to feel the pressure here,” Bastilla shuddered. “Why am I part of this group again?”

“That I am not certain of,” Irin answered as she looked at Reika, who had some time to collect herself.

“As Irinixis said before, I didn’t want to show off, you know? It is also a bit embarrassing he is so much more skilled than me despite us spending an equal amount of time doing alchemy and learning energy control,” Reika confessed. “It is infuriating...”

Irin just shook her head. “Listening to all of you complain is infuriating. That you managed to get bronze tokens is already more than the vast, vast majority of the multiverse can ever achieve, and you are both early on your Paths. So just keep working hard, and you can go far. Meanwhile, I am hoping to make those two black tokens my ticket to C-grade as, currently, it is still a toss-up if I will make it.”

And wasn’t that the truth. Irin had been D-grade for close to a century and had only recently gained a single level. The path to C-grade was even harder, and while she did have some confidence, it wasn’t a sure thing. She downplayed it a bit to the two girls, but she was truthful that she wanted to make Jake and Draskil – or at least one of them – her ticket to C-grade. It was what her profession was all about, after all. As for if she would also progress her succubus race... now that was a whole other question.

“Still didn’t answer why I was asked to join,” Bastilla muttered, making Irin refocus on the conversation.

Reika just sighed. “In all honesty? I think the primary factor was proximity. Jake wanted a fifth, and there you were.”

Irin nearly flailed a bit while flying as she heard the reason. I truly don’t understand these geniuses... but I should take the chance to.

“Reika, I have been wondering about the planet you and Lord Thayne hail from,” she began with a smile. “I strive to know more of those I am assigned, so I would love to learn more about you two and your origins.”

It was a perfect time to learn about at least one of the two geniuses when he wasn’t within earshot.

The two “geniuses” managed to turn what should have taken half an hour into a less than a five-minute trip. Jake had used One Step Thousand Miles, while Draskil had a legendary movement skill related to flying. Jake won out in the skill department when it came to traveling as One Step was a line of skills used for traveling and not necessarily for combat, while Draskil’s skill was more combat-oriented with a focus on instantaneous movement to escape and attack.

However, the level disparity meant that Draskil could make up for it. He was just faster, and Jake failed to catch up in the short time it took to reach the dungeon. Without the headstart Draskil had, Jake could have likely caught up.

Ah, but Jake still won. The race was to the dungeon... and Draskil flew straight by it while Jake picked up the unique mana signature emanating from a hole in the ground. Draskil quickly noticed Jake hadn’t followed and put two and two together.

Which led to their current situation.

“I was faster,” Draskil said.

“That wasn’t what we were competing about. It was who would make it to the dungeon first. Which I did,” Jake argued.

“Who cares about who got here first when I was faster,” Draskil sneered, clearly dissatisfied.

“If it wasn’t about who got here first, then why get a headstart? And didn’t I slowly catch up to you?” Jake argued further, feeling like he had Draskil cornered.

“Does not matter. I was the fastest to pass by the entrance and won,” Draskil refused to back down.

“If you run past the finish line, it doesn’t count,” Jake smirked. “And if it wasn’t for me, you would still be flying right now.”

“She said half an hour,” Draskil then decided to blame a third party.

“Sounds like bad excuses,” Jake laughed. “Just take the loss.”

“I didn’t lose.”

Jake was beginning to believe that this was not an argument that could be won as the other party simply chose to deny reality. Okay, in some fairness, all Draskil had asked was how fast Jake was, and there were no formal rules, but Jake only found it reasonable that their race was to the dungeon.

Having decided to not pursue it further, he properly inspected the chasm the hole had led into containing the dungeon. The entrance to the dungeon looked incredibly out of place as it was just a black metal door embedded in a stone wall, and it looked like one could easily break it or take it away. However, with further inspection, it became clear the gates were somehow entirely locked in place.

Jake inspected them with Draskil still moping, proving that he did recognize his loss. He just was just too shy or prideful to admit it. At least that is how Jake chose to interpret the actions of the dragonkin. Feeling good about himself, Jake began to consider ways to pass the time as they waited for the rest of their party to arrive.

About forty minutes went by before the others made it to the dungeon, and in the meantime, Jake had time to craft a batch of health potions just for good measure. Draskil had also gotten bored and began to meditate.

“Sorry for the wait,” Irin apologized when she made it into the chasm along with Bastilla and Reika.

Draskil just made a slightly dissatisfied noise while Jake waved it off. Having no need to exchange more words, they all went over to the gate, and as Jake lay his hand upon it, a system message appeared.

Dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns.

Requirements to enter: D-grade

Requirements to enter met

WARNING: Only 5 challengers are allowed per party attempting the dungeon.

Enter Dungeon?

Y/N

Not a single one of them hesitated as all five entered the dungeon. Jake felt excitement as he was teleported by the system, but his excitement died instantly when he appeared in the dungeon.

His smile faded, and his eyes opened in horror as he gazed out upon the first floor and what they could expect this dungeon to contain. "Fuck me," Jake exclaimed out loud, realizing this whole thing was a mistake. Because he saw them.

Mushrooms.

So many fucking mushrooms.

Chapter 502 - Mushrooms... So Many Mushrooms.

Jake had to question if it all was just one cruel joke that everyone but himself was in on. Had Villy put them up to his? Was he the one who had tipped off Draskil to choose this dungeon? Maybe influenced Irin? There had to be more to this than pure randomness. Because what Jake saw was just a hellscape.

The expansive cavern Jake stood before contained a large forest, but it had massive mushrooms rather than trees. The underbrush was just moss and mushrooms, mushroom spores covered the sky and floated in the air, and there were even mushrooms growing on the mushrooms.

And if that wasn't enough, then the first movement Jake saw was of a large mushroom with mushroom arms and mushroom legs, holding a mushroom shield and wielding a mushroom stalk as a club. The figure was about three meters tall and on the bulkier end, but was overall clearly a low-tier creature, even if its level was decent.

[Mushroom Man Warrior – lvl 171]

"I hate this place," Jake said as the first person to speak after entering the dungeon.

"Smells like shit," Draskil snorted, clearly not enjoying the mushrooms either.

Irin looked a bit confused while Reika understood Jake's hatred. Not because she carried it herself, but because Jake had ranted plenty of times to her about the evil shrooms. Bastilla was even more confused than Irin and just asked.

"Why? Aren't mushrooms great for poisons?" she spoke in her infinite ignorance.

"Great for poisoning people who don't know better too," Draskil muttered before looking at Jake. "We kill everything?"

“Wait!” Irin cut in. “Please do not destroy the corpses too badly as we may need them for materials or to get their life cores. Do we have anyone here with scavaging or dismantling abilities, by the way?”

Bastilla raised her hand. Jake was a bit surprised but didn’t show it. Irin looked at Jake momentarily with approval before nodding. “Very well, then you take care of dismantling all the corpses.”

“I will begin to collect materials and search for them then,” Reika said, but Jake decided to cut in as he looked at Draskil.

“Will killing any of these mushrooms even give you any experience worth mentioning?”

“No, but I would enjoy it,” Draskil answered bluntly.

“Totally fair. I was just thinking that we should have Reika and Bastilla kill those here on the earlier floors while we collect stuff and pass the test. Besides, we have four whole weeks total, and we both know we won’t need that time, and if we do need the time, it is due to the far more time-consuming alchemy aspect and not due to killing things slowly, so better you help me out,” Jake said.

Draskil clearly didn’t like the idea but grunted in approval anyway. “Fine... but if any of those damn mushrooms get in my way, I kill them.”

“Again, totally fair,” Jake nodded with a smile before turning to Bastilla and Reika. “Time for you two to put on your hunting boots and get killing.”

“Alright,” Reika agreed without arguing.

“I... I’m not really the fighting type of gal?” Bastilla said, seeming a bit shy for the first time since they met. She was obviously not a fan.

“Too bad, but sometimes you gotta fight to survive. You are a beastfolk. You are innately a fighter. Just tap into some of that primal instinct and go rip those damn shrooms to pieces,” Jake said encouragingly.

It wasn’t like it would be dangerous either way. Jake had a very good feel for the mushroom warrior, and it was clear it was damn weak, just as one would expect from a mushroom man. Mushrooms all sucked, after all.

“Okay...” Bastilla agreed after a comforting look from Reika.

“I shall help guard them while they hunt,” Irin added.

“No,” Jake shut the sentiment down. “Unless some hidden boss or a horde of those shroomy fucks pops out of the ground, it is their fights, and no one interferes.”

Bastilla looked like she wanted to protest, but Reika spoke up first. “I must agree. It is no proper fight if we have someone constantly guarding us. I have not fought for a while, and it is about time I get in some proper practice. Without a true element of danger, it wouldn’t be as worthwhile.”

Jake nodded in approval, seeing some of that Noboru blood leak through. Irin looked a bit concerned, but Jake wasn't. One had to remember that while Reika was not considered a peak fighter on Earth, then she was considered a single tier behind. And the peak fighters of Earth were out of the ordinary, to say the least.

They all watched as Reika pulled out a white scabbard and pulled out a sword. Jake felt the immense cold emanate from it as her mana stirred and infused the blade further. "I am ready."

Her aura had changed and was now both colder and sharper than before. Irin looked surprised, while Draskil seemed far more approving than before. Bastilla was the most surprised as she just stared before collecting herself. "Fine... let's go."

They all watched as Reika took the lead and approached the mushroom man. White cold air revolved around her as she stepped forward and charged. It looked like a simple charge, but Jake saw how the concept of ice enveloped her feet in icy mist, making her footwork faster and far more unpredictable.

The Mushroom Man Warrior turned to the human twenty or so levels below himself... itself... whatever. The mushroom swung his club, displaying a respectable amount of Strength and speed. Reika didn't even flinch as she dodged the attack and swept her blade upwards, leaving a cold trail. The mushroom man was cut deep into his mushy flesh and made an odd roaring sound as he just kept swinging the club haphazardly.

Reika took a bit to really get in the zone, and Jake saw noticeable improvements in her movements with every exchange. Having seen her fight before, Jake knew she was just getting into the swing of it. The mushroom man was nothing more than a training dummy for her to refind her fighting instincts after a long time of just doing alchemy and living in safety.

It took her only five minutes until Jake saw she was done with her opponent. She took a single step back from her opponent and fanned the sword in a circular pattern as it left afterimages behind. These afterimages froze in the air and turned into blades of ice that Reika sent barraging towards the mushroom man. It was impaled by dozens of them before Reika sheathed her blade again, and the moment she did, all the frozen blades exploded, blowing the body of the shroomy fuck apart into seven frozen parts.

“That felt refreshing,” Reika smiled as she walked back to them, not a single trace of dirt on her clothes.

“You know how to fight. You are skilled,” Draskil said, speaking to Reika for the first time.

“I try my best,” Reika bowed. “But I still have long to go before I would call myself skilled.”

“Don’t compare yourself to the old man,” Jake joked.

“Who is this old man, if I may ask?” Irin asked curiously.

Jake gave Reika a look, signaling that if she wanted it to be shared, it was up to her. She nodded and chose to answer.

“My great-grandfather and a true swordsman,” Reika answered with a smile, clearly proud.

“Is he strong?” Draskil asked again.

“Yes,” Reika just answered. “He taught me just a little bit of swordsmanship, and it has served me more than well.”

Draskil looked like he wanted to ask more, but Jake cut in. “Anyway, how about we actually do the dungeon now? As you can see, then Reika knows how to handle herself, so let’s leave the two roomies and go find out how to pass this floor and get to the more exciting parts of this accursed place. Hopefully somewhere with no mushrooms.”

Irin nodded in agreement, even if she did throw a few more curious glances at Reika. “Let us. We should look for the passageway to the next floor. The requirements to pass must be there.”

They better be, Jake thought. So far, all he had seen in the dungeon was mushrooms, and he wanted to pass this floor fast. The system message when he entered the dungeon wasn’t very useful either.

You have entered the dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns.

Objective: Pass at least four floors of the Indigo Caverns within the 28-day limit.

The only new information here was that you only needed to pass four floors to complete the dungeon, meaning everything after that was optional for better rewards. The time limit of four weeks was likely there to ensure that people couldn’t just enter, find out what they needed to do, and then leave the dungeon to make detailed plans or spend insane amounts of time testing and experimenting until a solution was found. Sure, one could leave the dungeon, but Jake knew that time kept passing inside even after one left. At least it did so for a period of time, making it unfeasible. There was also one more

thing... Jake couldn't find any exit. Not that he planned on leaving, but he had kind of gotten used to there being an exit from where they entered, while in this dungeon, there was just a cave wall.

Leaving Reika and Bastilla behind, Jake, Irin, and Draskil flew further into the dungeon floor. The first floor wasn't actually as big as Jake had initially thought, but only a few dozen or so square kilometers at most, with two kilometers to the mushroom-covered ceiling.

With that in mind, it didn't take them long to find the passage to the next floor. It was a gate like the one they had entered the dungeon through, and in front of the door was a large cauldron with a lid on it. Furthermore, on the wall beside the gate, an inscription could be found.

An inscription with pretty easy instructions.

Create three different kinds of poisons of at least inferior rarity from the materials found on this floor and place them all in the cauldron. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least one hundred Mushroom Man Warriors must be slain.

Progress: Mushroom Man Warriors killed: 3/100. Poisons placed in the cauldron: 0/3

As expected, the first floor was easy peasy. They just had to kill a hundred Mushroom Men, and with Reika and Bastilla already killing three, it would get done pretty quickly by itself. So all Jake had to do was to make the three poisons.

"Well, this is easy enough. Just get some different ingredients, and I will toss them together and make a few different poisons," Jake said.

None of them had expected much difficulty to begin with, and all set out again. Draskil and Jake both had Sense of the Malefic Viper, and Irin also had her own skills to search for valuable items. Amidst the many normal mushrooms spread throughout the forest were many special ones that counted as items, and Jake also quickly noticed how peculiar the fungi were.

The spores in the air all around them at all times weren't just for ambiance and released from the mushrooms – it was a unique feature of the dungeon and something all the ingredients there relied on. Nothing could be taken out of the dungeon without wilting, and Jake noticed how these spores even seemed to “enter” his spatial storage whenever he put a mushroom in it.

Jake also became aware of this from eating a lot of mushrooms. He hated mushrooms, but he still recognized that eating them was a good idea due to their uniqueness. Every single mushroom inside the dungeon could not be found on the outside but was specifically made for the dungeon.

Pulling out some old tricks, Jake made mushroom soup and went around just eating as he collected stuff. In the distance, he heard fighting, and at times a dark green pulse of power went through the floor when Draskil killed a Mushroom Man Warrior that got in his way.

What was a little disappointing was that all the mushrooms were common rarity at most, but it had to get better as they progressed through the floors, right? He damn well hoped so, as finding nearly only inferior rarity stuff sucked.

After an hour of eating and searching, Jake headed back to the passageway and plopped his ass down to do some alchemy. He had already gotten some ideas, and quite frankly, it was an easy job anyway.

If this had been before Jake had ever gone to the Order, it would have taken him a lot longer to confidently say he could successfully create three poisons that easily, but his general knowledge had come far. Taking out some mushrooms and some of the moss, Jake tossed it all into the cauldron along with some purified water and a few drops of his blood to act as a catalyst.

Irin returned and checked in on him ten minutes or so later as Jake sat there and let the cauldron simmer. She clearly didn't want to disturb him, but that was a needless worry.

"Found good things?" Jake asked.

"Not really," Irin answered after getting the go-ahead to talk. "This is the first floor. There aren't really ingredients I think anyone would consider good."

"Fair," Jake said.

"Are you confident in making the three poisons by yourself?" she asked.

"Well," Jake said as he dispelled his Alchemical Flame. "Got one already."

He opened the cauldron and nodded as he took out a few bottles. Once everything was in them, he inspected the final product.

[Weak Necrotic Mushroom Poison (Inferior)] – A poison created from the unique mushrooms of the Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns dungeon with necrotic properties, infecting and killing off biological material in the affected area. Wounds caused by necrotic poison are somewhat difficult to heal. The poison takes effect upon any contact with any biological material.

Jake instantly knew that even if it had added a bunch of things about the dungeon, this was really just normal necrotic poison. He also knew he could bring it outside no problem and use it like normal.

“That was fast,” Irin exclaimed.

“Of course,” Jake laughed a bit as he began his second concoction. Looking at the engraving, he saw that the hundred Mushroom Man Warriors were already dead, and the dungeon cauldron was open. To test, Jake tossed a bottle in the cauldron and saw the progress tick from 0/3 to 1/3.

“Well then, second poison,” Jake smiled as he threw in the ingredients. “In the meantime, can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?” Irin asked curiously.

“Can you roast the mushrooms or something to eat? The taste is driving me nuts,” Jake said spitefully.

Irin surprisingly smiled as she took out a small canister of sorts along with a large bowl. She then deposited all her collected mushrooms in the bowl and opened the container as an orange liquid covered the mushrooms. She tossed the mix a bit before nodding.

“Try one now,” she offered, and Jake promptly responded by extending a string of mana. He swooped up a mushroom and put it in his mouth as his eyes opened wide. How could he have forgotten the secret to making horrible salads edible?

Tasty dressing.

Chapter 503 - Truly Evil Dungeon Design

It didn't get better. Jake had hoped that the second floor would be less mushroomy, but it wasn't to be. In fact, there were even more mushrooms, and some of them were even aggressive and attacked them. Mushroom Man Mages had also been added to the list of enemies, usually wandering with their warrior kin.

The second floor ended up proceeding much like the first. Jake hadn't even needed any materials gathered by others from the first floor, and he and Draskil had ended up just having a mushroom feast prepared by Irin, who shared that she had a skill related to cooking. Why would a succubus have a skill related to cooking, one might ask? Jake didn't truly know, but he did know that he and Draskil both liked her better after she began making their mushroom meals far tastier. Perhaps she had only become a cook to integrate herself with others not only through social interactions but through their stomachs. A truly insidious strategy that Jake was totally fine with.

Anyway, the second floor was also rather dull. All it required was for the party to kill at least two hundred mushroom men and craft at least three different resource-restoring potions using the materials found in the dungeon. Jake once more did all the crafting while Reika got some combat done with an already tired-looking Bastilla joining in.

Draskil was just wandering about eating stuff, and Jake did see him at one point juggle three Mushroom Man Warriors in boredom. No, not juggle in the figurative sense but the literal one as he tossed them up in the air before catching them again.

On a side note, then Jake and the others also finally found the exit to the dungeon. Inside every passageway leading to the next floor was an exit that could be used, but it was only available in the passageway. If anyone entered the next floor, the exit would cease to function, and one couldn't go back to earlier floors once one had been successfully passed.

The third floor was once again more of the same, but at least there was something more than mushrooms present. Several flowers and plants had begun to grow together with the mushrooms, and one part even had a small lake with water plants inside. The challenge on the third floor was to craft a poison using the lake water. The poison itself had to retain all the toxic effects of the lake water but without any of the restorative properties. In essence, it was a test of purification rather than true crafting. There was one small snag, though – the water had to also increase in potency enough to be recognized as a common rarity poison.

By default, the water was of inferior rarity, and if the restorative effects were removed, it was questionable if it would even qualify as an item. This floor was the first time Reika proved her skills as she quickly figured out a way to distill the water, and Jake quickly realized that if he then just added some mushrooms also present on the floor, he would be able to make it.

On this floor, Bastilla also had to stop joining in on the combat or at least only fight with Reika. Reika herself was also struggling as the mushroom men got stronger, and the mages and warriors now also had something called defenders, which carried two mushroom shields.

Ah, not that there was any cause for concern if they could pass the floor or even subsequent ones. Draskil still ripped every single opponent apart with ease, and Jake had only killed a few himself who got in his way, all of them with only a few moves with his two katars.

From the fourth floor, the dynamic became more how they initially planned to do the dungeon. Draskil was in charge of the killing, with Bastilla primarily dismantling the corpses using skills Jake had never seen before. Usually, any creature killed only dropped its core or one other item, but Bastilla could

dismantle a corpse and gain far more. Using her skills, most parts of the creature would turn into items of some variety, but her greatest ability was how she could redirect the Records of a slain creature. She could change it so that rather than the orb storing all the energy, it would instead enter another or several other parts of the body. Sure, crafters could already infuse cores into materials from a monster, but Bastilla didn't just infuse the core into something – she infused the whole damn corpse. It was a bit weird seeing an entire mushroom man be reduced to a small piece of white mushroom flesh teeming with energy, but who was Jake to argue with system rules?

Reika and Jake also began to team up from the fourth floor and did all the alchemy. The challenges got quite a bit more complicated, and it was clear that the fourth one had a spike, likely due to being the last required floor one had to pass to complete the dungeon.

Oh yeah! The fourth floor also had a boss. Mushroom Man Commander. It was a bigger than usual mushroom man surrounded by many other mushroom men. Jake needed a piece from the boss to pass the floor, so he had Draskil be nice and not destroy the mushroom too much so Bastilla could still use her skills properly on it.

Needless to say, nothing seen so far could even touch Jake or Draskil. The Mushroom Man Commander had only been level 185 and wasn't even that strong of a D-grade. Jake could likely have killed it with one well-placed Arcane Powershot and one hundred percent killed it with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Draskil also only needed a few moments to kill it with his claws.

Jake had yet to really see how Draskil fought even after going through the floors with him. Seeing the dragonkin kill mushroom men by swiping his claws casually didn't give much insight, but at least did let Jake know Draskil was a melee fighter. Granted, Draskil didn't know Jake's fighting style either, as he had yet to pull out his bow.

Even if the fourth floor was a bit more difficult alchemy-wise than those prior, it still only took Jake and Reika a few hours to find out how to properly combine the Lifecore from the boss monster with the other ingredients. This floor was primarily made hard by only having one real shot at succeeding with the Lifecore, but at least they could practice the craft with lesser Lifecores from the other mushrooms

before the real attempt. On the note of crafting, then Jake was the one doing all of the actual alchemy, with Reika taking more of an advisory role. She did still do some crafts, but it was only exploratory ones to figure out stuff for Jake to reference.

Only a bit over twenty-four hours after entering the dungeon, they stepped foot in the passageway to the fifth floor, having officially “completed” the place. They all stopped as a system message appeared before all of them.

You have successfully passed four floors and have officially completed the dungeon.

However, if the quest ends here or not is up to you. Five more floors await you as you delve deeper into the Indigo Caverns, with challenge and opportunity growing hand in hand. Perhaps you may even see what dwells at the bottom of the caverns and obtain the true reward...

Do you wish to continue delving into the Indigo Caverns?

“I must admit... we got here faster than expected,” Irin said, shaking her head in slight disbelief. “I had estimated it would take us around two days, maybe closer to three.”

Jake had to agree with her assessment... shit had been easier than expected. Granted, it would have taken him a bit longer if he was alone, but Jake could have definitely passed the place solo in between two and three days easily.

“Well, we do have two absolute monsters here,” Bastilla muttered.

“Yeah, Reika and Irin are damn beasts at what they do!” Jake agreed, failing to hold himself back from making a joke. The two of them had been incredibly helpful, but it was obvious that the two main contributors had been Jake and Draskil. However, one should not discount the absolutely essential job Irin had.

She made mushrooms actually edible. The succubus did complain at one point about being reduced to a cook but still kept making mushroom feasts nonetheless. Okay, calling it cooking was maybe a bit much as all she did was season the mushrooms. Ah, but it was special seasoning. Not only did it make the mushrooms taste better – it had synergy with Palate of the Malefic Viper.

It made the knowledge obtained more... digestible and allowed Jake and Draskil to absorb it faster. It was a small and near-negligible effect, and the true worth was in making the mushrooms edible, but it was something. Not that the two of them would have cared if all her seasoning did was make mushrooms somewhat taste good as that was sure as hell a requirement because the god damn mushroom nightmare continued floor after floor, only getting worse.

On the note of eating copious amounts of mushrooms, Jake learned that while Draskil was not an alchemist, he still kind of was? He didn't concoct poisons the usual way but instead told Jake how he made it inside his body. He had what could almost be called an organ where he cultivated poisons using Palate and pretty much crafted toxins for him to use on his claws, fangs, and even to refine his blood.

Draskil thus needed to also eat a lot of poisons to both expand the scope and depth of his poison. Jake could only imagine the nightmare if he was the only one eating all that Irin prepared, so he was glad to have someone to share the pain with.

“Are we going to keep up the pace?” Reika asked, ignoring Jake's “praise.”

“Yes,” Draskil just stated.

Jake shrugged. “The big bad dragonkin has spoken. I want to reach this final C-grade boss too.”

“Will we actually fight it?” Bastilla asked with a bit of worry.

Draskil and Jake both looked at her and answered in concert. “Yes.” “Yeah.”

They had both killed C-grades before – well, Jake had killed one – so not trying to at least fight it would be silly. Irin had even mentioned how it was weak, so it would be a shame not to.

Having decided to continue, they entered the fifth floor after all agreeing to continue. The system prompt was not really a vote but more just an opportunity to leave, and Irin explained that if anyone did choose to exit, they could get their rewards then and there and be out. The rest of the party could still continue.

This floor was more of the same, even if the difficulty had spiked. Jake decided to finally join in on the action and helped kill some foes as they now had to slay five hundred mushroom men to proceed and craft a weird type of poison Jake had never come across before. A poison that seemed to erode water somehow. Not absorb it, but just make it disappear. It was weird, but Reika came in clutch again and helped find a solution, making the fifth floor take only around ten hours total.

Sixth floor? Same shit, more mushrooms. Took them twenty-two hours as the alchemy challenge was actually quite hard.

The seventh floor was next, but this one was at least different... in a bad way. It was a fucking water level with mer-mushroom men, which looked exactly as abominable as one can imagine. This floor was by far the hardest, and everyone hated it, even those who didn't carry the justified hatred of mushrooms Draskil and Jake did.

Irin complained about her magic feeling weaker and her wings getting soggy, Reika hated how her ice magic sucked in water, Bastilla how she had fur and how she wasn't made for swimming, and Jake because he was a sane human being who knew water levels sucked.

Draskil though... Draskil didn't really hate the water. No, he was more just uncomfortable. Jake wondered why but it got worse as time passed, and Jake finally realized after about half an hour. He was terrified. Jake felt legitimate fear from the mighty dragonkin as he swam in the underground cavern full of water. There had to be a story there, but Jake didn't want to pry. There was a time and a place for everything, and an underground cavern where the likely stronger than him dragonkin was already on edge was definitely not that time and place.

They still passed the dungeon, but it took a grueling two days and three hours. The poison they had to craft was also just a god damn nightmare to make. They had to make a bloody fire affinity poison using only water and earth affinity mushrooms found in the water. This was all while getting chased by horrifying mushroom men with squiggle tails and octopus-like tentacle arms trying to kill them.

Passing the gate to the eighth floor, they all took a small breather in the passageway. They dried off and decided to make camp for the first time there and then to all recover. They had just been running on potions and not really expending any resources due to how easy it was on all the prior floors, but the seventh water level had been hell.

Irin took out a massive party tent of sorts that barely fit in the rather large passageway and pulled out furniture to allow them to sit down and relax.

"I fucking hate water levels," Jake muttered as he sat on a couch in the large tent. He got a few approving nods as Irin asked inquisitively.

"Oh, you got a term for these kinds of challenges?"

"Yeah, that term is called shitty design. At least I tend to view them as proof the creator of the game ran out of good ideas and just decided to make something shitty to pad the time. I guess the creator of this dungeon wanted to spice things up and added a water level but ended up just making this dungeon go from a mushroom-filled hellhole to a soggy and wet mushroom-filled hellhole," Jake said only half-jokingly. Not even half-jokingly... maybe quarter-jokingly.

Irin stared for a moment before regaining her composure and smiling. "I am sure the previous floor was well-thought-out. Knowing how to adapt to a new environment is an important trait that the dungeon creator wanted to teach us."

"Sure. Doesn't mean it didn't suck," Jake countered, getting a reluctant nod in return.

"I will need to go meditate for a while," Reika added in with a sigh after their useless quipping about water levels. "Just wake me up once everyone is ready. I should be able to manage either way."

"Same... for the meditation part, not the manage either way part," Bastilla also said, a bit downtrodden.

Irin nodded. "I shall rest too. Please do not hesitate to wake me."

Jake nodded at them before finally turning his attention to Draskil, who had taken a seat on the ground, just staring out into space. He had been very mute for a long while. In fact, he had barely spoken during the floor at all and only now seemed to relax, making Jake decide this was the time and place.

Putting up a quick barrier so only the two of them could hear, he asked the dragonkin:

“You okay, mate?”

The dragonkin looked at him instantly, his eyes filled with bloodlust. “What?”

Jake didn’t feel intimidated but just shook his head. “If you want to talk, just talk. If you don’t... then don’t. Just wanted to let you know that if you want to, we are both here, and I am at least decent at listening.”

Draskil didn’t say anything but just turned his gaze away and stared into the wall of the tent. About a minute passed before he spoke.

“Water brings death,” he began as Jake soon learned an excellent reason for aquaphobia.

Chapter 504 - Heroes Of The Ninth Floor

“Underground... water is not like up above,” Draskil began, speaking far more than usual. “We sought long and far for it. Digging. We needed water to live... but the water was also a bringer of death. The skilled ones tried to be careful, but they failed. Sometimes. If they made a mistake...”

Draskil stared into the air again as he sighed and spoke in a serious tone. "They fucked up. Made a hole into a large reservoir of groundwater, flooding everything. It spread through our caverns and into our homes. So many drowned... I was the only one left. Family dead. Alone. Stuck for days with the water rising... had to swim."

Jake saw the now so powerful dragonkin shiver as he stopped talking. He had known that Draskil had been a mole-type creature before the system and what Villy had described as half-human-like. Something with intellect between that of a human and a chimpanzee. Smarter than any normal animal for sure and smart enough to form societies and have full sapience.

"Happened often... but we needed to dig. Water fine, but being in it is not," Draskil finally shook his head as he stared down. A few more moments passed before he looked at Jake. "Fear makes me weak?"

"Being afraid of something and being weak has nothing to do with one another," Jake said with a shrug. "What matters is what you do when afraid. You swam alongside us, you fought, you killed. Even if you were afraid, you didn't show weakness. So no, that doesn't make you weak, but quite the opposite."

Draskil was clearly skeptical as he sneered. "I was weaker because of fear."

Does he want me to scold him or what? Jake asked himself but still didn't fully agree.

"We were all weaker. You have already shown that even in the face of fear, you don't back down, and even if you are afraid of it now, you can overcome that fear," Jake said, trying to be convincing. He hoped for Draskil to accept the answer and feel relieved, but it didn't go that way.

“What do you fear?” Draskil instead just asked.

Jake opened his mouth and was about to answer but stopped. What was he afraid of? If he was thinking back... he felt a bit scared of Oras when he saw him in the void? No, that wasn't really him being scared but more an instinctual fear. But there was...

His silence seemed to annoy Draskil as the dragonkin asked. “Don't know?”

Jake took a moment longer before shaking his head. “I don't. Not really.”

That was... a lie. Jake just didn't want to say it as he realized he did have one fear. It was a weird thought, but Jake was legitimately scared of one thing – losing control. Not in the sense of momentarily being unable to do something or being forced into doing things, but truly losing control of himself. He remembered one time that had truly scared him.

It was the time he thought Miranda had tried to take over his Pylon. The anger and bloodlust he had felt at that moment. Those emotions that now felt so foreign. He had not been in control then but acted on pure impulse and emotion. Jake feared those kinds of emotions. And there was one other recent time where that happened.

During his meeting with Ell'Hakan within the Seat of the Exalted Prima, Jake had lost his wits and trusted someone for no god damn reason. He had been furious afterward but knew deep down it was due to fear. He was afraid of that kind of power that could make Jake lose, even just momentarily, control of his own emotions... because he knew that even without any outside sources interfering, his own emotions were scary.

It was honestly a stupid fear. Fearing your own strong emotions. Or maybe it was a normal fear that many people had. Perhaps it wasn't truly the emotions themselves he feared either, but what he would do while feeling those emotions.

"Or you do... and don't want to share," Draskil accurately read Jake. For some reason, this seemed to make the dragonkin feel better as he regained his old toothy smile. "All things to overcome."

Jake wryly smiled as he nodded, not sure if his fear was something one could truly overcome. Especially not with his bloodline. Perhaps it was closer to something you just came to accept and live with. Something to manage.

The two of them didn't speak much more but just relaxed and meditated a bit. Hours passed as they all got back into optimal condition, just needing a potion or two to top themselves up. The break was ultimately more to replenish mental energy than anything else and have them have a mental reset before the eighth floor.

Entering the eighth floor, it instantly became clear this was more of the same as those before the seventh, making Jake think that his theory of the water level being a failed attempt to diversify was correct. The only real difference on the eighth floor was how everything had just gotten massive in scale. Even the mushroom men had changed.

[Mushroom Man Giant Warrior - 183]

It towered more than fifteen meters into the air but otherwise looked the same. They all felt like they were miniatures of themselves. It was a pretty fun and novel experience.

Not that it had any effect on the outcome. Draskil still tore the big bastards apart with ease, and Jake blew them up with Arcane Powershots as he killed in droves together with the Malefic Dragonkin. Reika and Irin also joined in, but Bastilla could well and truly no longer participate meaningfully in combat. Reika barely could, but at least her ice magic helped slow down foes for Irin to sometimes finish them off. The problem was that Irin didn't really have many offensive skills or abilities.

Her race offered her skills mainly related to subterfuge and illusion magic, as well as other things one would expect of a succubus. Skills that were obviously not useable inside the dungeon unless Irin wanted to get really freaky with a giant mushroom. And that was a mental image Jake really didn't need.

Making their way through the cavern, they soon reached the next gate and saw the challenge to pass the eighth floor. Once they read it, Jake nearly wanted to laugh.

Create a hemotoxin, necrotic poison, or neurotoxin of at least uncommon rarity from the materials found on this floor and place it in the cauldron. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least eight hundred mushroom men must be slain.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 78/800. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

"Quite a spike in difficulty," Irin said after reading it. And she was technically correct. While the seventh floor had also required them to make an uncommon rarity poison, the materials provided had been far better as there were even a few rare rarity mushrooms they could use. On this floor, based on their initial observations, the best one could get was of uncommon rarity, and mushrooms with any of the required properties would take a good while to find.

However...

“Well, this will be easy,” Jake smirked as he pulled out two types of mushrooms he had already picked up earlier. “I will need more of these two mushrooms. Also, I need some of that red stalk you picked up earlier, Reika, and get the cores of those big stabby-arm mushroom men.”

They all looked at him a bit as Jake just shrugged. “What? Not my fault the dungeon decided to suddenly get easy. I wanted to gather all this stuff to eat anyway, as I am always looking to improve my hemotoxins and necrotic poison.”

Draskil nodded in approval showing himself a true man of culture. “Good poisons.”

With those words left to collect what Jake had asked for and Reika handed him the stalks before going to find more. Jake ate some of the materials he had gathered to absorb some knowledge through Palate as he got to work while the rest of his group killed things. Occasionally they would return with materials as Jake slowly refined the process. He made a common rarity hemotoxin in the very first concoction, and less than four and a half hours after entering the eighth floor, he got it.

Jake grinned as Draskil returned with some more materials, only to see Jake toss the poison bottle towards the cauldron. It landed on the lid still on top with a clank as Jake shook his head in an overly dramatic way.

“Man, you guys are sooo slow,” Jake failed to hold himself back from saying. He looked at the cauldron as he felt very good about himself.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 771/800. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

“Only because we bring you stuff,” Draskil scoffed.

“What’s that? Us doing our assigned jobs with me excelling?” Jake kept laughing as he got up. Draskil looked slightly annoyed but didn’t complain more. In fact, he looked happy even with all his grumbling as the floor had gone far faster than expected.

Jake joined the dragonkin as they headed out and got killing. There were around a thousand giant mushroom men on the floor total, and they ended up slaying most while collecting materials. Even if they could have been out of the floor within less than five hours, they ended up staying for ten or so more simply to take full advantage of the place. Each floor held mushrooms Jake had never seen or heard of before, just as the dungeon had been described, and it would be foolish not to eat as many as they could for Palate.

Bastilla and Irin were the only ones really working for the last around seven hours as Irin was making their food and even mixed some salads using the mushrooms. Bastilla frankly had too many corpses to dismantle and ended up only bothering with those who had Lifecores within. If they had to wait for her to dismantle nearly a thousand corpses – well, realistically, nine hundred as Draskil had taken his frustrations from the water level out on a few – they would have been there for well over a day. Probably longer. This time also allowed Draskil to get back in top condition as he had expended quite a bit of energy. There had been a lot of them, after all.

“One floor left,” Irin smiled after they had ended their break and now stood before the passageway to the ninth floor.

“And that C-grade optional boss floor,” Jake added on.

“Technically, every floor after the fourth is optional,” Reika correctly said.

“I feel like I should be paying to be here,” Bastilla said self-deprecatingly.

Draskil just grunted as they opened the gate and went through the passageway. Jake dearly hoped the designer hadn’t decided to make the ninth floor a water level and was relieved when he saw it was just more mushrooms without the water. It was a bit of a mix between the giant stuff on the eighth floor and all the prior mushroom floors with regular-sized foes. Regular-sized being the three-meter tall mushroom men.

One thing that was different was the sheer number of foes. Just standing at the entrance to the floor, Jake saw thousands of them. Some were Mushroom Man Healers, Mushroom Man Warriors, Mushroom Man Defenders, and Mushroom Man Mages. All kinds of mushroom men. And in the middle of them, standing on a large mushroom, was the boss of the ninth floor.

[Mushroom Man General – lvl 199]

With the General were naturally its commanders, which were just copy-pasted versions of the boss on the fourth floor with a few more levels on top. Four of them.

[Mushroom Man Commander – lvl 195]

“The level of enemy diversity in this dungeon is just utter shit-tier,” Jake said, stating facts. Recycling older bosses as semi-regular enemies. Really?

“I must admit, it does seem rather uninspired,” Reika agreed.

"I am sure there is a reason it is like this," Irin tried to defend the dungeon designer again even if she had to know, deep in her heart, that the dungeon designer had kind of sucked.

"Anyway, let's get to the gate on the other side and figure out what the objective is this time around," Jake said.

They all agreed and followed as they avoided the central part of the floor to not engage the boss. Not because they thought it was a threat, but because they wanted to avoid killing the boss only to figure out they needed to do something special to reach the next floor.

Only a few mushroom men were killed on the way to the cauldron placed in front of the gate. Another set of instructions was naturally also there, and this time there really was a spike in difficulty.

Create a poison using the Lifecore of the Mushroom Man General and from the materials found on this floor, and then place it in the cauldron. This poison must be at least of uncommon rarity and must primarily contain life affinity energy. In order to open the lid of the cauldron, at least two thousand mushroom men must be slain.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 41/2000. Poison placed in the cauldron: 0/1

"Only one real attempt... a complex affinity to have while still making it a poison..." Jake muttered as he read it.

“Uncommon rarity too,” Reika added with some worry. “We will need to make the life affinity energy highly volatile, that is for sure. If not, it won’t be recognized as a poison.”

“The problem is that the general’s core will likely lean far more towards a very stable and controlled life affinity considering its Records as a general,” Jake pointed out. “We will also need some cores from healers, but that energy is obviously of the healing kind.”

If Jake could add some of his own materials, it would be fine, but he couldn’t. The only thing he seemed allowed to add was his blood, as it was semi-qualified as dungeon material due to parts of it stemming from the dungeon courtesy of eating a lot of mushrooms.

“Before we decide anything, we need to get a proper understanding of what we have available,” Reika said, shaking her head.

“You can do it?” Draskil asked.

“Well, I think so, yeah, but I need to have the core of the general first,” Jake said. “Also, the core of the commanders are likely just lesser versions of the general, so we can use them for practice crafts.”

“So the first objective is to collect what this floor has available to get a scope of what we need?” Irin asked clarifyingly.

“And eat a mountain of mushrooms to figure out which ones are best,” Jake sighed.

“We go?” Draskil asked.

Jake summoned his wings and looked at Reika and Irin. “You two take the perimeter and hunt the stragglers?”

The two of them nodded as Bastilla added: “Then I will stand and cheerlead uselessly on the side, waiting for them to kill stuff I can dismantle.”

He gave her a pity thumbs-up as he and Draskil got to work. Jake and the dragonkin took to the air and flew towards the army of mushroom men. Every floor had grown in size as they progressed, and this one was no different. The large Mushroom Man General sat upon its mushroom uncaringly and unaware of the two monsters on their way to slaughter it.

Nay. Not monsters. Monsters did not act to set the world right by killing abominable existences that should have never existed. These were truly evil beings that deserved only death to make up for the sin of being alive. There was another name for those like Jake and Draskil who selflessly became arbiters of justice:

Heroes.

Chapter 505 - Mushroom Massacre & Friend Visit

It was war. On one side was a general with his four commanders and an army of soldiers willing to fight and die for their leaders. An organized group that worked together and used synergy to become more than what they were individually. There were thousands of them, every single one towards the end of D-grade.

On the other side were two people. A hunter with a bow and a dragonkin who seemed to finally have found an opportunity to let loose. These two were naturally the heroes of this fight. The brave men who would stand against the evil mushrooms.

It was also a display of something else... the disparity of power even in the same grade and level bracket. Jake was at a lower level than most of his opponents, and Draskil was still lower than a few of them. One would think their numbers would matter, that their synergy would allow them to fight. It didn't.

Maybe if they had actual tactics and not just sometimes tried to take hits for one another, it would matter. Maybe if they had ritual magic or complex formations. Had healers working together to form large barriers. However, as it was, they had none of these things, which made what transpired next only describable by one word:

Massacre.

Two words?

Justified massacre.

Explosions of arcane power lit up the cavern as Jake bombarded his opponents. A dense mist of poison hung thick in the air as Draskil and Jake both pumped it out of their wings. Jake killed primarily using explosive arrows that tore mushroom men apart with ease and followed up with occasional kill shots with stable arrows, while Draskil had a far simpler style.

He was more the rip and tear sort of fighter. His entire body was a weapon that none of their opponents could even scratch. His scales offered defenses to nearly all magic, his attacks unstoppable to the mushrooms as he tore their limbs off and ripped up their flesh, leaving rotting wounds behind.

Draskil also showed fighting methods Jake could never even attempt. His tail was like a fifth limb that whipped around and sometimes even impaled his foes. If not, he used it for movement, yanking himself back or using it to push himself, or while he was mid-air as a counterweight to allow him to rapidly reposition.

The dragonkin did not show any magic besides some to strengthen himself. Jake did notice how he also had the Pride skill like Jake, but his version was clearly far more focused on the mental attack aspect and making a domain of intimidation without any of the mana-control amplifying aspects.

Jake was actually pretty certain Draskil had all the of the Malefic Viper skills. He had believed it for a good while, but after the dungeon, it was more obvious. He clearly had Palate based on all he ate and Sagacity to properly store the knowledge. Jake did think Sagacity was still at a relatively low rarity, and Draskil did say that he had some bad skills he was working on. Besides that, he clearly had the wings, claws, and scales skills. These were likely unavoidable racial skills for any Malefic Dragonkin.

Sense of the Malefic Viper was also obvious based on how well he found mushrooms. That just left Blood and Touch. Jake was most unsure about Touch, honestly. Draskil also had Blood based on how he had used some of it as a weapon once, but Jake had yet to see the dragonkin use the familiar glow of Touch of the Malefic Viper. It was possible he had it and just never used it, but it was also possible he didn't have it or had changed it to a form very different from what Jake used. Like a purely non-combat version or something.

Now, Jake could just ask him, but where was the fun in that? He would rather just try and figure it out himself while slaughtering an army of mushroom men. The human and dragonkin had already killed hundreds before meeting up as Jake turned to Draskil.

"You want the big boss?" Jake asked. "Just remember we need all the Lifecores intact."

Draskil grunted in confirmation before asking: "We need the small ones?"

Jake shrugged. "Some, but not all."

Draskil then grinned. "You wanna see my breath?"

"I guess?" Jake asked. He wasn't sure what Draskil meant initially but soon understood.

The dragonkin took a breath, and for a moment, Jake felt all the mana in the environment stop before getting dragged in like Draskil's mouth was a vacuum. Intense mana gathered at a level far above Jake had ever seen anything in D-grade do.

Then he released it. A green beam was emitted from his mouth that swept across the cavern below. It was only a few meters in diameter when it hit the ground and made a grand sweep from one end of the cavern to the other. Not a single mark was left on the ground where it hit... but everything between the dragonkin and the ground was gone.

A line had been made through the entire dungeon. For a few dozen kilometers, a rotting black line that emanated death and decay had been formed as everything the breath had touched had decayed to nothingness in an instant. It did not matter if it was a plant or mushroom men over level 180. They had all just ceased to be.

Jake stared a bit at the sight that was both impressive and unimpressive at the same time. It was not an impressive-looking attack. There was no grand explosion, no massive scar left by the breath... just an eerie nothingness. It had simply killed everything it hit, and even more scary was how Jake did not feel a single whisper of mana from where it had hit. It was just... desolation. Jake didn't know for sure, but he had a feeling no mushroom would grow on that black line for a very long time.

All in all, the breath had killed only about ninety mushroom men that had been hit. Mind you, it didn't matter where they were hit. As long as a single part of their body had touched the breath, their entire bodies had turned to black sludge in an instant.

One thing was also clear... if Draskil ever used that attack on Jake, he would have to dodge it using his precognition. The beam moved faster than any attack Jake could make, and if he didn't move before it was released, he would have no way to get out of the way. And if he didn't dodge in time? Well, then Jake was just happy he still had Moment of the Primal Hunter because that would sure as hell activate.

"Impressive?" Draskil asked with a satisfied grin.

"Definitely wouldn't wanna be hit by it," Jake agreed. "Ah, but don't use it on essential foes... it didn't leave even a single Lifecore behind. Or anything, really."

"Bah," Draskil jokingly dismissed his words. "I kill the general. No breath."

Jake motioned for him to go ahead as he instead targeted the commanders. He saw that Reika and Irin were doing fine on their own, too, killing a few here and there themselves. Compared to Jake and Draskil, they barely made a dent, but they were never meant to anyway. This dungeon was made for members of the Order, not just those who were supremely talented. Jake and Draskil were way above the expected power level of anyone expected to do the dungeon, even on the ninth floor, and only the

C-grade could potentially offer them a good fight. Shit, this was a dungeon where the alchemy portion was the real challenge, so maybe it was silly for them to expect a good fight to begin with.

But before alchemy, it was always good to get some killing done. Always got Jake in the mood to do some concocting, ya know?

Meira was incredibly nervous as she waited. Master had given her permission, that was true, but she still felt unsure about actually doing it. In the end, she agreed to it after she and her friends had completed a lesson together and began working on an assignment where some of her Master's books could be useful.

The Grand Elder had also made it clear he didn't care if she invited people over and had told her that he would just not be there if she did. Meira was still perplexed why someone like the Grand Elder even bothered spending time on her, and it made her even more confused when she considered that her Master had clearly been the one to make him accept such an arrangement.

She just tried to not think about it too much and instead did her best in everything. Her Master clearly had plans, and Meira would do her best to follow his will and try and make them a success. If inviting her friends over was something he had explicitly given her permission to do, and if even the Grand Elder had voiced his lack of concern about doing this, perhaps it was just their way of telling Meira to do it? She wasn't good at subtle hints and trying to interpret commands, but maybe it was possible he didn't just allow her to bring people but wanted her to?

That is why when she was asked to bring some books, she then spoke up and said she had been allowed to bring them to the library. Meira felt proud of herself for that and was happy that the three of them had agreed to come. The only one a bit reluctant was Izil, but Nella and Utmal had both agreed that it was about time she invited them over. Maybe it was? Meira didn't know... she had never invited friends over for anything before.

Or had friends at all, really.

About five minutes later, a gate opened, and out stepped Izil. The elf instantly saw Meira and smiled.

“Thank you for the invitation,” she said courteously as she took out a small basket with flowers in it. “A token of my appreciation to you and the Lord of the mansion. Native flowers of the Altmar empire, all with their roots intact for potential planting.”

Meira was surprised at seeing the gift but quickly understood. It wasn’t that odd to bring something for her Master, considering he was far above the four of them in status as a black token. Ah, Meira had told them her Master had a black token as he had allowed her to do so.

“Thank you,” Meira bowed as she accepted it. “I am sure my Lord will appreciate it.”

“Is he present?” Izil asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Sadly not. My Lord had other engagements,” Meira answered. She would not have dared to invite them if her Master was there... she barely dared to when he was not.

Izil just nodded and followed Meira as they entered the mansion to place the basket of flowers. Just as they entered the house and she had stored the basket properly, Meira saw that the gate outside activated again, with Nella and Utmal stepping through.

Meira hurriedly ran outside to greet them and got a disapproving look from Nella as she approached. "I hope you treat your owner better than guests," she scoffed once Meira got close. "Or maybe you just consider it acceptable to not greet guests?"

"I apologize!" Meira said with a bow. She really didn't want to be a bad host, especially not if it would reflect badly on her Master.

"She was just inviting me inside," Izil said as she walked out of the mansion, glaring daggers at Nella. "And if you two had been here on the agreed-upon time, there would be no issue."

"Relax, I was just joking around," Nella said dismissively, Meira now feeling even more awkward as she had apologized. She still wasn't good at jokes or that sarcasm thing... or was it called irony? She really didn't quite know the difference.

"Nice place your Master got," Utmal then spoke, throwing Meira out of her thoughts. "You didn't lie about him being a black token, it seems. Where is he?"

"He is busy elsewhere," Meira once more explained apologetically.

"Oh? That is unfortunate," Nella said with a smile. "I would have loved to meet him. Now, if he is not here, let's just get going. Where is the library?"

"Right this way," Meira said, motioning towards the large mansion. The three of them followed as Meira wanted to keep the mood good, but Izil and Nella had been less and less friendly recently, and Meira really hoped they could get along better.

As they walked through the mansion, Izil asked: "Are there no other servants or occupants?"

"There is-" Meira began but quickly cut herself off. The Grand Elder had been staying there most of the time, but he wasn't there now and wasn't truly living there. Also, she shouldn't share he was there at all. "There is currently only me here. My Lord doesn't have any other servants or slaves residing within the Order of the Malefic Viper as far as I am aware."

Meira saw Utmal and Nella both frown a bit as Izil just nodded. "I see."

Then suddenly, Meira felt a mental probing from Izil. She was confused and accepted it as a telepathic connection was formed. "Meira... I didn't want to ask before but are you a slave of the owner of this mansion?"

Now Meira was even more confused. "Yes?" she answered instantly, using the connection. Didn't they already know that by now?

Izil frowned even more than before. "If possible, can I meet the owner of your contract?"

"I can maybe ask..." Meira answered, more than a little unsure. She didn't want to bother her Master needlessly with matters that were clearly her own to deal with.

"That is all I can ask," Izil responded as she smiled again and spoke out loud just as they entered the library. "What an incredible library. Could you point me towards the tomes you spoke of?"

Meira responded positively but was still not sure what Izil had actually wanted... but what she did know was that Utmal and Nella were both looking at her quite a bit differently than before. It should be fine, though. They were friends, right?

A great wrong had been set right. The abominable mushrooms were now dead, slain by the two heroes as their bounty had been harvested. Jake and Draskil had disengaged after a good period of fighting to collect materials from the areas they had cleared of mushroom men and then taken a small break.

By now, Jake was sitting at the exit of the ninth floor together with Reika, trying to figure out a solution. Both of them had their crafting equipment out, Jake using his cauldron and Reika having a far more advanced setup with several flasks, bottles, filters, and whatnot... still surrounding a cauldron, though.

It had been over two days since they entered the floor, and Jake and Reika had been busy as hell. Jake was eating and experimenting at all times with the different materials on the floor, but making the required poison wasn't as straightforward as one could hope.

Draskil was off hunting alone again with the alchemists working while Bastilla was dismantling corpses, having Irin protect her.

During this time, Jake decided to enter Serene Soul Meditation as he experimented to also check in on a certain someone.

"Could you do me a favor and spend less time sitting hunched over a cauldron and more time watching that dragonkin fight?" sim-Jake asked the moment Jake popped into his Soulspace.

“What?” Jake asked, confused as he oriented himself. He saw that sim-Jake had resealed the Eternal Hunger chimera using some kind of shadow barrier and had been standing impatiently waiting for Jake to enter.

“I just want you to reflect on what you gave up on,” sim-Jake shrugged. “I would have one hundred percent chosen to become a Malefic Dragonkin. And no, giving up on alchemy would not be a loss.”

“Oh, are you getting jealous you can’t be a scaly boy? I thought you wanted to learn from his fighting style or something,” Jake smirked.

“Heh,” sim-Jake scoffed. “Not much to learn there. His style is simple and effective but far below what I am aiming for.”

“But you are jealous of the claws,” Jake still pointed out.

“Fuck yeah, you bet I am! Those things are insane,” sim-Jake grinned. “Now I will excuse myself and allow you to do your alchemy... but just one quick question. If you want the life affinity energy to be more volatile, isn’t it enough to just mix in a bit of our arcane affinity? Just the destructive aspect. If not the affinity, then at least the concept you know?”

Jake shook his head. “Thank you for pointing out your utter lack of knowledge when it comes to alchemy. Won’t work. We need it volatile but still with a direction to cause harm using the life affinity energy. Life affinity does not deal damage by destroying... it is more like it grows stuff wrong.”

Sim-Jake nodded. "Yeah, I have no idea what the fuck I am talking about. I am gonna play some more with the chimera. Now that thing is a good example of a bundle of energy turned very antagonistic and full of life even when getting smacked around!"

"See you arou-" Jake began as he got an idea. An idea he had not even considered before now, and it was an incredibly novel one.

Curses were all about emotions... powerful emotions... so what if they could add some of that to the mix? Make a curse poison? One making use of an emotion Jake had plenty of:

Hatred for mushrooms.

Chapter 506 - United In Hatred

Jake didn't really know all that much about curses. But he did know a bit. He had the Root of Eternal Resentment in his Palate for a long-ass time, and it had housed a shitload of curse energy. Now, as for infusing that concept into a poison? Well, that was something entirely different.

He shared his idea with Reika and got a very skeptical response initially. She did point out some rather glaring issues. Curses tended to be born from strong emotions, yes, but they are also extremely hard to control as they were essentially emotions so strong they had tangible effects on the world. To contain a curse within a poison should not be easy, especially while avoiding it overpowering the life affinity aspect of the finished product. So that would be a bit of a challenge, but at least he was a bit better at another aspect of the task.

Jake had some experience with something that was kind of a life affinity poison. Well, one real experience - all the way back in the challenge dungeon where he had created his Unstable Amalgamation of Malefic Vitau. He now knew in retrospect that it was pretty much just a vitality-increasing elixir on crack and made unstable as fuck, but he also knew that this wasn't possible to do with the materials he currently had available.

Firstly, the amalgamation had not been made from life affinity energy but more a vital affinity. They were closely related but not exactly the same, and changing it into a vitality-increasing energy type would likely result in it no longer counting as truly life-affinity.

Secondly, the only reason it had worked back then was due to Malefic Viper's Poison triggering and upgrading the poison to above what it would usually be. It had been a direct impartment of Records by the Viper himself and not something Jake could replicate even if he wanted to.

Jake thus spent a good while considering how to make it, and Reika also came with plenty of input. One thing quickly became clear: if he wanted to use his curse energy, they would have to find a way to infuse it without overpowering and dominating any other part of the concoction. Transmutation was quickly ruled out as its transformative effect likely wouldn't work well with the curse energy.

There was the possibility of infusing a catalyst but there tended to be rather stringent requirements before one could infuse an object with curse energy. One requirement tended to be time and connection to the curse. Infusing a mushroom with a curse related to hating mushrooms sounded like a good way to just make it implode. The same was true for doing it to a Lifecore.

Yet this did not deter Jake or Reika as they began working on another way: ritualism. And for this, Jake had a skill that he hadn't really used much but would no doubt prove useful.

[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.

While this skill primarily revolved around souls, it also gave some general knowledge about rituals. Curses were also deeply related to the soul anyway, as they were born from it. Most curses came into being when someone died, as it was the remnant emotions in one of the layers of the soul that managed to collect and take a form with intent. Most often, it was due to a lot of people dying with similar grievances and thus empowering each other. However, the part of the soul that would turn into a curse upon death could also be focused on and extracted to forcefully make a curse. An oversimplification, sure, but this was effectively it.

This is what Casper did. He focused, extracted, and infused his own emotions into vessels that he then used as weapons. That he could also mix it with mana was the kind of technique that Jake was still very unsure of how he did. Anyway, none of this was that important as Jake didn't plan on making a truly cursed item but just a poison with a bit of curse energy mixed in to give it direction.

It didn't take him long to figure out how he wanted to infuse the energy. He was limited to materials from the dungeon, but as he discovered earlier, he could also use his blood. He could naturally also use his own mana and energy as that was just a part of the crafting process, and one could argue Jake was technically part of the dungeon as he was within it, so his plan should work.

With enough focus and a ritual to further amplify the effects, Jake believed he could make his blood into essentially a cursed liquid that would mix with an otherwise non-damaging life affinity item. Life affinity was by itself not damaging unless made volatile or, as Jake hoped to do, self-destructive.

Because yes... when Jake considered earlier how infusing a curse would just make the life affinity item self-implode, Jake saw that as an opportunity.

What he wanted to do was to make the life affinity latch unto the vital energy of the mushroom man, making it self-implode in self-hatred upon entering the body out of pure disgust, turning it into poison.

Would this work? Maybe. Was Jake going to try, hoping to see a mushroom man consume itself and effectively commit suicide? Fuck yeah, he did.

Reika was supportive of his idea, and the two of them began experimenting in this direction. He had decided to begin by just making a highly dense life-affinity liquid using the mushroom juices of slain foes and further infusing that with Lifecores. He also had to remind himself that the final concoction would require the Lifecore of the General, which actually worked out perfectly with his plans. He wanted it to be a controlled self-implosion, after all.

It was one of the most ambitious things Jake had ever done, but he felt confident, and he really wanted to do it.

Hours passed as iteration after iteration was made. Soon they settled on a stable version of highly focused life energy in the form of a flask. Reika was the one who crafted it using her skills and managed to create several common rarity flasks for Jake to experiment with. She added that when it came to the real thing, she should be able to make an uncommon flask using the best materials they had.

Jake, on the other hand, focused entirely on the poison aspect of the creation. He planned on making a ritual where he would infuse his own blood into the Lifecore using a ritual. However, as he attempted to do this several times, he repeatedly failed to actually create a curse. He didn't understand why as he kept trying until a realization struck him. One he never thought possible.

My hatred isn't strong enough...

How it was even possible, Jake didn't know. He did hate mushrooms; of that, there was no doubt. But... he had to admit his hatred was not as strong as the level he had seen from others. It wasn't like mushrooms had killed his family, cut off his Path, or removed his freedom. They had just made Jake mad and annoyed, and there was that one time where it tied him to a toilet for far too long.

Casper had an extreme natural affinity to curses and initially channeled his anger toward those who killed his now-ghost-girlfriend Lyra. That was some real anger, and Jake knew that while Casper was a very introverted person, he was also the sort of person go to all in when he felt something.

Jake could not claim his hatred of mushrooms was at that level. Feeling a bit distressed at the thought of failing, Jake remembered: he was not alone in his hatred.

"I need Draskil," Jake spoke. "I need his hate."

Reika raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't it be best if we all joined in and contributed to the ritual?"

"On a scale of one to ten, how much do you hate mushrooms?" Jake asked.

"Well, I guess it depends on the type of--"

"Already disqualified by not instantly saying eleven," Jake shot her down.

"Now you are just being unreasonable," Reika argued with a sigh. "It is utterly illogical to hold such a level of hatred towards fungi."

“Hate is illogical by nature. And it is in my nature to hate mushrooms. Always has been. From the time I was a kid, and my mom tried to make me eat those shitty white button mushrooms or whatever the fuck they are called, I have despised them. They bring nothing good to the world, and their only use is when they are destroyed and their juices are squeezed out to kill things. Because even in death, mushrooms bring only suffering,” Jake said, getting a bit flared up and feeling like he was a step closer already to successfully creating the curse.

“Okay...” Reika said, shaking her head as she went off to contact Draskil as Jake made modifications to the ritual. He needed to bring Draskil into the fold and not just make his hate part of the curse. Curses were naturally inclined to combine similar negative emotions, so it wasn’t a difficult adaptation.

A few minutes later, Draskil appeared together with Reika. Jake looked at him and asked.

“On a scale of one to ten, how much do you hate mushrooms?”

“Not worth giving number, not deserving of the thought energy to consider,” Draskil sneered.

Jake looked at Reika, who reluctantly resigned herself and went back to making a flask good enough to use in the final concoction, or at least in one of their four available test concoctions using the Lifecores of Mushroom Man Commanders.

“Draskil, our plan is to-”

“I don’t care,” Draskil cut him off.

“Fair. I need you to pour all your hate into your Blood of the Malefic Viper, put it in my cauldron, and then join me in my hatred of mushrooms for the ritual,” Jake shortened his speech down to only what the dragonkin needed to do.

“Make curse?” Draskil asked, clearly a little interested even if he said he wasn’t. Jake understood. It was about hating mushrooms, after all.

“Yep,” Jake nodded.

Draskil nodded, fully understanding without needing any more explanation. Jake began the ritual without further ado as Draskil and Jake mixed their blood together with the Lifecore of a dead Mushroom Man – and by now, Jake was beginning to realize that he was pretty much doing a blood ritual with what was effectively the heart of a monster.

It was a bit morbid... but nothing was off the table when it came to slaying mushrooms.

Jake instantly felt the difference as he realized that Draskil’s hatred for mushrooms seemed to rival or even surpass his own. That, and Jake also ran into the issue of Draskil’s blood being far more potent than Jake’s. And it wasn’t just due to the level disparity, but clearly, Draskil had Blood of the Malefic Viper at a higher rarity than himself.

It was a challenge to overcome, but one Jake gladly took on. Draskil was incredibly patient, far more than Jake would have expected, and assisted Jake with rituals throughout the next two days as he improved more and more. At the end of the second day, since he began making rituals together with Draskil, he made a Lifecore.

[Cursed Mushroom Man Mage Lifecore (Common)] – The cursed core of a Mushroom Man Mage. This Lifecore contains a large amount of life affinity energy that has now been contaminated with a curse of immense hatred towards its own kind. The core is slowly degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

It wasn't much, but it was honest work. Sure, it would self-detonate within an hour or two, as far as Jake could tell, but it was good enough. They didn't even need the finished concoction to last very long, just long enough to pass the floor.

Draskil also seemed pretty happy at the finished creation and decided to stay and help. During the last two days, he did go off once in a while to hunt some more mushroom men, but he always returned quickly and got really engrossed in the process.

Only about a day and a half later, Jake got frisky and tried to use one of the Commander Lifecores. The first attempt failed, but feeling that he was close, he tried again, only to succeed the second time around,

[Cursed Mushroom Man Commander Lifecore (Uncommon)] – The cursed core of a Mushroom Man Commander. This Lifecore contains an immense amount of life affinity energy that has now been contaminated with a curse of immense hatred towards its own kind. The core is slowly degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

With that, he and Reika began the final part of the process – fusing the Lifecore and flask. One would think this would be hard, but it was actually incredibly straightforward. Jake just had to place the Lifecore in the liquid of the flask and slowly diffuse it into the concoction while controlling the process.

He did also have to keep infusing some of the curse energy during the entire thing, needing Draskil present at all times. About a day after the first Commander Lifecore was made, they also made their first uncommon rarity concoction using it. If this had been the General's, it would have been enough then and there... but Jake was pushing for more.

Refining the process more and more, it finally culminated nearly a full day later. Using a large ritual and with Reika and Draskil both assisting in the process, they gave birth to liquid justice.

[Desired Fate of the Mushroom Men (Rare)] – On the border between a flask and a poison cursed by intense hatred, a bane of the mushroom men has been created as this very liquid desires nothing but their demise. Contains an intense amount of life affinity energy that will act to help those who seek to slay mushroom men. If consumed while actively killing mushroom men, this concoction will temporarily increase health regeneration as the life affinity helps you on your quest. If injected or consumed by any mushroom man, the effect will be the opposite, turning natural regeneration into active degeneration and flooding the body with intense amounts of hostile life energy as long as the will of the curse remains or the concoctions runs out of energy. The concoction is currently stable but, with time, may slowly begin degrading due to its inherent nature caused by the curse making it seek to consume and destroy itself.

With great satisfaction, he looked at Draskil and Reika. Reika just seemed relieved and Draskil happy upon seeing the completed product. Inspecting the item itself, Jake was more than satisfied. He was happy to see it was even somewhat stable, even if it did carry a warning that it was temporary.

Was this kind of poison actually useful in practice, one might ask? No... no, not really. It had taken far too much effort to create, it was unstable, and Jake could quickly see that one would have to infect the foe with pretty much a full bottle's worth to get a proper effect, contrary to normal poisons where just a little would be highly effective. This was more the kind of poison you had to fool a mushroom man into drinking, which Jake had a hard time seeing.

This didn't make Jake any less satisfied with what they had made, though. It was objective proof of his and Draskil's hatred of mushrooms and a rare rarity item.

Now for the moment of truth. Would the concoction they had made qualify as poison and allow them to pass the floor?

With much anticipation, Jake placed the concoction in the cauldron in front of the final gate as he stared intently at the progress bar on the wall beside it.

Progress: mushroom men killed: 2000/2000. Poison placed in the cauldron: 1/1

After the obligatory round of high-fives and waves of relief, their entire group took a well-deserved rest.

Well, besides Bastilla, who kept dismantling, and Irin, who kept making food for Draskil and Jake. But before eating, Jake decided it was high time to get a bit of meditation done and check something he had neglected over the last few days: his notifications.

Chapter 507 - Reflecting On Stats & Supreme Final Boss

Jake sat down and relaxed while recuperating before moving on to the final optional boss. He felt pretty damn good about himself and, while he was sitting there, reflected on the progress he had made recently. Level-wise, he had gained one level in his profession during the period of nearly a month before they entered the dungeon, but after entering, Jake had now already gained four whole levels... which was actually an insane speed.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

...

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 174 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

What made it all even more insane was that Jake had not only been doing alchemy but also fighting. Though, to be fair, the fighting hadn't been difficult. Even so, it had netted him two levels.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 170 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

The combination of easy fights and the monotonous type of enemies made every foe barely give any experience, but he had killed enough to still get some levels. It did help that usually Jake had to actually go looking and find enemies, while in the dungeon, there were ten mushroom men around every corner.

With these levels also came a few race levels.

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 170 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 171 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 172 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Now... finally, with levels came Free Points. Jake wanted to just throw it all in Perception, he really did, but a voice at the back of his head that totally wasn't sim-Jake screaming within his Soulspace made him reconsider.

With great reluctance, Jake did something that disgusted him as he invested 280 Free Points into Strength. Instantly he felt a hot glow go through his body as his muscles seemed to almost bulge for a moment before settling down. He had exited meditation at this point and sat here opening and closing his fist.

It was more than a 10% increase to his total Strength just by investing those points. It was an actual tangible difference, but Jake also knew that a 10% increase in Strength did not mean he now hit ten percent harder. The system and reality just didn't work like that, and the only time where Strength was the only real factor was when in a tug of war or when trying to push someone.

Not that it wasn't massively helpful to him, especially his melee skills. Sim-Jake had made it clear Jake needed more Strength, but also that Agility was still by far the most important stat. Something like a 60-40 split was best, according to him. Jake chose to trust his other self in that department.

Looking over his stats as a whole, they were relatively balanced, and he was beginning to get close to the optimal Strength-Agility split.

Stats

Strength: 4146

Agility: 6761

Endurance: 3626

Vitality: 4828

Toughness: 3521

Wisdom: 6207

Intelligence: 5067

Perception: 10720

Willpower: 5252

Free points: 0

Toughness and Endurance were both really falling behind, but Jake wasn't that worried as both stats were still considered high for his level.

The highest amount of stat points one could possibly gain per D-grade level – counting race, profession, and class- was around 250 total. 100 from class, seventy from race, and eighty from profession. This was all, of course, only in the case of a human. In reality, it would always be lower, and even in the top tier, one was considered close to the apex at 220 stats per D-grade level.

Below D-grade, it was a third for E-grade, so around 75 stats total per level was the top, and then it was even lower at F-grade below that. All in all, if someone gained around 60 per level in the first 100 levels – or 6000 total stats at the point of evolution to D-grade – it would already be considered close to the theoretical maximum for pure stat gains while leveling.

Jake had over ten thousand total stats the day he evolved to D-grade – even without counting his equipment.

In reality, it wasn't as simple as just a pure equation due to all the other factors like titles, equipment, and elixirs, especially not counting percentage bonuses which Jake had plenty of. The “of the Malefic Viper” skills also added on extra stats, making it even more skewed.

Even then. If one stayed with the simplified math, then someone powerful at Jake's level, 172, would end up with 6000 stats for the first 100 levels and 220 for the next 73, for a total of 22,000 stats. Dividing that out in nine parts, then around 2500 in a single stat would be considered average. With Jake having a thousand more than that in even his lowest stat, it honestly wasn't bad, especially considering this example was of someone with a powerful Path. Again, oversimplified, but it was still clear Jake was far above the expected durability of the average D-tier at his level, despite never investing much into Toughness.

Ah, on a final note, Jake also just realized that he had surpassed 50,000 total stat points counting everything. Having a nearly 60% overall stat increase amplifier really was nice. To summarize, then Jake was just good in pretty much all aspects, and in Perception, he was in the realm of being a little bonkers with how much he had.

Abandoning any more thoughts about annoying math that Jake honestly couldn't be bothered with, he returned to meditation. The dungeon group meditated and recuperated for the better part of a day before it was time to take on the final challenge.

"We passed this a bit faster than expected," Irin said. "I expected us to take at least a little longer, and our speed is especially impressive considering the potentially needless over-complication of the ninth level."

"Hey, we passed it, and it allowed us to bond over shared hatred," Jake grinned at Draskil.

"I must also admit it was a very interesting method. I would never have come up with using a curse. Instead, I think I would have mixed some of the death affinity mushrooms into the concoction along with the life affinity energy and then just had it be stabilized and dormant using the Lifecore. Using a catalyst or just having the balance between the energies be very reactive, we could then do so it was activated upon entering another living foe, making the life and death affinity clash. It should have counted as a rather effective poison," Reika added on. "But I guess there are some pitfalls I missed since Jake rejected the idea."

"Nah, it would have totally worked. I just really wanted to go with my idea," Jake waved it off. "With my method, Draskil also got involved!"

Reika stared at Jake for a moment before just shaking her head in slight disbelief. “Honestly? I think I learned more from your method too, so screw it.”

Draskil and Bastilla just stood silently in the background and didn’t seem to have anything to add, even if Jake could see Draskil had enjoyed Jake’s method. After Jake’s and Reika’s brief talk, Irin took the lead again.

“Anyway, time to tackle the final floor. Now, let me warn you, this is a fully-fledged C-grade we are dealing with,” she said as she put a hand on the gate. A notification appeared before all of them once more.

You have successfully passed the ninth floor and gone above and beyond expectations!

Now only one more challenge remains. A single more floor is sealed away at the bottom of the dungeon, only available to those who have proven themselves exceptional. But be warned, for the final floor houses an entity far more deadly than anything you have faced so far.

Do you wish to explore the final floor of the Indigo Caverns?

“I... should probably just leave,” Bastilla finally said. “I will just get in the way, and from what you said earlier, the final floor is pretty much just a single fight. Not much I can help with there, and I am unsure if I can even use my dismantling skills on a C-grade.”

“I concur in that I doubt I would be of much use,” Reika shook her head. “I couldn’t do anything to the General before, and a C-grade is bound to be a lot more powerful. I think it better I sit this one out.”

Irin also ended up nodding. "While I am confident I can stay hidden if the foe is distracted, I must admit I also don't see myself making any meaningful contributions. I am not a fighter, as you have probably noticed."

Jake exchanged a look with Draskil before he smiled lightly. "Well... I wouldn't mind either way. If you want to come along to watch and maybe get some better rewards, I am all for it."

Draskil grunted in approval. While he wasn't the most talkative, Jake had a feeling he could actually be a bit of a softie and genuinely had taken a liking to their three other party members.

"I can try to hide us using illusions," Irin wondered out loud, not even trying to be subtle that she wanted to enter the final floor with them. Reika also clearly wanted to go, and Bastilla felt the peer pressure as she made a huge animated sigh.

"Fiiine! Let's go and possibly die because the two of them forget we exist and accidentally blow us up or something without even noticing," Bastilla moaned in resignation.

"Wouldn't happen. My Perception is too high to not notice," Jake rightly defended himself.

"I am not even going to argue that," Bastilla signed again. "Let's just go, alright? I already feel like I am some young mistress getting escorted through this dungeon, so I may as well stay shameless and finish it."

With that, they all agreed to continue the dungeon and began going through the passageway. It was a bit longer than before, and while Bastilla did throw a second glance at the exit in the middle of the passage as they passed it, she stayed with the group.

Exiting the passageway, they came to yet another large floor... but this one was also very different from any prior. A blue hue dominated the entire place, and while it was filled with mushrooms, they weren't the usual diverse kind. There were only glowing blue mushrooms spread throughout, and in the middle of the floor was an absolutely massive mushroom towering more than a kilometer into the air.

It gave off an intense sheen, and the cap was clearly illuminated as Jake saw something that looked like a throne on top of it. A small throne that barely registered as a small bulge on the mushroom cap. It looked like a throne for a child, which made sense when Jake saw what was sitting on it. It was a small mushroom man with a cap vaguely shaped like a crown.

You gotta be fucking kidding me.

[Mushroom Man King – lvl ???]

Defeat the supreme leader of the mushroom men: the Mushroom Man King.

Jake just stared in disbelief at the "final boss."

It was just a small mushroom man no more than a meter tall, holding a wooden scepter with a glowing mushroom growing out the tip. On a scale from one to ten, it was a solid zero when it came to representation and intimidation.

"I..." Irin muttered as she stood there. "An unexpected opponent for sure, and-"

"Irin," Jake interrupted her. "Just admit it already."

She looked reluctant but finally sighed. "Okay... okay, I admit, the design of this dungeon could be better, and maybe some questionable decisions were made during its creation."

"It's shit," Draskil just muttered.

Reika and Bastilla also didn't hide their contempt. Jake decided to take charge and spoke: "Nevertheless, it is still a C-grade. With that in mind, we must go all out from the very beginning and utterly destroy this abomination. So stay back."

Draskil understood as he moved forward. Jake joined him as he pulled out his bow and instantly began making an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter in his quiver. Irin and the others stayed at the gate many kilometers away from the throne of the Mushroom Man King as she set up a barrier making them invisible and hiding their presence.

"It is a mage of some kind," Jake quickly said as he felt the mana from the Mushroom Man in the distance. "And this entire place is that little bastard's domain."

"Hm," Draskil grunted. "Not strong."

“No,” Jake shook his head. “No, it is not.”

Draskil grinned as his wings unfolded and his body began burning with power. Jake responded in kind as Arcane Awakening activated, and they both took flight towards the Mushroom Man King, who only now became aware of their existence.

The entire cavern began humming with mana as the little mushroom got off his throne and lifted the scepter. Every single mushroom present seemed to resonate with the scepter, and even the large mushroom beneath the little king responded.

Bolts of mana condensed by the thousands as the king attacked. Scales covered Jake’s body as Draskil just flew unbothered towards the boss. Beneath the king, the flesh of the mushroom cap began changing and seemed to almost liquefy and come alive as it moved to defend.

Jake had already stopped in mid-air and nocked an arrow to shoot. He avoided a few mana bolts before releasing it towards the Mushroom Man King but found his attack blocked by the tendrils of mushroom. However, even if he was blocked, he did his job as he made an opening.

With the tendrils out of the way, Draskil disappeared as he reappeared right in front of the Mushroom Man King. He swept his claw upwards and sent the little creature flying through the air with a few new claw marks on its shroomy body. Yet Draskil still frowned as the mushroom king healed before he even hit the cavern wall.

Jake did notice a very slight dimming of some of the mushrooms on the ground far below, as he understood. He should have known it was another case of kind of shitty design. Every time they dealt

damage to the Mushroom Man King, it would absorb energy from the many mushrooms spread throughout the cavern to recover, making it effectively one tanky motherfucker.

“Gotta destroy the mushroom!” Jake yelled to Draskil, getting a roar of recognition in response. He didn’t really do as Jake expected but just charged the Mushroom Man King again, smashing it down towards the ground.

The little abomination was ready after the second strike and summoned blue barriers to defend himself, but Draskil just tore straight through them and grabbed the Mushroom Man King. He proceeded to tear the final boss in two and threw the pieces away.

Only for both of them to regrow a little crowned mushroom man holding a scepter.

Fuck me do I hate this place, Jake cursed. He proceeded to bombard the area with explosive arcane arrows but found the effect underwhelming. As he thought about others ways to fight, he got an idea as he reached into his inventory and took out three bottles.

On the ninth floor, the batch of poison had been put into four bottles total. One for the cauldron to pass the level and three that Jake had kept. Looking at them, Jake decided to see how good they actually were as he wrapped all three in arcane bolts and sent them into the massive blue mushroom before proceeding to explode the bolts and spreading the poison.

Instantly the poison took hold, and Jake saw parts of the mushroom begin to wither and die. The Mushroom Man King – both of them – lifted their small scepters, and instantly the mushroom began to regenerate and the poison rapidly eliminated.

Draskil turned towards him and threw him a glance as they both knew what had to be done. Jake acknowledged as Draskil went for the two Mushroom Man Kings as Jake beelined it towards the large blue mushroom. During the dungeon, Jake had used most of his alchemy skills, but one skill he hadn't used yet was absolutely perfect for this situation:

Touch of the Malefic Viper.

Chapter 508 - A Rude Interruption

Everyone knew by now that mushrooms sucked. No, they didn't just suck; they went above sucking. Their level of suck was so high they were endless vacuums of suffering. One of the reasons mushrooms sucked so much was because of how they worked.

Jake had encountered it before and knew that fungi were sneaky fucks. They liked to hide in things and make it look like there totally was an entire cavern full of mushrooms when it was actually just one single god damn fungus. This final boss floor was the same as Jake quickly came to realize. He tracked his poison in the large mushroom as it spread throughout the entire system of the fungus - the curse energy was divided and conquered by what had to be millions of mushrooms.

This made the entire fungus have an absolutely massive body covering well over a dozen square kilometers. And all of this was somehow linked to the Mushroom Man King. No, this wasn't a case where the huge fungus was actually the body of the little guy, but far more likely one where the small Mushroom Man had stumbled upon an incredibly powerful natural treasure and then grown it to the huge fungus Jake and Draskil were now seeking to destroy.

Based on what Jake could see, it was possible to just repeatedly kill the Mushroom Man King until the massive fungus ran out of energy, but it was far faster to kill both at once. It would probably take Draskil in excess of two hours with the current speed he was expending the energy of the mushrooms, and Jake wasn't even sure if the dragonkin would last that long if he had his boosting skill active. This approach of destroying the fungus also fitted way better with the theme of the dungeon as it wasn't as much a fight against an individual as it was a task to poison an entire ecosystem.

Jake used One Step to get to the stem of the massive mushroom as he was surrounded by the blue glowing fucks. Spores were released from all of them, trying to poison Jake, but all it did was make him more aware of the nature of the fungus.

Kneeling down, Jake blew away some soil as he took hold of the massive root system beneath the ground. The largest roots were around the massive mushroom, and Jake would use that as his point of entrance.

Above him, explosions repeatedly sounded out as the Mushroom Man King tried to get Draskil away from him, but the dragonkin shrugged it all off as he continued his assault. One party released dozens of different spells every second while the other simply ripped and tore with his claws and tail, with Draskil dominating it handily, giving the Mushroom Man no opportunity to address Jake.

Jake had grasped hold of the massive mushroom and closed his eyes for a moment. Touch of the Malefic Viper activated, and with his high Perception, he quickly came to understand the massive network of roots. The cursed concoction had nearly run out of power while Jake got in position, but some of it still remained. He decided to take advantage of this.

Poison was pumped in as Jake sought to strengthen the cursed poison. At the same time, he delivered some more common fungicide to deal massive damage to the entire root system. He didn't need to use any of the aspects of subtlety from the soul poison he used on the last big blue mushroom he killed but could just go all in.

A barrage of spells was then released down towards him, but Draskil moved to intercept as he teleported with a flap of his wings. Jake would have been fine either way, but his dragonkin buddy had clearly decided that the little king was not even getting a sliver of a chance.

Focusing on his task, Jake kept poisoning the monstrosity of a fungus. He believed he was doing a good job until suddenly he felt something... a push. Usually, when one used Touch of the Malefic Viper, it was an infusion. But to make an infusion, a connection had to be formed, and through this connection, the fungus now attacked.

Dense energy flooded through the fungus' roots and into Jake. He considered letting go but knew that the fungus was now awake and would rapidly destroy the poison he had used if he gave up now. Even more importantly, then Jake didn't want to lose out and give up when his dragonkin buddy was watching and doing a splendid job himself.

Gritting his teeth, Jake felt the energy invade his body and begin to ravage him from within. The fungus contained far more energy than Jake did... far, far more energy. It was like a massive battery of pure power, and Jake's only saving grace was that it couldn't discharge much of it rapidly. The closest comparison Jake had to the fungus was the curse energy in Eternal Hunger, but that was a pretty bad comparison considering the curse energy had not been actively antagonistic towards Jake and was also on an entirely different level in both quality and quantity. This fungus did contain a lot of energy, sure, but if what was within Eternal Hunger went rampant, Jake knew entire planets could be consumed by its hunger.

Jake and the mushroom continued their battle of push and pull as both tried to combat the energy they were injected with. Jake felt that the energy flooding him was surprisingly pure, not having any affinity. It was still trying to kill him, but he was now sure it was all controlled by the Mushroom Man King.

Draskil and Jake were fighting the same foe in the battle of attrition as Jake pushed in more and more energy. He allowed the mushroom to attack him in kind, believing in his body's ability to take it. Considering the lack of affinity in the mushroom, Jake also began to pump in some dark mana. The nature of dark mana was to consume other types of mana and propagate itself, and Jake happily helped it do that to consume more of the mushroom's energy storage. He controlled the poison through Touch and tried to attack the most essential parts of the massive fungus to kill it faster.

It was a game of cat and mouse. The fungus tried to eliminate the toxic energy Jake poured in, while Jake wanted to keep pumping. In the meanwhile, he also needed to keep avoiding getting what he had already put in eliminated. If the massive fungus could lock down what toxic energy he injecting, it would be able to instantly just flood it with mana and destroy it.

Hence Jake controlled it. He condensed the toxic energy as he focused. A vivid image of a giant network of paths appeared in his mind, and he instinctively knew it was a representation of the Soulshape of the fungus. It almost felt as if Jake was a small yellow circle with a mouth running around a maze being chased by ghosts as he slowly consumed more and more of his foe.

Realizing the fight was not going its way, the Mushroom Man King began trying to change its tactic. It saw Jake as the primary threat, and the now four versions of the little king began waving their wands and making tendrils of shroom emerge to attack Jake.

Jake, still holding into the roots of the massive fungus, kept his eyes closed as he focused. The tendrils flying for him suddenly began withering and turned into black dust that promptly scattered. More came, but they all met the same fate as Jake smirked unknowingly.

Every time the fungus moved, its Soulshape shifted slightly to represent it. All Jake did was split off some energy towards these moving parts, essentially sending toxic payloads into the tendrils to instantly destroy them. With the lacking ability of the Mushroom Man King to properly focus on taking down Jake while fighting Draskil, it had a tough time combatting this.

Jake kept up his part of the battle as he manipulated the toxic energy within the fungus like never before. At the same time, he also managed to do something else he usually didn't: amplifying the existing toxin he had injected. Or, more accurately, thrown on top of the giant mushroom.

He felt like he had more control than ever before and felt like he was touching upon an opportunity. Rather than infusing toxins into the creature itself... what if he injected it directly into the toxin he had already placed there? Sure, it had to go through the fungus, but currently, it was more like Jake connected a facet of toxins to the fungus and just let it drain into the maze-like Soulshape of the fungus before finally taking control of it. What if he instead shot it directly towards the toxic energy already in there? So rather than connecting a facet, he shot a water beam straight towards his target.

Combined with Sense of the Malefic Vlper and mayb-

You have slain [Mushroom Man King – lvl 201] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 172 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 173 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake's train of thought was interrupted by the entire Soulshape suddenly withering and breaking. His mind took a second to process what had happened as he looked up and saw Draskil with his mouth still open and a large black line cutting the large mushroom in two along with a few black rotting parts of the many Mushroom Man Kings falling to the ground.

He still stared as the dragonkin teleported down. "It died," Draskil said, a bit disappointed.

Jake felt the crumbling roots of the fungus in his hands as he sighed.

"Fuck me... be right back."

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 3

With that, Jake flashed out of existence for a moment as he went on a journey to experience the Path of the Malefic Viper – or at least a little snippet of it.

"Alright, we are closing in on the den," a male elf wearing golden armor said as he lifted his hand, signaling those behind him to stop.

Four men and six women followed him closely, all wearing different equipment and wielding powerful weapons. Jake, who was observing this, instantly knew all of them were C-grade... mid-tier C-grade, he guessed.

Out of this group, many would perhaps put most of their attention on their elven leader, but Jake focused on someone else. A human-looking male with long black hair, wearing a relatively simple robe. He didn't appear particularly threatening, and from how he was in the back and his equipment, he was clearly a caster of some kind.

However, the reason why he stood out to Jake was his familiar eyes and aura. This was the weakest iteration he had ever seen of him, but it was clearly the Malefic Viper fully disguised as a human.

"Strolas, do you have the flasks ready?" the elven leader asked as he turned to the one who would one day be known as the Malefic Viper.

“Yes, sir,” the Malefic Viper – going by Strolas – answered in a meek tone. “Just remember not to take too much damage, or the flasks may lose their effect.”

“I trust you,” the elf said with a smile. With that, the Viper handed out flasks to everyone in his group. They headed closer to the den, and once they did so, another caster of the group cast some magic before nodding. “It’s in there.”

The elven leader nodded. “Let’s go.”

Everyone drank their flasks. A few were a bit hesitant, but Strolas consumed his own instantly, making everyone else follow suit. Jake barely noticed a glint in the eyes of the Viper as the hunt began.

A massive beast firing out intense lasers of pure light magic emerged from the den and attacked. Jake watched on as the battle raged with what he quickly identified as a late-tier C-grade. It was a real struggle and a damn close fight from the looks of it, but the party of eleven persevered. Everyone took damage and was hit back, and Jake had to admit that any person shown in this vision would be able to kill him.

After nearly two grueling hours – that had felt more like a minute due to the entire fight getting fast-forwarded through - the giant beast lay dead, with not a single one in the group falling. The elf in his golden armor now had a bare chest as his armor had been broken, and one of the mages was missing an arm. The one healer in their group was spent, and everyone looked exhausted. All of them had done their utmost and pushed themselves... everyone but one person.

Jake had noticed how the Viper had gone easy. He had avoided nearly all hits and only allowed some attacks to hit him, making it look like he had taken significant damage with his singed cloak and scarred upper body, but in reality, he was in near-top condition.

“Good job,” the elven leader said as they all celebrated. He praised all the members with a genuine smile and also turned to the Viper. “Strolas, you have gone above and beyond once more. Those flasks surpassed my expectations. You truly are the best alchemist in the empire, and I will make sure to mention your performance to my father.”

The Viper seemed thankful as he went closer to the elf. “Thank you, sir, but if I may have one request...”

“What is it?” the elf asked, still happy as he got close to the Viper.

“Would you all kindly die?”

Pride of the Malefic Viper – or what would be known as Pride – descended as a domain appeared. The entire group of celebrating party members became alert as the Viper’s head flew forward and bit into the neck of the elf. At the same time, he lifted his hand into the air as it began glowing a dark green color... and Jake’s Perception of time slowed as he felt it.

Within every single person in the group, a toxin stirred, touched not by his hand but his domain. It was the flask they had all consumed before. Jake did not know what it was made of, but clearly, it had been an incredibly potent toxin in disguise.

The Viper ripped out the neck of the elf before he was blasted back by a flaming sword from the stumbling group leader. He looked at the Viper with shock as black scales emerged on his body and his body morphed into a large black wyvern in seconds.

He froze and didn't properly react. Everyone did. Their mental states were disturbed, their bodies broken from the battle with the beast before, and their resources spent. They even came to learn that the potions they had consumed contained more hidden poison, making them all despair further.

It was a group that Jake felt the Viper could never beat alone in a fight. The elven leader was a match for Villy alone, and if he hadn't been the main fighter against the beast before, they would have had a close fight. But with the element of surprise, them consuming an incredibly potent poison and their already weakened states, the outcome was obvious.

Even then, the Viper took damage as he killed them one by one. His wing was severed and his scales bleeding as he finally stood before the elven leader, who managed to hold on till the end.

"Why... what are you? How?" the elf said in disbelief as he was unable to stand any longer.

"The line between what is a poison and something helpful can be very narrow and blurred. Deceiving the Perception of an amateur in alchemy is not an impressive feat in the slightest. As for who I am... ah, it doesn't matter, now does it?" the Malefic Viper said with a light smile. The elf had already closed his eyes and succumbed to the poison.

Time rewound.

Jake once more saw the moment he activated Touch of the Malefic Viper. He focused on the process and, the second time around, felt that the simple motion had been a marvel of control. He didn't just activate the poison within them all but manipulated it. Amplified it. Sense of the Malefic Viper allowed him to see, Pride allowed him to extend his influence, and Touch to control.

Time rewound.

He felt it all again as more things became clear. He saw all their Soulshapes, and it was like a connection was made to each of them. Through Pride, it was formed...but Pride was not truly what created this connection. It was formed by Touch using Pride as a proxy, the two skills working flawlessly in synergy.

Time rewound.

Again and again, he saw it. He had already been on the precipice before and was just hammering out any flaws. He wasn't even sure if he would have needed to use Path of the Heretic-Chosen to get the upgrade... but he had the uses, so why not? He also feared that the inspiration could leave him if he didn't finish the upgrade there and then.

After thirteen rewinds, Jake got the notification as everything clicked into place, and he felt himself return to the real world once more.

Chapter 509 - (Un)Expected Situation

This vision had definitely been on the shorter side, and compared to his last one where Villy got smacked around by Valdemar, it was also far less valuable. Then again, that vision had consumed two charges of the skill and allowed him to see two future Primordials duking it out with a focus on more than one of the Malefic Viper skills.

Jake was teleported back into the dungeon as expected and was excited to get to his new skill but noticed something was off. Draskil was staring at him weirdly, and Irin was flying over together with Reika and Bastilla. Reika looked surprised more than anything, while Irin and Bastilla looked utterly dumbfounded.

As he was still wondering what was up, Reika poked him mentally and informed him: “Whatever you just did released a wave of a presence or something... it was yours but different... I think they know you are the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.”

His brain took a while to process what she had just said as it clicked. Oh... fuck.

Path of the Heretic-Chosen.

When he used the skill, he tapped into his direct connection to Villy and momentarily seized it to gaze upon the Records of the Primordial. He hadn’t even considered what that could do as all he knew was that he momentarily disappeared... unaware of what he left behind when he did that.

Still unsure what kind of explanation he should try and come up with, Irin made him fully aware he was way past the point of explaining it away the moment she got close.

Without any hesitation, she kneeled in front of him and pressed her forehead to the muddy soil as she spoke in a voice that seemed both pleading and apologetic. “This one greets the Chosen.”

Fuck me, Jake cursed internally as he realized he had truly fucked up. As he was about to say something, a prompt appeared in front of Jake and everyone else.

Congratulations! You have cleared the Dungeon: Nine Floors of the Indigo Caverns

Objective: Defeat the supreme leader of the mushroom men: the Mushroom Man King (Completed).

Dungeon shutting down in: 00:00:03

He saw the three seconds left just as two boxes appeared in front of them. Jake was quick and opened them both, taking the items in his inventory before he was whisked out of the dungeon.

Jake and the four others appeared outside the dungeon, Irin still kneeling and Draskil still staring. Reika and Bastilla were both in the air when they had exited and were now standing unmovingly on the ground. The unmoving part was not something unique to them as everyone was frozen. Even the air itself had stopped moving.

"Just some simple time magic," he heard a voice say as Villy appeared right beside him. Jake turned to the Viper, who patted him on the back. "Quite the pickle you just made for yourself. You know, every time you use Path of the Heretic-Chosen, you leave behind your anchored Truesoul... but that anchored Truesoul does not have the protection you worked so hard on making with Shroud. Not that it would have mattered as you tapping into my Records clearly leaves behind some traces, and those familiar with me are bound to notice. Now, what was the vision about? We can deal with this entire thing after, I care more about what you saw."

Still uncertain what to do, Jake just gave the cliff notes. "About Touch. It was you with a party led by an elf in golden armor, killed a late C-grade beast, you poisoned all of them with flasks and poisons, killing them and stealing the corpse as well as everything they owned."

Villy failed to hold back a smirk. "You know I am not a believer in fate, but this coincidence is a bit too perfect, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" Jake asked, his brain still trying to make up a plan.

"You see a vision of me killing my own party after a hunt and now find yourself in a situation where you must choose if you want to do the same," the Viper said. "With them alive, I do not see you hiding for long. The girl from Earth managed to solve this issue by having all those humans she brought with her sign a contract, but that isn't an option here. The demon is bound by a contract already, and signing one of confidentiality in this matter would go directly against that. So, Jake.... what will you do?"

"Oh," Jake said after hearing everything Villy said, not really caring about the last part. "Guess I am kinda screwed then."

"You can still kill them," the Viper shrugged. "Sure, the dragonkin may be a bit too much for you to handle, but you can go through official channels and use some of that Chosen clout to get him killed. Just ask Viridia, and I am sure she would gladly remove him or anyone else from existence."

"The chances of that happening are nil," Jake shut it down instantly.

"So you value their lives above your own secrecy?" Villy raised an eyebrow.

“Well, yeah. I can just keep trying to hide or tell people to leave me the fuck alone or something. At the very least, ask them to keep it a secret. Also, you said Irin had another contract, right? Does that contract really require her to report any secret the Malefic Viper or his Chosen told her not to divulge? Sounds like a shit contract.”

“Got me there,” the Viper said, putting up both his hands defensively. “But I am serious when I say you just made another weak point when it comes to your hidden identity. She will be forced to report something. Soon the cracks will spread, and your mask will shatter entirely, revealing the ugly mug of my Chosen beneath.”

“I will handle that when it happens,” Jake shook his head. “Also, quick question, does this count as time dilation?”

“Nope. I just stopped this cavern; time moves normally everywhere else. Localized time stops are pretty damn basic tools of the god toolkit. Anyway, you made your decision to just come clean to these three, right?”

“Seems like that is what is happening, yeah,” Jake nodded.

“Great. Then introduce me to your friends already,” Villy said with a teasing smile. The moment he was done speaking, time returned to normal as everyone looked confused. Draskil’s eyes quickly darted to the person now standing next to Jake and knelt down instantly, joining Irin, who was still pressing her head to the ground.

Reika and Bastilla stared confused for a moment before Jake realized neither of them had seen the Viper in his human form before nor were Blessed and thus felt his presence. It was like with Meira, and they would only truly be affected once they knew who he was, so if they-

"Hello there, my name is Vilastromoz, but most people call me the Malefic Viper, your pleasure to meet me," Villy said with a grin.

The effect was almost instant as Reika began shaking a bit before failing to stay upright, with Bastilla making an odd scared whining noise before just straight-up laying down in a fetal position.

Irin, now finally noticing something was off, looked up and saw the Viper standing there. She made eye contact for a fraction of a second before slamming her head down onto the ground again. Not a single word was spoken by her, and it was Draskil who opened his mouth first.

"Draskil greets his Patron," the dragonkin said in a tone Jake had never heard before. Rather than his usual domineering attitude and tone of confidence, he now seemed as meek as a baby lizard before a true dragon.

"You really wanted to play this casual, huh?" Jake muttered as he looked at Villy.

"No, I actually just wanted to fuck with you a little and have some fun when meeting your little friends," the Viper chuckled, clearly in a good mood. "And now that I have met them, I can't be arsed to stay. Since you decided not to kill them, I shall leave the rest to you. See you again a bit later, and by later, I mean in two days as I got some new ale done brewing by then."

"Can you just leave already to not make this worse than it already is?" Jake exclaimed with exasperation, knowing that the Viper was saying and doing all those things just to mess with him.

The Viper didn't even respond as he disappeared without a trace, leaving Jake and his party behind with only a final mental message to Jake sent mentally: "I made a barrier covering this entire cavern so go wild talking."

Jake took a few seconds to gather his thoughts and, in a glorious attempt to not address the elephant in the room, began talking. "So... ahem, we should discuss how we split the dungeon loot. I hurried to pick it up and--"

"Jake," Reika spoke as she looked up with red eyes and sweat pouring down her face, unable to be nice by not pointing out the damn elephant.

With a big sigh, Jake sat down with his legs crossed on the ground. Nobody else moved, and they were all either lying prone or kneeling. "So... yeah... I got the True Blessing of the Viper. We met under weird circumstances, got along well, and here we are. Sorry for keeping it a secret, but things tend to get weird when people know, and if possible, can we just act like I don't have it or at least not think about it too much? Let's just return to ten minutes ago mentally, alright?"

He knew he was reaching and knew it was a losing battle. Even after speaking, he knew he was not helping his situation. Jake felt utterly fucked, but he had neglected to consider that there already was one person in the group who knew and didn't act all weird about it.

Reika stood up and took out a handkerchief to clean her brows as she shook her head. "The mere presence of the Malefic One is truly something; I can't understand how you manage to stay upright and so casual."

Jake picked up on what she was trying to do and responded jokingly. "It's mainly the Bloodline, but plenty of practice sure helps."

Their casual demeanor seemed to slightly affect the others as Draskil finally looked up with questioning eyes. He stared at Jake as he frowned. "Why hide?"

At least he asked an easy question, Jake thought as he answered. "Due to exactly what is happening right now. I want to actually have normal interactions with others and not whatever you guys are doing."

Draskil still seemed confused and again asked: "Why?"

"Because that is who I am," Jake just said. "I didn't treat you differently when you thought I had a lower-leveled Blessing than you, did I? I want it to be like that with how you treat me. Also, Irin... why is your head still glued to the ground?"

Irin barely reacted as she shook a little. Jake was about to talk again as Reika stopped him. "Jake... can you go over there for a moment?" she asked, pointing to a corner rather far away.

Jake was confused before he looked at Reika, who gave him the kind of stare that told him he should really agree.

"Alright..." he said as he walked away. Shit, I am bad at this.

Wanting to take his mind off things, Jake sat down in the corner nearly a full kilometer away from Reika, who set up her own barrier. He had put it off due to the "situation" but now found the time to finally go over his upgrade and what he had at least gained out of this entire thing.

As expected, the notification he had heard was Touch of the Malefic Viper finally upgrading.

[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper has slain countless foes. Attempt to inject poison into a being through physical contact. The nature of the poison is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 1 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

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[Touch of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] – With a single touch, the Malefic Viper seizes control of the world. Attempt to inject toxic energy into a being through contact. The nature of the toxic energy is determined by the user. The alchemist can only use toxic effects he has concocted or created prior or to further empower an existing toxic effect within the target. Allows the alchemist to far more effectively control all toxins he is in contact with when using Touch of the Malefic Viper. Can be used with all compatible types of mana affinities, further altering the effects. This effect is especially effective using your arcane affinity. Vastly increases the potency of transmutations made using Touch of the Malefic Viper at the cost of partly binding them to your soul. Some effects cannot be replicated. Adds an increase to the effectiveness of Touch of the Malefic Viper based on Intelligence and Wisdom. Passively provides 3 Intelligence per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your touch be the catalyst of corruption as you bend the world to your will.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 175 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

Jake once more considered how damn long those skill descriptions were getting. It was truly proof of how utterly bonkers the Malefic Viper Legacy skills were. The description itself only had minor changes but impactful ones. It no longer said “through physical contact” but merely “through contact,” no-doubt reflecting the synergy with Pride. It also added the effects of empowering existing toxins and even the part about increased control. Rather than one major improvement which he often saw with upgraded skills, it was several smaller things that Jake had been working towards for a long time. The part about empowering toxins was something he had already done before. He had, of course, also trained to improve his control at all times, and the only truly new thing was the use of Pride. Even then, it wasn’t entirely new, considering all the training Jake had done when it came to Soulshapes.

The level to his profession was also welcome. As Jake looked at his status, he noted that he was now more than halfway through upgrading his nine Malefic Viper Legacy skills to legendary. He still needed Blood, Wings, Sagacity, and surprisingly enough, Sense of the Malefic Viper. For Wings, he had a good idea what to do, Sagacity, he had a feeling was heavily linked to the drop of blood in his Soulspace, but with both Blood and Sense, he wasn’t that sure where to take them. He decided that he should definitely dedicate more time to them as he wanted to get all four skills to legendary rarity before reaching C-grade, just like he had gotten them all to Ancient before D-grade.

As a final thing, Jake checked and saw that his Dungeoneer title had also upgraded once again.

[Dungeoneer VIII] – Successfully clear a Dungeon suitable for your level. +14 all stats.

It was just three to all stats, but everything was welcome.

Having gone through all his menus and some internal reflection, Jake considered what to do now. He didn’t want to go through the loot from the dungeon alone and looked over towards the barrier that was still up and wondered what they were talking about as he sent some encouraging thoughts their way.

Go Reika! I believe in you!

Chapter 510 - Reika & The Insurmountable Task Of Trying To Explain Jake

"Your actions were needless and just made unnecessary trouble for him," Duskleaf said as Vilastromoz teleported back to his usual chambers. "Your intent, I assume."

"You know me so well," the Viper smiled at his disciple.

"Are you disappointed?" Duskleaf asked. "You would have killed all four of them in a heartbeat just to avoid the slightest inconvenience. A choice he didn't even consider."

"No... if I wanted him to be a mirror image of me, I wouldn't like him nearly as much," Vilastromoz shook his head. "Sentimentality can be healthy as long as he doesn't overdo it."

"His Path is not yours and never will be," Duskleaf sighed. "He is far more controlled than you ever were."

Vilastromoz smirked. "You say that... and yet I wonder what happens when he is truly pushed. I believe we shall come to discover that his and my extremes are not that different. That the lines he is willing to cross are far less controlled and restrained than you believe."

Duskleaf frowned but didn't speak further. Not entirely able to disagree.

--

Reika had been at many social gatherings in her life and done plenty of convincing and negotiating. She had worked for her clan and even argued for more research funding... but trying to convince three fanatics that meeting their god and someone who was essentially a prophet wasn't that big of a deal was way out of her league. To make it worse, then they had hung out with Jake and been casual with him for quite a while already, and this seemed to only hit them harder as they, in retrospect, viewed their actions as insulting if not downright blasphemous. This was clearly not something where logic could win.

After she had made the barrier and Jake was gone, it put a dampener on the mood, and Irin finally lifted her head as she stared at Reika. "You knew?"

"Yes," Reika just answered.

"For how long?"

"Since before we entered the Order. Jake's identity is hidden here but not on our planet," Reika explained. "Back there, everyone with any status knows."

"How..." Irin muttered as she fell silent again.

Bastilla still looked at Reika with disbelief without speaking as Reika sighed. She considered her approach to try and salvage the situation they found themselves in. She knew that her own casual demeanor was already way off from what the three of them would expect of her and would use that in her approach.

Rather than attempt to spin a tale of lies or a new cover-up, she decided to just go with the truth... a slightly modified truth with a good deal of her own conjecture mixed in, but the truth nonetheless.

"You must remember that Jake and I come from a planet that hasn't even had the system for a few years yet. I didn't even believe gods actually existed before the system arrived, and there is a good chance Jake didn't either. Moreover, we come from a world with a modern culture focused heavily on individualism and a belief in personal freedom and equality. At least the parts of the world we were from. No one was inherently superior to others, at least we believed they weren't, and anyone claiming to be better due to their inborn traits was heavily ostracized and looked down upon," Reika began explaining as the three of them listened.

"The concept of others being superior is so foreign to us and also why I personally have a hard time adapting to a world with literal gods. It is a slow process, but I am getting more acclimated to it these days. I know they are superior; I know that a being such as the Malefic Viper is an existence I can barely dream of approaching, and I feel it deep in my bones every time I am confronted with a creature of superior strength and grade. But Jake does not feel this fear. You all know he has a Bloodline, and that Bloodline offers him innate resistance to auras and presences. Due to it, he does not feel the suppression of a god's presence and coupled with his upbringing and inherent values and culture, he simply doesn't share the same sentiment as most everyone in the multiverse. He does not experience fear nor reverence towards those superior to him, and in turn, he does not wish to be viewed as superior either simply due to what or who he is. Let us also be fair, Jake is not the most normal person, even on his best days. I do not say that to criticize him in any way either. Would anyone expect the Chosen of a Primordial to be normal? Has any of you ever met one before? I do not know if it is just me, but if each god can only have one Chosen, is it not only to be expected that person will be unique? And that the Chosen of a Primordial will be more special than any other?"

She needed to speak rather carefully and avoid saying anything too incendiary. While Jake could get away with blasphemy, Reika didn't believe she could. Not in a million years. She also wanted to kind of excuse why Jake acted as he did.

The thing about his Bloodline was something she had pre-approved by Jake a long time ago. She had been told the properties of his Bloodline before and knew it allowed him to resist auras. Parts of her wondered if it had other aspects as well, but it wasn't something she would think about too much and definitely never ask about.

Reika tried to reach them but had a hard time reading the three members of the Order, especially the dragonkin, as she quite honestly had no idea what expressions they made or what emotions those expressions represented. Bastilla also just stared blankly as she likely tried to process everything, and Irin looked deep in thought.

I don't need to convince Bastilla or even Draskil. As long as I get Irin on board and we reach an understanding, she can rope in the two others. Jake will also likely be able to convince Draskil himself, Reika thought as she talked directly to Irin.

"Irin... what are you thinking about right now?" she asked the demon. Even if she had an idea, she still wanted to confirm.

"I... I just saw the Malefic One in person and have spoken to his Chosen several times," Irin said as a stupid smile covered her face.

Not what I thought, Reika quickly realized as Irin kept talking.

"I even approached the Chosen with the intent to..." Irin said as her eyes opened wide. "What have I done? How could I not have realized? My behavior has been utterly unbecoming... should I beg? No, I don't deserve forgiveness; I should just--"

"Hey!" Reika yelled as she chopped the head of the succubus, hurting her hand a bit. "Snap out of it already. Didn't you hear a single word I said before? That he said before leaving."

Irin finally looked up, and with her attention, Reika spoke again. "You know what is really unforgivable? Thinking that if the Chosen and the Malefic One wanted to hide his identity, you could figure it out on your own. Or you believing that any actions you have done while interacting with the disguise he purposefully made weren't something he wanted. Consider it for a moment. Jake already told you why he wanted to hide his identity before. Are you questioning his judgment?"

"I would never!" Irin said dismissively, if not a bit mad.

"Then you still don't get it. This part is primarily my own conjecture, but while we know why Jake wanted to hide his identity, have you considered why the Malefic One approved?" Reika asked, getting a few interested glances.

"While I do not dare claim I understand the thoughts of a Primordial, would it not make sense that this is related to the Path of his Chosen? Perhaps it has been deemed that he benefits from interactions with others without them knowing his true identity. Perhaps it is something entirely else. Either way, the Malefic Viper likely wants us to question his Chosen. Judge his Chosen. Allow his Chosen to grow. For him to make his own choices and walk his own Path not affected by his status. Do notice how the Malefic One even asked the opinion of Jake and seemed relaxed with him. Machinations far above our realm of understanding are taking place, and if we truly wish to show our loyalty, the best we can do is to act as they want of us by not seeing Jake as the Malefic One's Chosen. Even if we do at least recognize it, then we should not use it as an excuse to treat him differently," Reika explained to Irin.

"When I first learned he was the Chosen of the Malefic One, I had a hard time comprehending it, and after coming here to the Order, I have to remind myself every day that treating Jake like Jake the Chosen and not Jake the person goes directly against what he himself and the Viper wishes. So at the very least, try to treat him like a normal person. You have his permission and the permission of the Malefic One to do this," Reika said, only lying a little bit as she didn't ever really struggle with his identity. She also chose to add on one more thing that she only sent to Irin.

"And consider the possibilities. You have an open invitation to approach and interact with the Chosen in a casual way. Are you really going to throw such a golden opportunity away?"

If Reika had learned one thing while in the Order, it was that everyone was inherently selfish. Irin was worried for several reasons, most of them to do with self-preservation and fear of what could happen to her if Jake was genuinely mad or offended. So rather than Irin seeing it as a negative that she now knew, Reika wanted her to see it as something to take advantage of. Jake could deal with whatever the outcome of that was.

Her words clearly reached the demon as Irin seemed to focus and think it over. A few seconds passed before her eyes darted up. "Are you certain that this is truly the will of the Malefic One and his Chosen?"

"Well, no," Reika answered honestly. "But I have yet to be smitten for blasphemy, and I have treated Jake normally ever since we met. He even asked me to join for this dungeon run showing that he clearly isn't offended by my presence or how I act."

"So you just act like you don't know he is the Chosen?" she asked clarifyingly.

"It is more accurate to say that I act like him being the Chosen isn't really that big of a deal. I recognize it, I know it, but I don't make it be what defines him. That is also his wish, and I respect that," Reika once more answered.

"Still don't get why he hides it," Draskil muttered, finally speaking.

Can't tell them Jake doesn't actually think it is that big of a deal and just annoying to be a Chosen... Reika thought as she instead made a roundabout answer. "Who are we to even try? If that is the Path Jake and the Malefic One has chosen, the most respectful thing we can do is to honor their wishes."

She felt like she was talking in circles, but sometimes repetition could be helpful. Reika felt like she had made some good process, but there was still work to do before she felt confident "releasing" the three of them upon Jake.

Jake, in the meantime, had chosen to run away to a place no one else could go.

"Why did you even bother trying to hide your identity to begin with when you can't be arsed to actually keep hiding?" sim-Jake asked the real Jake as they both sat in the Soulspace.

"I just prefer it if people don't know I am the Chosen. It isn't a make-or-break-it kind of deal," Jake shrugged.

"It is more the lack of decisiveness," sim-Jake criticized. "You half-ass so many things. You start doing something only to quit halfway through, or you just stop bothering."

"So I should have killed all four of them?" Jake asked with a scoff.

"I am saying you should have never bothered hiding your identity at all or have been fully prepared for it eventually coming out when you barely try to stay under the radar. You are not going to change the entire multiverse and their views on gods or their Chosen. It is natural to submit to those more powerful

than yourself, and they all know it. It is the law of the multiverse, and there is a reason why natural suppression between grades exists. There is a reason we do not feel it either, as we are born to stand beside or above everyone. Better to just embrace that you are indeed superior and then go from there," sim-Jake said.

"We are not having this conversation again," Jake sighed as he stood up within the Soulspace.

"You spent your entire life trying to fit in and adapt to a world you never fit into. Yet now, when you finally find a world you fit into, you try to apply those useless values that only led to the suppression of your Bloodline – of who you are," Jake's other self kept talking. "Why not just accept it? It is an inevitability anyway. With time we will reach levels of power where being Chosen or not has no meaning."

"And at that time, it will at least be earned and not merely given because Villy decided to give it to me," Jake shot back.

"Fair, I at least get that. You don't want to borrow his clout, even if I will say it is earned. Villy has recognized that we are worth it, and I get him. Like I just said, then he also views us reaching the apex as a foregone conclusion, and when eternity is the timeline you are used to working with, why not get ahead of the curve and just recognize us as worth viewing as an equal right away?" sim-Jake said.

"That or die," Jake pointed out.

"True, true. Definitely shouldn't do that," sim-Jake chuckled as he also stood up. "Anyway, enough about that, let's talk about what actually matters. I have been busy while you were playing alchemist, and I wanted some input."

"No, you don't need my input," Jake said.

"Heh, true. I just want to show off my progress," sim-Jake smirked.

"So, you beating up the chimera again?"

"Nah, this isn't about the fighting style this time around but my other project," sim-Jake explained.
"Watch this."

Sim-Jake closed his eyes and focused for a moment. He knelt down and jumped forward as suddenly he turned all shadowy. Several copies of sim-Jake then appeared in a line between him and his destination before he finally appeared more than a hundred meters away.

"Space magic," Jake quickly concluded.

"Bingo," sim-Jake said. It is far better than Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra but far from useful yet. So yeah, hold back on upgrading it. Mixing in space magic like I am is already pushing it away from its Origin in Umbra's Legacy, but I need far more to properly make it our own."

Jake nodded. "Alright. Keep up the good work. Anything else to add? If not, I want to go study the drop of blood I stole from Villy a bit."

"Just one thing," sim-Jake said. "Fight some more C-grades with space magic if you can. I got a lot of ideas from reviewing the fight with the Phantomshade Panther."

Jake nodded in understanding as he went towards the red marble floating inside his Soulspace in a desolate area. He hadn't really interacted with it actively that much but thought it was high time he began studying it properly. A full analysis was out of the question, but he should be able to at least figure something useful out.

He didn't know how much time he had either and, quite honestly, was more occupied with passing the time than anything else, so he didn't have to think about the outside world that he would have to deal with pretty soon.

Jake sincerely hoped that Reika would succeed. If she didn't, it would really suck. He had enjoyed the dungeon quite a lot despite the shitty mushroom theme only because he had good company. Not to misunderstand, Jake liked his solo adventures, but he also liked to at least have the option of teaming up. It also had many benefits, as Jake had learned quite a few things from his party members.

If Reika failed, Jake wasn't even sure what his plans were. Would he cut them off? Distance himself? Accept them no longer treating him like before? He genuinely didn't know.

All he could do was hope that it didn't come to that.