

Hunter 301

Chapter 301: Treasure Hunt - Count Hunting

Jake walked through the hall as the black mist parted around him. He found that even with the Root in his inventory, the mist still parted for him. The Root was an interesting item that he was certain had some specific intended use already.

Also, the wood the Root was made of was a bit recognizable. He had a strong suspicion that whatever tree this Root came from was the tree that had been used to make the Pure Ones' anti-vampire weapons and, of course, the Stake. However, the Root was clearly far superior to the Stake. In fact, Jake had a strong suspicion that if he stabbed a Count with it, it would be a near-instant kill.

The mere fact that it was even useful before using it as a stabby tool was awesome, and he saw several possibilities to explore areas filled with black mist. But for now, he planned on just keeping it hidden away in his inventory... at least that was the plan.

Yet just as he reached the atrium again, he felt something from his Hunter Insignia. The Root wanted out, and Jake responded as it appeared in his hand, and the moment it did, it functioned as a black hole of curse energy once more... but not towards the atmospheric mist.

No, it was from some of the nearly a thousand golems he had slain. A large number of them below sent energy up towards the Root as it absorbed every bit of it, and Jake felt the curse be amplified as it subtly influenced him. It wanted him to slaughter vampires and made him feel anger and hate towards them... or at least it tried to. The thing is, Jake had been walking around with a cursed blade for months and had gotten accustomed to its constant influence, plus he had to deal with what was essentially an emotional minefield caused by his bloodline, too. So yeah, while the curse on the Root was powerful, it failed to really do anything. Also, one shouldn't discount the now legendary-rarity Pride of the Malefic Viper, which facilitated his resistance and amplified his will to resist the curse.

It only took a few seconds before all the curse energy had been collected, and when Jake jumped out over the railing, he got in range of even more dead golems and felt yet another rush of cursed energy. He kept holding the Root throughout the halls as he just let it absorb more and more curse energy.

He decided to give the tower a quick rundown for any hidden treasures, considering the Count's gate had been intact, so maybe there were other hidden places too?

Well, after half an hour, he did finally spot another closed gate, and once he got close, he saw that behind it was another six Knights. They were gathered around a chest, making it damn obvious they were guarding some kind of treasure or something.

I guess I can kill a few more.

He went up to the gate and just gave it a quick kick as it fell apart. All the gates in this place were just shitty. Jake had expected the five Knights to react when the gate was suddenly destroyed, and they did... just not as expected.

They all turned towards him for a second before just returning to standing around the chest, ignoring him completely.

"Huh?" he said out loud as he walked closer. Jake went straight up to one of the golems and just poked it with his finger, not getting any reaction. He then looked down at the Root and got an idea.

He lifted it up and hit the golem gently on the helmet with the blunt end of the Root.

You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 135] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

The black mist that inhabited the golem was instantly absorbed into the Root as the armor fell to the ground and crumbled into scrap metal. Jake's eyes lit up as he went over to the next golem.

“Bonk.”

You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 135] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

With childlike glee, he bonked the next three too. Seeing the enemy that had given him that much grief just fall apart and be one-shot with the Root was so damn satisfying. Also, he was fully aware that while he got notifications for the kills, it wasn't like he actually got any worthwhile experience. It was like that rat swarm in the Forgotten Sewers he had killed with the control staff. Sure, it said they gave experience, but it was negligible due to the way he killed them.

Once they were all turned to scrap, he opened the chest and saw a pillow was placed within with a collection of small orbs on it.

[Bead of Curse Resistance (Common)] – A bead that will grant the user temporary resistance to all kinds of curses once crushed by coating the user in a veil of mana. One-time use. The veil of mana will be worn down faster, dependent on the power of the curse it blocks.

Correction, he saw a pillow with a collection of small beads on it. He counted about thirty of them, and he was amazed at how useless they would be to him after obtaining the Root. This was the puzzle room all over again, in the sense that it was clearly intended that he should find this place before he headed for the Count's chamber. That way, he could have used the beads to defend himself while exploring the upper floors.

Needless to say, Jake had no need for them now with the far more effective Root. Hence, he moved on.

Because now it was time to speedrun some Counts.

While Jake had been busy fighting an army of cursed golems, the different factions had stayed closer to the center of the Treasure Hunt area, also known as the Mistless Plains. Additionally, they had chosen to focus on the Counts first above anything else, and it soon became obvious that the faction named the Pure Ones had hidden armories or weapon stashes in nearly all the towers. All of them hiding a Stake specifically created to severely weaken a Count.

News spread that the Sword Saint had slain a Count after around a full day of the Hunt. If a Stake had been used or not was unknown. Either way that would be the second person to kill one after the Lord of Haven. As for the Holy Church? They were aiming to get the third at this moment.

"Noor, Joshua, how long till the barrier is ready?" Bertram asked as they stood outside the room to enter the Count's chambers. The caster and healer of the party were hard at work laying down a barrier in collaboration to seal in the Count of Blood to avoid it running down the tower or, worse yet, flee outside the chamber.

The first kill on a Count had made it clear that one couldn't let the vampire run free and consume people, hence why they decided to seal it in. Jacob had also warned them that it could become a very tough fight if the vampire ran rampant.

Lucian and Maria, the swordsman and archer of their party, were just hanging back, both also making subtle preparations. Maria was preparing her bow by temporarily making it stronger and boosting its enchantments – courtesy of her profession. Lucian was sitting with a small pen, engraving small runes upon one of the swords related to the Pure Ones, each rune pulsing with magic.

They were going all-out in this fight.

"It will be done within the next minute," Noor answered him as she finished up the final parts.

"Good. Lucian will sneak in first and use the Stake on the Count. The moment he does so, he will retreat to the rest of us, and we'll deploy the tactics discussed and used against the Viscount. Any questions?"

Seeing only nods, Bertram motioned for Lucian to get ready. The swordsman donned a robe enchanted with stealth-improving properties and went up to the gate. The moment Noor gave the sign that the barrier was ready, he presented the Mark of Blood as the gate opened.

Lucian slipped inside, no movement inside yet as he held the Stake in his hand. The vampire didn't react before the moment the Stake penetrated its chest, making it scream loudly in pain as black veins spread from the wound.

"YOU DARE USE THIS HERETICAL TOOL TO HARM ME!? MERE LIVESTOCK DESERVES ONLY DEATH FOR SUCH TRANSGRESSIONS!"

The Count screamed, but all of them had been prepared and steeled their mental defenses. Luckily they all had skills to resist the constant mental attack from the Count that slowly dwindled away the will of his foes through what, granted, did sound like horrendous speeches.

Bertram stormed the Count first as his team followed up. They had planned for this using the last half a day or so, and that preparation showed itself. They continually suppressed the Count, Joshua searing it with powerful light magic, and Maria bombarding it with fire arrows that left flames that refused to burn out.

The fight ended up still taking nearly half an hour, with the Count of Blood struggling throughout, but it was far from powerless. It used whips of blood to try and cut them up and summoned snake-like creatures from bloody spots it left on the ground. These attacks had not been predicted, and the Count seemed far less melee-focused than they had come to believe. Ultimately, while this did add some difficulty, the party of five still proved superior.

Bertram cleaved down with a mighty swing of the blade and finished off the already-haggard vampire. From Lucian building up poison with envenomed attacks to the two powerful ranged fighters, they had significant damage output. Bertram constantly smashing it down and keeping the Count controlled had also been a major contributor to what made them victorious. Noor had been supporting them throughout it, of course, and she especially proved her worth when she used a healing spell to regenerate Joshua's arm when he got it whipped off.

As the vampire turned to ash, Bertram claimed the key as well as all the other loot. The entire group was tired, and Noor was already sitting down from being out of mana along with Joshua. Maria was in the best condition as she had managed to avoid all hits and stayed as far away as possible throughout the fight.

Bertram looked at his party as he commended them. "Great job, everyone... this was a tough one. We can all be proud."

Three of them smiled, but Maria shook her head as she looked at the ashes of the vampire. "And the Sword Saint and Lord Thayne killed one each alone... no one reported seeing signs Lord Thayne had even used a Stake, in fact, they found one in that tower later... do we even know the Sword Saint used one? Is this really anything to be proud of?"

I get it, Bertram thought but chose to say silent. But do not compare yourself to monsters, for it will lead to nothing good.

"Stop being a downer," Lucian scoffed. "No one says we couldn't have beaten it without the Stake either. We don't even know how effective it is, and he maybe used something else to weaken it. Also, clearly, they were not identical monsters, so comparing them one to one is just moronic."

"Do you seriously believe that?" Maria shot back.

"Unless you present proof that shows otherwise, why wouldn't I? We don't know which is true. Maybe that other Count was just weak in comparison," Lucan shrugged. "Point is, nobody knows, so why be a downer and assume we're weak compared to that Thayne guy?"

"You-"

"Because we are weak in comparison," Bertram said with a sigh, getting everyone to turn their attention to him. "That is simply a fact. But he is also alone. His support system is weak compared to ours. He may have the biggest stick, but we have thousands of sticks. So don't be discouraged... we don't need to be the most powerful people on Earth. The Holy Church just needs to be the most influential faction. And the best way to make the Church stronger is to do as we are doing right now and progress. Got it?"

He got a few glances, but they all eventually nodded. After that, Bertram just closed his eyes as he entered meditation. One thing he had left unsaid, though...

While the Holy Church certainly was powerful on Earth... Bertram didn't need to voice his doubts that their numbers would be ultimately useless before true monsters in human skin.

An unlikely party traveled through the tower. Two women and a small green ball of fluffy feathers tore through the halls with incredible speed, tearing apart anything in their way. It was mainly done by the woman at the front as she slammed her fists into the cursed black golems.

Behind her was another woman with green magic revolving around her. She summoned bolts of what looked like shimmering green fire and pelted the enemies, but it was only when the golems died she truly showed her worth.

A golem neared death as it exploded into black mist, but the woman simply waved her hand as the golem suddenly sank into the ground. A moment later, a few scraps of metal remerged where the golem had just been, emanating black mist making it clear it had just exploded.

Another golem tried to attack them from the side, but the feather ball flew up to it and cut a deep gash into the black metal before sending it flying back with a green gust of wind.

This unlikely party was Carmen and Sylphie, now joined by another friend.

"I feel like I'm getting carried on the back of you guys," Miranda miffed as the woman and bird both displayed power above her own in these direct fights.

"You're doing great; those explosions are shitty to deal with," Carmen comforted her.

"Ree!" Sylphie added, none of the women understanding the bird, but still giving her a nod anyway as if they did.

"Well, I'm trying," Miranda smiled in return to Carmen.

Miranda had coincidentally run into one of Arnold's drones, and when she asked it about information, he told her the location of Sylphie and Carmen inside one of the many grave hills. Miranda had believed there was a chance Jake was also there or at least nearby but had found only the two comrades she now explored the Hunt with.

Carmen had especially been welcoming. As for Sylphie? Miranda had luckily made a habit to always carry some of those pellets the bird liked. Yes, it was 100% a bribe to make the small hawk like her, but what can you do?

Funnily enough, Carmen hadn't asked Miranda about the bird other than if she knew it. Miranda had just responded it came from Haven, and they had left it at that. Honestly, she appreciated it, as she wasn't comfortable divulging it had entered with Jake. Not without his permission, at least.

"Do you think we can take down a Count?" Carmen asked.

"Ree!" Sylphie chimed in. Both of them understand that clearly; she believed they could.

"We need a Stake, that's for sure," Miranda answered. "Perhaps a few more allies too. I heard a group tried to take on that Count the Holy Church was after and ended up being slaughtered within minutes. It even wasted a Mark of Blood as the gate slammed shut after their deaths."

"You sure we can't do it just us three?" Carmen asked again.

"A hard maybe..." Miranda once more reiterated. "But I would argue it would be better to get some more powerful people involved."

Miranda was naturally trying to get Carmen to do something. And...

Carmen sighed as she gave up. "Fine, I'll call Sven and the others."

The Mistress of Haven just smiled in return. "With them, it should be more than manageable."

Chapter 302: Treasure Hunt: Actual Speedrunning (mostly)

This time, Jake actually did as he intended when he called it a speedrun. An hour after leaving the tower, he was already within another, with a new Mark of Blood in hand. Well, in his Hunter Insignia. Whatever.

He stormed up the tower, noticing many others already within it. There didn't seem to be a singular faction that dominated, but just many smaller forces and parties, which was perfect. This was one of the towers still not consumed by mist, and it would contain a Count from the looks of it.

When he made it to the upper floors, he saw a great number of people grouped up before the gate. There were around thirty in total, and Jake saw that their levels ranged from 109 to 116. There were two people Jake couldn't identify without squinting a bit and penetrating whatever they used to hide their levels. Needless to say, their puny skills were nothing before the might of the mega-perception build.

Jake's appearance wasn't exactly unknown at this point, and everyone turned to him when he appeared.

Being a recognizable figure, a few people backed away, while others seemed to take up semi-defensive positions. It was a bit useless as neither of those would help anything if Jake had come to rob people. Luckily for them, he hadn't, but that didn't mean he was just going to leave them be.

"I'm here for the Count. Leave."

To his surprise, more than half of the people there just looked at him for a brief moment before leaving without any arguing. A good bit of people did stay, though. It was the ones at higher levels. Fourteen people remained; all of them were above 112.

"Lord Thayne, do you have a Stake?" a man from the group of fourteen asked him. "If not, we can offer one and work together on taking down this Count. You can have the key; we just wish to split the rest of the loot."

"No thanks, just leave," Jake said as he walked closer to the gate.

"Would it not be better if-"

"No. Leave."

The man looked at Jake with an open mouth, clearly not entirely sure what to say. A party of five among the fourteen people behind him exchanged looks before they left. Half of the remaining eight beside the leader seemed to take this as their cue to bail, leaving only four behind him – probably his party members.

Jake threw him one final glance before he just summoned the Mark of Blood and the gate began to open. The man saw him do this, his eyes wide as he yelled for his party to run. While retreating, Jake heard him mutter something about Jake being an "unreasonable asshole."

He wasn't really going to disagree on that one. But it only made sense. It was foolish to expect a hunter to be nice when you come between him and his prey.

As the door opened, Jake spun a web of arcane strings that he attached to each side of the gate, keeping it at the ready for when the time was right. It was ready just in time for the gate to fully open and a relatively small form appeared from the silver coffin with long tendril-like hairs expending from all over his body.

"Who are you? How dare mere livestock awaken this Count? I-"

BOOM!

"You'll die," Jake answered as Limit Break activated at 20%, his presence blanketing the entire chamber, blades, and arrows, poisoned, as he went forth, holding nothing back.

What followed was a lot of explosions, a vampire with oddly stretchable limbs and the ability to grow out hair that tried to grasp him and consume his blood – that one turned out well for Jake as the Count got a good slurp of Jake's poisoned blood. In not that long, the Count was already on its last legs.

The Count tried to run, but Jake was ready. He activated his arcane strings, and the gate slammed shut in the face of the fleeing vampire. The hairy bloodsucker screamed and fired off magic to try and tear off the strings and keep Jake away, but that wasn't going to happen.

Jake caught up to the vampire and gripped his head from behind, and slammed the vampiric face into the gate as he began channeling Touch of the Malefic Viper. The Count tried to pierce his hands with his long hair, but Jake had already infused his gloves with arcane magic, making them incredibly tough.

The Count struggled, but Jake kept smashing his foe's head into the hard metal gate over and over again as blood splashed everywhere and the head of the vampire became more and more squishy from the Touch. The long hair tried to penetrate his body over and over again, but Jake either shrugged it off or avoided being hit in any vital places.

Ultimately, the Count of Blood was too weak, and with a final smash, the entire head popped like a watermelon fired from a cannon into a brick wall.

You have slain [Count of Blood – lvl 155] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

‘DING!’ Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 135 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points

Second Count down.

Jake looted the key that dropped as well as the heart, and instead of a sword, this Count dropped a dagger. The dagger and key were all items he already knew about, as the knife was the same as the sword, in pretty much all ways.

The only interesting drop was the heart - another beautiful red gem.

[Starved Hilsic Vampire Heart (Epic)] – The heart of a severely starved Hilsic Vampire. This type of vampire is a rare variant with high agility and controllable hair that is more durable than most metals. The rarity has been downgraded due to the starved state of the vampire the heart has been claimed from. Has many alchemical uses.

“Hilsic vampire, huh,” Jake muttered, the name meaning absolutely nothing to him. He was impressed with how many different vampires there were, though. It was pretty neat. He did wonder why the Viscounts didn’t drop any hearts, though. Was it because they weren’t rare enough variants? Or just system-fuckery? Either way, now Jake had two epic-rarity hearts.

Next up, he looted the altar and coffin, finding them both identical to the ones prior. He had no idea what he would use two damn altars and coffins for, but now he had them.

With everything done, he began another important job... stealing the gates. Now that wasn't very speedrun of him, but the gates were awesome.

Jake spent the next twenty minutes burning off the first door and only eighteen for the second one. He was getting better, that was for sure. It did look a bit funny with the gate completely gone, faint marks as if something had torn it off from where it had been attached to the walls.

Gate in his inventory, he chugged a mana potion and headed onwards to get another Mark of Blood and kill another Count. He summoned his wings and leaped up as he took flight, feeling like going by air this time around. He went over the battle again in his head as he flew while also sending a few mental messages back and forth with Sylphie.

"He's just some stuck-up arrogant piece of shit who thinks he's better than everyone else," the man complained loudly to the dozen, or so people gathered around him.

"Why are we even staying here when the dude is probably already dead?" another one chimed in, sounding equally mad and annoyed.

"Yeah, is the seal still not reactivated?" the first guy said, turning to someone in the group with a small compass-like item.

"No, it's still down, so he is probably still alive somehow," the one with the compass answered with a shrug. "I guess the vampire is taking its time getting a good meal."

“I hope that fucker dies and doesn’t leave like a coward.”

“A damn narcissist is what he is. If he had just teamed up with us, the Count would be dead already. It’s been over a fucking hour, for fuck’s sake,” the first dude cursed as he paced back and forth.

“Maybe he will have weakened it, and we can capitalize?” the second guy came in again.

“Perhaps. He did kill one before, but let’s not risk things more than-“

It was at that moment a figure flew by, coming from the direction of the Count’s chambers. They saw the black wings and for a moment thought it was the vampire, but soon realized it wasn’t... it was Lord Thayne.

He flew by them without even acknowledging their existence. What’s more important was that they didn’t see any hints in his movements that he was heavily injured.

The twelve people who had stayed behind looked at each other in disbelief before they all took off towards the Count’s chamber. When they got there, they were absolutely dumbstruck. The entire chamber was completely ruined, and there was blood everywhere... but more so than that...

“How... how did he destroy the gate?”

It was a question they all asked themselves as they saw it gone. They had all encountered that black metal and knew exactly how tough it was. None of them could even leave a noticeable mark on it. And yet Lord Haven had blown it off during his fight.

“He... is he human?”

“I... I think I’m gonna leave.”

“Do... do any of you think he heard us? What if he holds a grudge?”

“What a monster...”

While their responses differed, one thing was certain... none of them dared shit-talk him ever again. In fact, they would prefer to never even meet him or get his attention.

Ever.

Someone else that would agree that Jake was a monster was his next foe. Three hours after he killed his second Count of Blood, Jake was at it again as the entire chamber was covered in toxic mist, but it was not the cursed kind but the highly toxic variant from Wings of the Malefic Viper.

Five figures attacked Jake, each of them holding a black rapier. Jake ignored four of them and slammed his Scimitar of Cursed Hunger infused with arcane mana into the fifth one, sending the vampiric woman stumbling back. Yes, it was a woman, and double-yes, it was still called a Count of Blood.

Jake suddenly saw the entire hall in front of him shift and change as the walls collapsed in upon themselves, as if space was a piece of paper being crumbled, him caught within. He ignored it again, took out his bow, and took a quick shot into empty space.

He hit the Count of Blood, and she shrieked as she now had yet another poisoned arrow sticking out of her chest.

Next up, Jake felt like a hundred voices invaded his mind, and his vision shifted as everything suddenly became entirely red. But, once more, he didn't really react but just kept shooting arrows at the vampire he could still see within his Sphere of Perception without any issues.

You see, Jake had found out that this next Count of Blood used some interesting magic. One part was mind magic. It reminded him a bit of the Minotaur Mindchief but was clearly a different variant. The essence was the same, though, as it aimed to make him fail to block blows properly. These blows would be delivered with a rapier, the damn vampire always going for his heart.

The second type of magic it used was illusion magic. It was quite the combo to not only mess with your opponent's head but also actually change how things looked in the real world. A real double-whammy that one, and Jake could see many others have issues with this Count. It was the trickiest one so far by a mile.

Except it met Jake. It was one of those situations that weren't really fair and proof that match-ups mattered a lot. If two people were equal in power, but one person countered the other, it wouldn't really be a fight. Sure, the Count still had its usual magic, and it seemed quite potent at that too. Still,

when her two strongest tools were utterly nullified by fighting someone with insane perception and a legendary-rarity ocular skill to see through nearly all her illusion... it just made it feel unfair.

The mind magic did little against his Pride of the Malefic Viper either, and considering how Jake was completely confident and barely breaking a sweat, he sure as hell didn't despair.

Oh, and finally... none of those things would have mattered anyway, as his bloodline made both the illusion magic and the mind magic used to amplify the illusion magic completely useless. She could make the world look as fancy as she wanted, and Jake's sphere or instincts still wouldn't give a shit.

So... yeah. It ended up being a bit anti-climactic with Jake honestly just spending his time slowly killing her as he took his sweet time robbing the entire chamber of furniture. He even took the gaudy pictures this time. All of them of the vampire he was currently fighting. Him taking them had nothing to do with them depicting the scantily clad goth-looking vampire lady in various risqué poses. Not at all.

A bit over an hour after he entered the chamber, he killed his third Count of Blood.

You have slain [Count of Blood – lvl 155] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

He didn't get a level for this one, and Jake wasn't sure that was because the fight had been easier than the previous ones or something else.

Making his way over to the corpse of the Count – she was at the far end of the chamber as Jake had finished her with a Powershot – Jake passed the coffin and altar, putting both in his inventory. Which

meant he had three of each now. He continued over to the ashes of the vampire to loot the three items she had dropped.

Jake first picked up his second heart of the day, Identifying it as he did so.

[Starved Nalkar Vampire Heart (Epic)] – The heart of a severely starved Nalkar Vampire. This type of vampire is a rare variant with extremely high innate abilities in illusion and mind magic and often possesses a larger reserve of blood energy than most other vampires. The rarity has been downgraded due to the starved state of the vampire the heart has been claimed from. Has many alchemical uses.

First of all, Jake felt vindicated. This heart confirmed vampires had a resource called blood energy, which he assumed was their form of mana. Or maybe their form of fused mana and stamina? Health and mana? All three? All of these and more were things he could likely learn if he read some of the books he had swiped. Anyway, the heart was as he expected.

Besides the heart, he also naturally got the key. The weapon this Count of Blood dropped was the rapier, and he picked it up and tossed it in the Hunter Insignia with the two other Count weapons... which is when he felt something.

A resonance came from within the Insignia, and as he had bound the three Count weapons, he instantly understood...

They wanted to fuse.

Chapter 303: Treasure Hunt: Blades & Brothers

Jake was aware that the vampire weapons could fuse, but he had kind of assumed that would happen when he got all nine and not with just three of them. He wasn't going to complain, though, as he summoned all three of them on a wooden table he had also just tossed out.

Instinctively, he felt the three weapon's desire to devour one another. He just had to permit them... so he did. Jake had to choose a weapon to absorb the others, and he chose the blade over the dagger or rapier, as he was more used to using swords.

The three weapons acted almost magnetic as they attracted each other and clashed when he gave permission. The moment they touched, their black metal became liquid, and within a few seconds, all of them had turned into a weird glob of what looked like black mercury. It did kind of keep the shape of a sword throughout this process, but it didn't exactly look stable.

He observed the entire process closely as he felt them slowly become one. Throughout, it became clear that they were made for this. Their Records fused, and the metal itself gladly mixed and consolidated as the size of the weapon didn't increase.

Around a minute after it began, the blade returned to the shape it had before he began. It did not look any different at all but was just a simple black metal sword, but its aura had been amplified significantly, and Identify also confirmed the changes.

[Count's Vampiric Transforming Blade (Epic)] – A weapon created fusing three weapons wielded by Counts of Blood, all of which have been soaked in the blood of countless enemies throughout the ages. Crafted using a special type of steel, the blade can absorb the life force of vitality-based lifeforms to repair itself. The combined Records of the three weapons have allowed the blade to evolve and transform even further, allowing it to steal a portion of the life force of anyone injured as well as change form between a sword, a dagger, and a rapier. This blade was originally crafted in a set of nine using the unique environment of the hidden world and can absorb the weapons of other Counts of Blood to enhance itself. Three have now been fused, and six remain. Note this functionality is only available within the Treasure Hunt area and will disappear once the event concludes. Enchantments: Hemoabsorbant Self-Repair. Vampiric Weapon. Transformation.

Requirements: lvl 130+ in any humanoid race.

The level requirement had gone up by five, and the rarity increased to epic. Those were the most obvious changes. Besides that, the only real change was the ability to transform.

Jake picked it up, and with an easy mental command, the entire weapon changed into the shape of a black metal dagger. The entire process took less than a second, but that still made him frown as it meant it wasn't something he could do in live combat. He had mastered the art of fast weapon switching using his inventory already, and it was far faster just to do that. He also fast discovered it could only transform into the set shapes of a dagger, a sword, or a rapier – in other words, weapons he had used to fuse it.

This led to the ultimate question... would he switch using this blade over any of his other weapons? Jake honestly wasn't sure yet.

The Scimitar of Cursed Hunger was in a weird place, in that Jake couldn't determine exactly how powerful it was. It looked to be made of black steel or iron, and the metal itself didn't strike him as anything significant. What was significant was the curse on it. The weapon grew with every fight he was in as it absorbed excess vital energy, so even if it was Soulbound and didn't have a level requirement, if it did have one, he guessed it would be around 115 or 120 by now.

He also had to admit he had a bit of an emotional attachment to it, as it was the first weapon he created using Touch of the Malefic Viper that was actually worth a damn. It would also be a waste not to keep improving it. The power curses could hold was also evident to him, especially after exploring this Treasure Hunt.

Curses were essentially just emotions, willpower, magic, and possibly other stuff mixed oddly together to create something he didn't fully understand. No two curses were the same, and there didn't seem to be many rules or standards to how curses functioned either.

So he wasn't going to replace his scimitar as he saw too much potential in it, which left his Nanoblade. The Nanoblade had a lower level requirement and even a lower rarity than this vampiric blade. All the statistics would make one believe it was weaker, but... it just suited him too well.

It was a no-nonsense weapon. All it did was to be unbelievably sharp and durable and make his arcane energy better when Jake coated the blade in it. Perhaps the vampiric blade would be better, but there was also something to be said about familiarity, and Jake had to admit that he just liked using the Nanoblade. Meanwhile, the vampire weapon didn't sit well in his hand when he held it, and he just didn't click with it. Was it more powerful? Perhaps. Would he use it? No.

Not yet, at least. If Jake got his hand on more vampire weapons and upgraded it again, his chosen weapon could very well change.

With everything done in the chamber, Jake left. Now, one may wonder how he found another tower so readily available without anyone getting in his way or messing up the fight. The reason for this was the same as why he didn't steal the gate.

Walking out, he smiled and dispelled his mask as he gave the person waiting for him a wave. "Count is officially down for the count."

"That was bad, and you should feel bad," the person standing outside answered.

It was a man clad in a black robe with a thin metal pole with an orb at the end floating behind him. He looked a lot like Jake, but that was to be expected, considering it was his brother.

“Oh wow, are you judging me for my humor?” Jake shot back, grinning at Caleb.

“You are getting awfully close to a declaration of war here.”

“You won’t even take me to court first?”

Caleb looked at Jake before cracking a grin himself. “I apologize for my impoliteness, oh glorious Champion of the Malefic Viper, Progenitor of Earth, and the true chosen one and hero of our age. Please show mercy upon this lowly mortal.”

“This one forgives thou transgressions,” Jake joked back, refusing to see himself beaten by his little brother. Well, he did make some concessions. No way he was going to burn off the gate with Caleb staring him over the shoulder while judging him for taking it.

Caleb chuckled as he turned a bit more serious. “Any issues with the Count of Blood?”

“Nah, it was a great match-up for me,” Jake answered, giving Caleb some quick details about the Count and how he had beaten her. There was no one else present, and Caleb was at the gate just in case the vampire made it out. While he had admitted to Jake he didn’t think he could kill a Count; he was confident holding one back long enough for Jake to reengage the vampire.

“That does sound like a tough enemy for any regular group,” Caleb noted. “We would have needed a Stake for sure.”

The reason why the Court of Shadows hadn’t killed the Count was that they didn’t have a Stake. They were still in the process of getting it, but they had gotten very unlucky with the kind of method they had to use to open the gate it was hidden behind. It required them to correctly craft several special metal keys to open the puzzle, and while their crafters had been hard at it, it still took time. Of course, they were still going to open it, but now Caleb could just keep the Stake.

“Yep, I could see those illusions cause some issues,” Jake agreed before swiftly changing the topic. “How is everyone? Do you have any problems or need any help?”

Jake hadn’t asked before but just rushed for the Count, also by request of his brother just to get the boss done... but now that it was a silent moment, he had to ask.

“They’re doing well, and I got things handled. Just focus on what you need to do. Your presence alone is a shield,” Caleb answered with a comforting smile. “We named him Adam. Just like Maja had been talking about.”

“Mom was also a big fan of that name; she must be ecstatic,” Jake smiled, remembering a simpler time. A time so simple it appeared gray and dull in his mind... it was cruel to think. But he couldn’t lie. He had to admit he had just been bored before the system. Even when he spent time with his family, there was a cloud of boredom hanging over him.

“She is,” Caleb answered, throwing Jake out of his thoughts. His brother’s smile slowly faded as he turned a lot more serious. “Jake, after the Treasure Hunt, you’re coming to visit. I’m not asking. Got it?”

Jake sighed. "Got it."

Caleb returned to his usual smile. "Good. Here, take this Mark before heading out. You may be lucky and snatch another Count before all of them are slain. From all the info we have gathered, this is the sixth key to be claimed. The Noboru clan has two, Holy Church one, you three, and last I heard, the last three are under heavy contention."

"I'll keep that in mind, and thanks," Jake answered as he got handed the Mark of Blood.

"No problem, isn't that what family is for? Helping each other hunt down vampires in some separate dimension?" Caleb joked.

"Naturally," Jake said with a teasing smile. "I am surprised you guys don't have a key; you seem to enjoy stealing stuff related to the Counts."

"Yeah... that moron will be heavily reprimanded when we get back. But, seriously, he once stole a damn uncommon-rarity dagger and refused to give it back until his dad told him to. I am not even joking," Caleb said, shaking his head in utter disbelief.

"Sounds like a grade A member of the Court," Jake kept teasing.

"That's the issue... he is. The guy is damn talented at stealing stuff and even more capable at making tools to steal things," Caleb said with a large sigh.

“Tough being a boss. You should just delegate everything and only do stuff when you feel like it,” Jake shrugged.

“It is what it is. Anyway, I think you should get going if you want to get another Count before others do,” Caleb said, adding on a final warning. “Be careful of the Sword Saint; he isn’t simple at all. The man named Eron also isn’t to be taken lightly, though he seems to have little interest in the keys. I heard he fought a Count before it went on a rampage throughout a tower consuming everyone it came across, and the Sword Saint ended up putting it down. And somehow, Eron still walked out of that tower unscathed.”

“I know. I already have a bet with the Sword Saint on who gets five keys first,” he nodded. “I’ll be off. Take care, and see you in the Mistless Plains for the big reveal!”

With those words, Jake turned around to make his way towards the next Count of Blood, hoping he would make it in time.

Reika stood with her two followers, the Mark of Blood ready, and the path cleared. She still had the Stake from the Pure Ones ready, too, in her Hunter Insignia. She had sent the message to her great grandfather already, and her follower had used a skill allowing the Patriarch to pinpoint their location. Navigating the mist could still prove difficult, so it helped tremendously.

She waited with anticipation as she slowly got updates about the happenings of the Treasure Hunt. Reika sat down with her alchemy cauldron, making some potions as she needed some practice making stamina potions. She listened attentively as she heard the news that Lord Thayne, Jake, had killed another Count of Blood and was last seen entering a tower that had been claimed primarily by members of the Court of Shadows.

His level of power was something she had difficulty understanding. It was hard for her to see him as the powerful person he was. It wasn't like her great grandfather, where she understood his power. Her time with Jake had not helped her truly comprehend him either, besides the fact that he was driven. Driven to a ridiculous degree. He also seemed to always just enjoy himself... it was very odd to see someone smile and not frown when they encountered a complex problem.

As she sat there in thought, she heard a sound. Soft footsteps echoed through the halls, and Reika instantly recognized the familiar way of walking.

She stopped her crafting and got up, just in time to see the Patriarch around a corner. His steps were immaculate, and every one of them made him slide oddly across the ground, making him travel far faster than his casual stroll would indicate.

"Patriarch!" she greeted with a bow as he came to a stop before them. "I have prepared the Stake and Mark of Blood as promised!"

Reika summoned the two items and held them out, one in each hand.

Her great-grandfather looked at her as he chuckled. "Good work as always, Reika. I thank you for the Mark of Blood, but do keep hold of the Stake."

She looked up at him, a bit confused, her followers doing the same. "Do you already possess one?"

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "It would simply be wasteful to use an item that provides extra rewards unnecessarily, don't you agree?"

The implication was clear.

He didn't need it.

Miranda, Carmen, and Sylphie were prepared as the reinforcement arrived.

A party of five walked through the hall towards them, making Miranda frown. At the front was Sven, the man that had primarily represented the faction of Valhal during the World Congress, and with him were four others. She recognized one of them as another participant of the World Congress, and she was certain of one thing... that party was powerful.

Carmen went up to them to meet them, and Miranda noted how they were all oddly respectful. It had to be noted that while Miranda had been in a group with Carmen and Sylphie for the last day and a half or so, they hadn't exactly met any strong foes. In fact, it was Miranda who insisted they needed assistance with the Count. She had heard the Counts were powerful, and she truly didn't want to unnecessarily risk it.

Once Carmen was done talking to them, Sven turned his attention to Miranda. "I must admit, I was surprised when I heard the Rune Maiden was with the City Lord of Haven and a peculiar hawk. Is it yours?"

Before Miranda could react, Sylphie answered for herself with her usual loud "Ree!"

Sven looked a bit taken aback as Miranda answered, unfazed. “No, she is a member of this group like Carmen and me. I can’t reveal more; just know she is powerful and an ally. Also, I see nothing weird about us women spending some quality time together.”

Miranda said the last part a bit teasingly, getting a smirk from Carmen and another screech from Sylphie. She did think about the odd title Sven referred to Carmen by, though. Rune Maiden. Perhaps it was her class? Profession? Miranda had seen Carmen deploy some rune magic, but not much. Once again, their fights had been relatively easy so far.

“I see. Well then, are we ready?” Sven asked.

“Should we not strategize first?” Miranda implored. Sven should have brought a Stake to use, so he should sneak in first and stab the vampire before it awakened.

“Is that truly necessary?” Sven asked, directing this question at Carmen.

“Maybe, maybe not. Let’s see for ourselves,” Carmen just smiled as she, without further ado, summoned the Mark of Blood and opened the gate before anyone else could react.

“Wait, don’t we need to go in with the Stake first to make sure the Count doesn’t awa-“

“I HAVE AWAKENED! WAIT! LIVESTOCK DARE INVADE MY CHAMBER!”

Carmen looked at the rising form of the vampire before briefly looking back at them as she silently muttered. "I forgot?"

Chapter 304: Treasure Hunt: Punching Back

Miranda felt a moment of distress as the vampire rose and its aura spread out the gate and into the hallway. Sylphie didn't seem to be that on edge, but the same couldn't be said about the people behind Sven. Sven himself didn't display anything but just drew his weapon and yelled for his party to get ready.

She also took this yell as her wake-up call and waved her hand as magic circles began being summoned around her. She doubted she could do much direct damage to the Count of Blood as the Viscounts already outmatched her, but she would do her best nevertheless.

Carmen threw a glance towards Sylphie, and without further ado, the two made their move. Sven followed, wielding a large two-handed sword, with his four party members also doing their own thing. One summoned runic lines that appeared on the armor of Sven and Carmen; another began summoning root spears, the third charged with Sven, wielding a sword and shield, while the last one was the most impressive, at least visually. He roared as his body slowly began morphing, and before long, a large armored bear had joined the battle.

The Count of Blood was a large male who summoned armor of bone upon seeing the charging humans, as a black spear also appeared in his hands. Red energy exploded out of his body. Miranda had to defend herself as she began doing what she thought was most valuable: creating a barrier between her and the two casters in Sven's party. Not one that could hold back the vampire for long, just long enough for them to react.

Magic filled the air, and the two sides clashed, a powerful vampire on one side and a group of humans on the other. Oh, and a green bird that fast proved to be one of the most dangerous things in the room.

Sven could only chip off parts of the bone armor with his swings, making it crack and sometimes knock pieces off, but Sylphie? Sylphie did a fly-by and cut up the vampire's back, sending blood flying as the armor failed to block her glowing green wing. How the hell the bird had such potent attack power Miranda truly didn't understand.

The bear proved to be impressive-looking but unable to do much. All it did was try and pre-occupy the vampire by holding onto parts of it, or sometimes land mostly-ineffective blows with its large paws. On the other hand, the bear-man did prove to be very durable, but the vampire handled that by simply not attacking it.

Besides Sylphie, Carmen was the one who found the most success. Her glowing fists cracked the bone armor with every hit, and with her far higher rate of attack, she was by far the main danger of their entire group. Fortunately, the vampire seemed not to have much attacking power besides the spear – which he did wield skillfully, but even so, the human side did take quite a few injuries.

Miranda worked on her barrier while the wood mage fired off wooden spears, and after seeing they did nothing, switching to summoning roots to try and restrain the vampire and limit its movements. The rune caster was some kind of healer and used his magic to temporarily make Carmen or Sven stronger while also creating runes that summoned shields.

Overall their group was balanced, and it became a battle of attrition. The vampire kept yelling horrible dialogue about how it would drink their blood and feast on their flesh, but from what Miranda had learned, that was just par for the course.

She was beginning to feel confident, even if the vampire healed any wounds they inflicted, and the wounds accumulated on primarily the bear, Sven, and the woman with a sword and shield. On a side note, Sven had attempted to use the Stake but found that it failed to penetrate the bone armor and only made the vampire even madder. After that happened, she feared for a moment they would have to flee and hopefully find Jake to help them, but that didn't seem neccesar-

“ENOUGH!”

The Count of Blood screamed as his entire body exploded in white light, sending all the melee fighters back and interrupted the spellcasting of everyone as Miranda felt her magic be disrupted. Then, she saw the vampire raise its spear as it stabbed it into the ground.

“Forest of Bones.”

Miranda barely had time to react before the ground erupted as thousands of spear-like bones shot up from below. The barrier she had made also protected downwards, but only barely. She dodged back but still ended up being speared through the thigh and an arm, making her yelp in pain and lose her concentration.

Those who had been close to the Count and were blasted back now faced angled spears of bone aimed towards their backs. Sven turned in mid-air blocking with the flat side of his large blade but still took a few minor stabs in his chest.

Carmen didn't even bother with it all as she was speared from behind, and the bones barely penetrated a few centimeters, allowing her to quickly shoot back towards the vampire, her wounds visibly healing. The one who handled it the worst was the woman with a shield. She had already been wounded by a spear earlier and now failed to adapt as she was impaled through the chest.

Miranda turned and saw that the runic healer had also been stabbed by a spear and was trying to get to healing again. The wood mage had handled it well by shooting vines up from the ground himself, making him be shot up into the air.

The bear was the one that took the most spears due to its size, and the man had now reverted back to his human form, retreating towards the back wall as blood dripped from dozens of wounds on his body.

This isn't good, Miranda thought, gritting her teeth. The only one unaffected by the attack had been Sylphie, courtesy of her small form and being airborne.

Would she have to call Jake? Could Sylphie do it?

Carmen clashed with the vampire again, but the vampire appeared stronger than before. The armor of bone began changing into a smaller version, and the spear moves became faster and even more deadly.

As Miranda was seriously considering if they should retreat, Carmen jumped back and quickly glanced around the room. Sven had also gotten up and looked Carmen's way. He only looked at her for a moment before he nodded.

"Retreat!"

The bear-man didn't have to be told that twice as he began running out of the chamber, while the wood mage summoned roots to extract the damaged shield-wielding woman.

But... two 'people' didn't retreat. One of them was Sylphie and the other one Carmen.

Miranda was practically pushed by Sven to leave and exit the chamber, leaving the bird and woman behind. She frowned but didn't resist as she knew she truly couldn't do much. Carmen kept clashing with the vampire during this time while Sylphie hung back.

"What are we going to do?" Miranda asked once outside. She could still see inside the room due to a mark she had left on her magic circle, and all she saw was Carmen still fighting the Count on her own. Sven was working on closing the gate and securing it using his sword as he turned and looked oddly at her.

"I don't follow?"

"Shouldn't we do something? The Count proved stronger than expected, and-"

"Ah, Ms. Wells, you worry needlessly," Sven chuckled, the rest of his party also shaking their heads. "I am most certain Carmen is more than happy about the state of that room. The only one I am worried about would be the bird, but it seems to be able to handle itself."

Inside the room, Carmen stared at the Count of Blood. Sylphie looked at her, and she threw the hawk a glance. She seemed to understand and made a small "ree" as Carmen smiled and got to work. The Count was weakened and about to be out of resources, so it was time to finish the fight. As Carmen prepared, Sylphie flew towards the Count and began flying around it as a whirlwind was kicked up, keeping the Count locked in place.

Carmen knelt down and placed both her fists on the ground as she spoke.

"Sacred Battlefield."

A pulse went through the ground as an odd aura overtook the entire chamber.

“Regalia of the Fallen.”

A golden set of phantasmal, almost ghostly, armor covered her body in a veil of energy.

“Runes of the Valkyrie.”

Runes appeared all over her arms as she felt an influx of power in them, and their resilience significantly increased.

“Exaltation of Valhal.”

Behind her, an illusory hall full of feasting warriors appeared as they all seemed to lift a mug in her glory. Carmen felt like she suddenly got a huge boost to her stamina as the energy moving through her body sped up.

“Blessed Echo.”

A see-through woman wielding a large axe floated above for a fraction of a second before it slowly descended into her body, buffing up all her physical attributes.

“Ruinous Drive.”

All the energy in her body began burning as her body became significantly more powerful. Her skin started flaking, and blood dripping out of cracks on her skin. For but a moment, she was at her strongest. All of the skills came together and boosted her at once, pushing her incredibly durable body and healing ability to its absolute limits.

With all those skills active at once, she couldn’t fight for long... which is why she would finish it quickly.

She drew back her fist as energy began revolving around it. The Count looked out of the green whirlwind caused by Sylphie as it crossed its arms in front of its chest just in time.

“Fist of Ragnarok.”

In a flash, Carmen appeared before the Count of Blood as she punched.

Her fist literally exploded as she struck the vampire. Two bone-covered arms flew into the air as her fist penetrated through the chest of the vampire, blasting it back towards the back wall of the chamber.

Carmen kneeled down on the ground with only a stump left where her arm had been. Yet, she was only grinning. Sure, the vampire was still alive, but...

A green flash appeared as the vampire that was already embedded in the wall had its head separated from its neck as a green figure flew by. A notification confirmed the kill, and Carmen just laughed as Sylphie claimed the items dropped.

That is when Carmen remembered something else she had forgotten... she had promised that Sylphie would get the loot from the next boss besides the Mark of Blood... considering this one didn't even drop a Mark of Blood...

Carmen began laughing even more as she was already imagining Sven's reaction.

Jacob had made many decisions he now doubted were wise, and the one he had made that day was one of them. With Jake having obtained three keys for Haven and the City Lord working with Valhal to get another... they needed to ensure the last one. And right now, or at least very soon, Jake would be headed their way.

They needed to delay him. The issue was... who or what could delay the Progenitor of Earth? The likely most powerful person on the planet? Jacob had thought about this for a long time in case things went south... so he had made contact with someone else who was a wild card of their newly initiated universe. His only purpose was to delay Jake, and as far as Jacob was aware, it wasn't like his friend would come to harm since he seriously doubted anything would come out of their fight.

At least Jacob didn't believe so... but had to admit that out of the many people on Earth he had difficulty comprehending, Eron was perhaps the biggest mystery to him.

There were many unknowns in this choice, but he had to take some risks. While he did consider Jake a close friend, he still valued his responsibility to the Church over personal relations. He simply had too much responsibility on his shoulders to make decisions based on emotions alone.

This was also why he had made an alliance not with Haven but the Noboru clan. Perhaps the clan had realized that with the Court of Shadows firmly on the side of Haven and Valhal working with their City Lord, they also needed allies.

The Holy Church reciprocated. Jacob saw a lot of value in nurturing the relationship between the Church and the clan. It was work, not personal business. With the Church already having one and now getting another, and the Noboru clan close to claiming their third... it would mean the clan and the Church having five.

Of course, all of that depended on Eron's ability to delay Jake long enough for Bertram and the others to finish off the Count of Blood.

There was one other thing that irked him, though. It had been two full days of the Treasure Hunt by now, and outside of the first hour or so of the Treasure Hunt, he had heard nothing of the undead faction at all. Considering the antagonistic relationship between the Holy Church and the undead, this was a major cause for concern...

Jacob sighed as he once more entered meditation to try and discover what would happen the moment all nine keys came together. One thing was for certain, though.

He had talked to many individuals from the Holy Church and done a lot of research before entering the Treasure Hunt. General investigation into system events and the general tendencies and stages they went through and based on all that research, Jacob was confident of one thing:

This entire Treasure Hunt was being completed far faster than was usual.

Jake used One Step Mile through the plains as he approached the tower in the distance. There were three unkilld Counts, and Jake was going for the closest tower to the one he had just done. He had been told that the Holy Church had already claimed one, and considering how a fourth key had appeared in his inventory halfway to this next tower, he wasn't going to play nice. He just needed one more, and he would do all he could to get it.

He made it inside and sprinted through the halls, frowning a bit as he encountered no one on any of the lower floors. His frown only grew the further up he got until he finally detected a presence.

A single man stood within a large hallway with a metal gate at the end. Jake instantly saw that the gate wasn't there naturally but placed. It had been almost welded to the walls, and with his sphere, he saw enough to realize it would require a bit of burning with Alchemical Flame to get it free. Or a lot of Arcane Powershots.

But... that wasn't the most important right now. It was the man who stood in front of the gate. The man smiled as he saw Jake.

"We meet again, Mr. Thayne. I must admit, It is good that we met again so soon. It always gladdens me to see sparks grow and rekindle."

It was that madman Eron.

Chapter 305: Treasure Hunt: Invincible

Jake looked at the man with his combed-back slick hair and casual demeanor. He wore a simple white robe that reminded Jake a bit of the coat doctors would wear based on its design, though it was clearly magical and enchanted. However, he wasn't there to judge fashion but to kill a vampire.

"Move."

Eron looked back at Jake as he shook his head. "I apologize; I'm unable to do that."

"You're gonna stop me?"

"Delay. I was contracted to delay your arrival in the Count's chamber by one and a half hours. Ah, around an hour only now. In case you wonder, yes, it was the Augur and the Holy Church who contracted me," Eron explained forthcomingly. "I shall be honest, I would prefer for this not to devolve into needless violence, so would it be too much to ask for us to simply sit down for a cup of coffee and wait? Or do you prefer tea?"

Jake looked a bit dumbfounded at the man who just stood there with a light smile on his face as he summoned a small coffee table and a pair of chairs. The issue was... Jake needed to go down this hallway. Like with the other Count chambers, the way there was linear. There was one way in and one way out.

Within his Sphere of Perception, he saw the other side of the metal door. A group of fifteen people stood close to the gate on the other side as they channeled mana into it. With them and Eron in front of him, the situation had suddenly gotten a lot more annoying.

Well played, Jacob.

Jake had to admit this wasn't expected. Eron was one of the few unknowns of the planet that he couldn't really understand. He was the one other person on Earth with a bloodline as far as Jake was aware, instantly making him a person of interest.

Sadly for Eron, Jake had no interest in being delayed.

"Yeah, no. Fuck off, or I'm gonna make you."

Eron looked up at Jake. "Rude, but I guess your anger is understandable. Fine, I am looking forward to seeing your attempt at making me leave, as if violence becomes a necessity, let it at least have a purpose. I have heard much of you and your capabilities, so please show me your methods."

Jake narrowed his eyes. He had already used Identify on the man, but the result had been disappointing.

[?]

No matter what he did, Jake couldn't pierce it. It wasn't that bad as Jake still got a feel for the madman's strength... but all that told him was the same as during the World Congress. A feeling that fighting him would be a waste of time.

In the end, Jake sighed as he took a step. He appeared straight in front of Eron, who was still making his coffee. Drawing his blade, Jake placed it at the neck of Eron, who stood unfazed.

“Nothing?”

“My reaction would warrant a belief that decapitation would do me any harm. I would prefer to do without, though, as it would ruin my drink,” Eron answered as he twirled the spoon in the cup of hot coffee.

Frowning, Jake put his blade away and just ignored Eron as he went over to the gate. He had already inspected it with his sphere, and it was far from as well secured as all the others. While those took him twenty minutes to get off a door, he could easily do this one in five.

Just as he began burning at the hastily assembled hinges, Eron waved his hand as an odd flame appeared and formed into a bolt. Jake stopped what he was doing and looked back to see a pure white flaming bolt be fired his way.

He decided to block it primarily out of curiosity. The moment the flame hit his hand, it just sank into Jake’s body, and instantly he felt like a warm flow went through his body... before it began burning, and Jake had to grit his teeth from the pain. It was only for a moment before his own internal energies dispelled the foreign energy, but Jake saw and felt he had taken damage directly to his health points.

What the fuck was that? Jake asked himself as he backed away. He genuinely had no idea what the fuck that magic was, but he knew it was dangerous in large quantities.

“Once more, I am to delay you. So please, can just we just relax for the next hour or so? Or at least have it be you attacking me?” Eron asked before taking a sip of his coffee.

“No to the first one.”

This time Jake didn’t hold back. Eron struck him first, and he would respond in kind. Then, brandishing his Nanoblade, Jake attacked. He expected the other party to dodge, but the man just stood there as Jake effortlessly bisected him at the stomach.

“I expected more originality,” Eron said. A split second later, his severed lower body simply disappeared as they exploded into red mist, and Eron landed on his newly healed legs.

Now Jake really frowned... for he had seen the entire progress. This wasn’t nullification of damage. Eron had just taken some significant damage; Jake was sure of it. His Mark confirmed as much too. Yet the man seemed unaffected... he had just healed it instantly, without Jake even detecting any magic being used.

Natural extreme regeneration?

“What are you?” Jake asked, Eron having not even let go of his cup.

“A human, just like you. I do not mean to sound cliché, but we are not so different, you and I. We both seek the pinnacle of what is possible - to explore behind all the doors this new multiverse has opened up! We have just chosen to open different doors. While you aim for destruction and death, I seek preservation and life. Ah, but do not see this as me admonishing you. Both are necessary, even if I may

personally dislike your path,” Eron monologed. Jake didn’t know if it was because the dude had time on his side or if he really was such a talker.

“Then let me see if I can destroy you,” Jake said as he attacked again. He infused his blade with arcane energy as he stabbed Eron, who just kept talking.

“Evolution is an interesting concept, is it not? To develop towards your own version of perfection... yet some things will forever be in common. I am not talking of the vain outward features but what is beneath the skin. The viscera- oh excuse me, internal organs will slowly disappear in the ranking of importance. The spleen, liver, large parts of the intestines. All of these are judged unimportant as we as humans stop needing them,” Eron said, Jake, having already cut him into many pieces, including half of his head and the brain. Yet the man kept talking as if unaffected.

“However, it is not these I find the most interesting. It is those that remain... or, more accurately, why they remain. Tell me, Mr. Thayne, why do you need lungs when you do not need to breathe? Why do you retain a stomach when you do not need to eat? Is it not fascinating how the reason why we keep those is not for their original purpose?”

“How you seem to not need any organs at all sure is fascinating,” Jake said as he repeatedly turned Eron’s insides to mush with Touch of the Malefic Viper, only to see his poison constantly be nullified by a flood of vital energy but not before corroding his entire chest away, everything within included.

“The lungs do not remain to inhale air, but mana. We breathe to regenerate ourselves; it's why meditation is so closely interlinked with breathing techniques. We keep our stomachs not to get nutrients but simply for pleasure. In fact, many things remain only for pleasure. Human vanity. Now, some things make sense that they remain. The sexual organs will forever serve the purpose of reproduction as we are biological creatures, but why retain the anus when it is no longer used for the excretion of waste? I surmise it’s only retained for se-“

“Dude, what the fuck, too much information,” Jake blurted out as he smashed Eron into the ground again, making half of his body explode, including the head. His entire body regenerated within a moment as the man kept speaking.

“Very well, let me just skip the details then and get to the point. Besides those vanity organs or features, do you know what the last organs to disappear are in all biological creatures of the system? What has been deemed essential, and that we, even in our pursuit of perfection, can never get rid of?” Eron asked, the question not rhetorical this time.

“I dunno, the dick?” Jake shot back, honestly starting to get annoyed. Touch did nothing, his arcane magic did nothing, and he even tried Gaze of the Apex Hunter, but all it did was freeze the guy for a bit. With his arcane energy, he stacked his Arcane Charge to the largest one possible... and yet it did nothing.

“Well, yes, that does remain... but besides that, what remains is the heart and the brain despite their presence being less and less relevant. I do believe that I myself am a great example of this. In fact, no organs are vital to continue existing.”

Jake decided to switch up his tactic as he wrapped up Eron in strings of arcane mana. His thought process was that if he couldn't kill Eron, he would just displace him and toss him somewhere far enough away from the gate to get Jake enough time to burn the gate off.

Yet just when Jake was done wrapping up Eron, his danger sense reacted for the first time. Jake jumped back from the man just in time as Eron's entire body burned with energy, and the madman exploded in a red explosion of pure vital energy and mist, a bit reminiscent of the Deepdwellers but far smaller and more localized.

Another difference was that the Deepdwellers did not instantly appear again before the mist had even subsided.

“Case in point, I believe. You see, we as living beings no longer exist solely dependent on our bodies. As long as our sparks remain alit, we remain alive. This spark does not exist within our bodies... no, it exists beyond that,” Eron said as he quickly summoned back the robe to cover himself.

Jake looked at him before asking: “Are you unkillable or what?” He had just seen him literally return his body to nothing. Not even a drop of blood remained, yet he regenerated.

Eron looked at Jake. “No. No, I don’t believe anything in this multiverse is truly unkillable. For every spark there is, a force that can blow it out must also exist. At least, I believe such a balance is necessary. I do not doubt for a second that any god could whisk me out of existence if they so pleased.”

The two men stood for a while as Jake considered what the fuck to do, while Eron wouldn’t stop talking.

“To return to the earlier topic... the brain and heart remain. The brain controls the body and speeds up reactions. It no longer houses who you are but is more like a complicated muscle that serves to amplify your body functions. Once more, I can see this making sense as anchoring physicality, and physical prowess outside of the metaphysical is sensical. But... this brings us to the heart.

“Why do we need the heart, and why is the heart the center of our beings? You hold a bloodline, so I am certain you know that the heart is linked to the core of your soul. It’s the point of contact between metaphysical existence and our tangible forms. When I heal, my heart is the first to appear,” he said, promptly ripping out his own heart to show. He then exploded the rest of his body as his entire person reformed around the heart.

“The heart still pumps blood and now even creates the blood itself. This naturally begs the question of why blood is even necessary. I believe this refers back to grounding the tangible. To transfer energy through a physical medium is simply far more effective than not. To have blood deliver vital energy to the body only makes sense, does it not?”

While Jake did find it more interesting than he dared to admit listening to the guy talk, he still knew his objective. The issue just was that he wasn't certain how to actually do anything... because he was fairly certain that his theory was correct.

“You have limitless or at least near-limitless health points, don't you?”

It was the only thing Jake could see make sense. Eron had learned to control his vital energy like Jake controlled his mana and could use it actively to instantly regenerate his body. Of course, the expenditure of vital energy – health points – to do this had to be ridiculous... but what if you had a near-limitless supply?

“That is correct if a bit oversimplified. I will not share how I have achieved this, however.”

“I see... what was the bright white flame before?” Jake also asked, now acting far more willing to talk.

Eron's smile deepened. “As I am certain you can guess, then my ability to stay alive in most situations is great. However, this does have some drawbacks, including certain limitations to my options in combat. I needed a tool to defend myself. My thought process behind it was to take a part of my own spark and use it to displace a portion of my foes, effectively eliminating a portion of their health pool. This magic is by the system called an arcane-affinity.”

That one sure got Jake's attention. An arcane-affinity? Sure, Jake was aware that arcane-affinities varied person by person and was unique to the creator... but to see that Eron had made one too? And one so substantially different than his own. While Jake's was all about stability and destruction, and the dichotomy of those two, Eron's seemed entirely vitality-based.

"You're awfully open about your abilities," Jake remarked. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to ponder more on the man's abilities, as it was soon time.

"Naturally. I hope for you to find the chink in my armor and pierce through it. To expose my weaknesses and exploit them. My pinnacle is one of infallibility. So once more, please. The soul attack earlier was interesting, but I have recently learned counter-methods to that kind of attack. Your mana attacks are effective, but ultimately they are just regular attacks."

"Yeah... I'm really not sure how to kill you... but can I try something anyway?" Jake asked.

"Please, go ahead," Eron said, almost elated at Jake's willingness.

Jake drew his Scimitar of Cursed Hunger and stabbed it into Eron's body, right through his heart. Eron just looked down at it with obvious disappointment before his eyebrows raised, and he commented: "A vitality-absorbing curse? I have been battling vampires with similar abilities for days. Do you really think this will be enough?"

Jake looked at him. "Nah... but it will delay you."

A cube of arcane barriers appeared around Eron at that moment, just as Jake used Gaze of the Apex Hunter to freeze the man. Jake didn't let his eyes leave his opponent as gates he had stolen so far appeared on all four sides of the man, trapping him between the ceiling and floor, as Jake pressed down on Eron from above with the arcane barrier, intending to make him completely immobile.

The arcana mana barrier closed in and pressed the gates together, making Jake finally lose sight of Eron, resulting in his constant channeling of Gaze stopping as his eyes dripped with blood. Eron would still be frozen for a bit longer, and Jake pressed the barriers together even more as Eron got squished, the blade still in his heart. Jake made a final push as his entire construct stabilized.

"Let's hope this works," Jake muttered as he rushed towards the gate. He kept a part of his consciousness on the barrier to keep it active as he began channeling his flame.

Inside his makeshift prison, he saw Eron struggle as the man exploded into a mist of blood but only regenerated in the same spot, the blade still stuck in his heart. He felt the energy from the scimitar increase through his connection to it, as it consumed vital energy from Eron constantly, the absorption only increasing further the more it consumed. Jake felt Eron fight back as the white flames spread and began seeping through the imperfect gaps between the gates and into his arcane barrier... but Jake's stable arcane-affinity won out in that duel as it became clear Eron wouldn't be out any time soon. His barrier was being corroded, but slowly.

Behind the gate that Jake was attempting to open, he saw several people as they channeled mana into it to stop Jake... but they didn't stop his burning of the gate; they only made a barrier behind it. Jake sadly couldn't see what was happening further down the hallway towards the Count's chamber, but he hoped he would make it in time.

Chapter 306: Treasure Hunt: Unreasonable People

Jake burned through the sides of the gate to get it free from the wall as he kept Eron trapped. However, it ended up taking him nearly ten minutes to get the door off as he had to split his focus, and he felt Eron attack his arcane barrier with more and more power.

Once Jake got the gate off, he grasped hold of it and pulled. The moment it stopped touching anything, he put it in his inventory and saw the barrier behind where the door had been. The people there, surprisingly enough, didn't look alarmed but just kept channeling their mana.

Jake walked up to the magic barrier and placed his hand on it. Touch of the Malefic Viper pulsed out from his palm as the entire barrier began being corroded. It had only been there to make sure the gate stayed in place, making it far from durable.

With a final punch, the entire barrier shattered like glass, and Jake made it through. The moment he did so, all the casters and healers formerly channeling their power into the barrier just disappeared, leaving Hunter Insignias in their places.

They just fucking left like that?

He frowned as he quickly claimed all of them... and saw that every single Insignia was empty. The fuckers had handed off all their loot to someone else already, and this entire thing had been planned. Jake rushed forward as he had now wholly cut his connection to the arcane barrier behind him.

Passing through the halls, he soon looked down the hallway to the Count's chamber. The gate was open, and in front of it, he saw only a single person he didn't recognize sitting on the ground, waiting. Jake realized, there and then, that he hadn't made it. Eron and the gate had together delayed him by over half an hour, which had proven to be enough time for the Church to kill the Count and leave with the key.

Jake walked slowly towards the chamber and the man sitting there. It was just a random level 101 human who didn't look special in any way, shape, or form. It was just a D-grade from the Church who had barely qualified to enter the Hunt. Or, as the Church had clearly viewed it, a disposable messenger.

“Lord Thayne,” the man said as he stood up and bowed.

“Where is the Count and the key?” Jake asked, already knowing the answer.

“I apologize, the Count of Blood was slain a quarter of an hour ago, and the key claimed. The Augur expresses that he finds this entire situation unfortunate, but he made the choice he believed was the most advantageous for the Holy Church. Therefore, he hopes that these treasures can serve as an apology,” the man said as he summoned a number of items.

Jake narrowed his eyes as he saw the altar and coffin appear. The same ancient-rarity ones he had already claimed four of each of. This was all the loot the Count’s Chamber usually held. However, that wasn’t all.

There was also a black metal claw and a metal pike, as well two red gems. It was the hearts and weapons of two Counts of Blood.

“Due to other obligations, we cannot provide the keys, but the Augur and Church as a whole truly hope this can be viewed as recompense. The Noboru clan has already made prior claims on the keys, and how could we as a Church be trustworthy if we didn’t fulfill our obligations?” the man kept explaining.

Trying to play both sides... classic Jacob.

He really wasn't sure how to feel about this entire thing. On the one hand, Jacob was an asshole for getting in his way, and on the other hand, Jake was an asshole for trying to kill the Count under the Holy Church's nose. The fact that they now even gave him some kind of compensation for claiming a kill that most would rightfully point out was theirs to begin with, was a bit weird.

Jake swiped all the loot the guy had thrown on the ground, and the moment he did so, he saw the guy light up a rune on his hand as he spoke a final time. "The Holy Church hopes this does not create bad blood between Haven and the Holy Church or between the Progenitor and the Augur. Sometimes you lose, and this is simply the nature of the competition."

"Oh, for sure," Jake agreed.

It was also the nature of competition to openly rob people and kill them during this Treasure Hunt, so was that fine too? Jake had a strong suspicion that the last part wasn't part of what Jacob had instructed the guy to say. Because Jacob wouldn't have said something that dumb, that could be interpreted in so many ways.

Without further ado, the guy just activated his own Insignia as he disappeared, leaving an empty one just like everyone else from the Church. Jake walked further towards the Count's chamber, and right in front of the gate, he found remnants of a magic circle. As he stood in the middle of it, he vividly felt the traces of space-affinity mana in the air, as it became apparent that those who had killed the Count of Blood had left through teleportation straight after.

It was another smart move, as Jake would have 100% gotten the key from them if they hadn't.

Jake really wasn't sure how to handle this entire situation but just shook his head as he reminded himself. Keep things simple, and take the complications as they come.

Seeing as there was nothing left to claim in the chamber, Jake turned around as he headed back towards the Mistless Plains, unsure of how he would confront the Holy Church. He sent a mental message to Sylphie letting her know and got back a response that she was headed there too.

As was the majority of the significant forces of the Treasure Hunt, Jake reckoned.

“Ms. Wells, I believe we should at least discuss the distribution of loot properly,” Sven tried as Miranda and Sylphie traveled towards the Mistless Plains with the people from Valhal.

“Dude, just cut it out; I already told you this is what Sylphie and I agreed. Are you saying I’m a fucking liar or what? Oh, or are you arguing that it wasn’t the two of us who did the majority of the work?” Carmen butted in, staring daggers at Sven.

Miranda quite honestly found the entire situation utterly bizarre. Carmen was fully aware Sylphie was related to Haven, but she still chose to support the small hawk over the faction one would expect she should. It made Miranda believe that perhaps the relationship between Carmen and the nominal leader of Valhal on their planet wasn’t the best.

Carmen’s position in Valhal was one Miranda wasn’t certain of. Clearly, Sven recognized her as of higher rank than him, and Miranda wasn’t sure if that was solely due to Carmen being more powerful. Miranda knew that Valhal placed much importance on combat prowess, so it was a possibility... but none of that explained why Carmen sided with Sylphie and Haven over her own faction.

Of course, even if Carmen supported Sven... Miranda couldn’t really do anything about the hawk. Something she had tried to explain several times, but Sven seemed to doubt her words.

“As I told you, I am not able to command Sylphie,” Miranda asserted once more. She wasn’t sure if she could divulge the actual relationship between Sylphie and Jake, but she was pretty damn confident both Carmen and Sven had figured it out. Primarily by the process of elimination.

A few of the members of Valhal had beasts they had brought into the Treasure Hunt. Only two people, but it still set a precedent. They knew a human had to have some kind of bond with the beast to bring it into the Treasure Hunt... and who else but the Lord of Haven could bring in a small green bird that was one of the most powerful individuals in the entire Hunt?

“Please understand why I find it hard to believe that the City Lord of Haven doesn’t even have the authority to give simple orders to the pet of-“

“Not a pet,” Miranda and Carmen said at the same time, exchanging a smile. As for Sylphie? Sylphie was just silently floating through the air alongside them as if perched on an invisible branch. Miranda had noted how she tended to refuse to sit on anyone except Jake. That part was kind of cute.

“Companion then,” Sven corrected himself, as Miranda was sure he thought of both Miranda and Carmen as unreasonable women.

Miranda had to admit that she had approached Carmen partly with purely political intentions, but from their first encounter, she had liked the woman, and Carmen was starting to become someone she would consider a friend. In some ways, she reminded Miranda of Jake. They were both highly individualistic powerful people who were more than a little unreasonable and unpredictable most of the time.

Is it weird I’m beginning to find those likable traits?

It probably was, but it was probably also fine for things to be a bit weird sometimes.

So she continued to talk to Carmen as they made their way back, ignoring Sven for the most part, with only Sylphie joining in sometimes with screeches.

Overall? She was having a good time.

The group of hundreds walked through the black mist.

A curse that everyone else who had dared venture into the mist was forced to wrestle with appeared calm and even gave away to the large group. Shades of Resentment and other creatures of magic born from the powers of the curse swirled and flew around the group in excitement as they welcomed them.

At the front of this group were three people. Two Risen and a wraith, with a man walking slightly ahead of everyone else as he showed the way.

It was naturally Casper, Lyra, and Priscilla, leading the D-grades of the Risen in the Treasure Hunt. They were a group that had not hunted Viscounts or Counts, not solved puzzles or sought after loot, but had instead headed where no one else could. Beyond the wall of mist, away from any mountains. They had ventured into a land that had been covered in darkness for countless years.

Casper listened to the Shades as the powers of the curse bore into his body but did no harm. Instead, it encouraged him. Cheered him on as the curse wished for them to reach their goal.

“The final Count has fallen. It’s only a matter of time now before they activate the device,” Casper said to Priscilla and Lyra as the Shades told him.

“We still have a head start,” Priscilla answered. “Once the Vaults unlock, we will be in position.”

Out of everyone in the entire Treasure Hunt, the Risen were the ones that came in with the most information. It was a pure stroke of luck, or perhaps what some would call fate. For when they entered, and Casper felt the curse on that very first day, he knew.

When he practiced during the tutorial and was taught about magic and curses, the one that inflicted Yalsten was one of his topics of research. It was an example of a curse that hung over an entirely separate world in its own subdimension and had been studied for years before the world was sealed off.

There was also one other interesting snippet of information. The ritual performed on the mist to attempt to help the vampiric race had not been thought up by the King as many believed. It was one he had acquired. What the vampire King had not known was that the creator was undead.

For even if some of the world’s history had been altered and parts of the world changed, one fact still remained...

The state of Yalsten had been ultimately engineered by the Risen. This was their world, and to them, the curse was no obstacle. They also knew about the next phase the Hunt would enter based on what the Shades had told them... they just had to be ready for the moment the people in the Mistless Plains initiated it.

To Casper, it was never a question of if, but when that phase would activate. But he had to admit... it had gone faster than expected.

Jake walked back the way he came and saw the cube of white fire as his arcane barriers were being corroded at an ever-increasing speed. Finally, after a few seconds, the entire box exploded in white flames, the arcane barrier destroyed, and the gates fell to the ground, making the entire hallway quake.

Having his priorities straight, Jake hurried up over to get the four gates back in his inventory before Eron could claim them. His arcane barrier had made it so Eron couldn't put them in his Insignia, but Jake feared that the guy could now that the barrier was broken.

He also saw that his Scimitar had been blasted away and was now lying on the ground. He went over to pick it up but hesitated for a moment. It was practically humming with power as it absorbed unprecedented amounts of vital energy... more than it had in all the time he had owned it. Usually, the absorbed vital energy would first heal Jake and then empower the blade afterward. When in combat, he always took a bit of damage all the time from minor things... but not today.

But now? Now it had been stuck in a guy with seemingly infinite health with no other purpose for the energy but to empower the curse.

Knowing it was a bit risky, Jake steeled himself as he put his hands on the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger. When his hand made contact with the handle, he felt a pulse of emotion invade his mind. The endless hunger and avarice of the blade flooded his mind, as Jake just made a toothy smile. Sated, eh?

He knew the blade was now stronger than ever before.

Where the makeshift prison had been a moment prior, Eron walked out, looking to be in near-pristine condition. But only near-pristine, as he actually looked a bit tired.

“An unexpected approach,” Eron said as he eyed the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger. “The curse on that blade is not simple, and most certainly not of earthly origins. I would tell you to watch out, but I think it fits you very well... it also brings comfort to know that should you die, the curse dies with you.”

Jake held onto the blade as he looked at Eron. “I didn’t make it in time, so I guess you’re happy?”

“I simply fulfilled my duty even if you made a valiant attempt to make me fail.”

“So you wouldn’t mind me stabbing this blade back into you to empower my weapon more?” Jake asked Eron.

“Truthfully? No. But sadly, the blade seems satisfied for now as it stopped absorbing vitality a minute or so ago,” Eron explained.

Jake inspected his weapon again and indeed found that while it hungered, it was also full. So it would need some time to digest all the vital energy before it would be worth it to go stab the unkillable healer in front of him.

“Bummer.”

“Quite so. With this appears all nine keys are assembled,” Eron stated. “My hypothesis is that you are now headed back towards the Mistless Plains, correct?”

“Yep,” Jake agreed as he put the weapon away.

Eron smiled as his response. “Mind if we travel there together? I believe we have much to learn from each other. The type of mana you used is part of your arcane-affinity, is it not? A curiosity, don’t you think? That both of us possess bloodlines and that both of us have managed to create our own affinities. While that is only two data points, it still does not feel like a coincidence.”

Jake looked at Eron for a moment before he shrugged. “You know what? Sure. Let’s take our time and have a nice long chat as we go there.”

While he couldn’t get payback on anyone for his loss right away... what he could do was delay the entire event that would happen with the nine keys by being incredibly petty and not hurry back to the Mistless Plains.

Also... he genuinely did believe he could learn some interesting things from Eron. As for getting revenge or something like that against Eron? Jake honestly didn’t care that much. He would just take learning a bit about controlling vital energy as payback.

Not even three days after the Treasure Hunt began, the forces of Earth had gathered all nine keys and were ready to unlock the second stage of the Treasure Hunt.

While the Noboru Clan was the faction to acquire five keys first, determining a winner was not easy, if even possible. Because while they had obtained the five of the keys, Jake had obtained more of the loot

from the Counts. All of this also disregarded the many individual actors of the event who all stumbled across lucky opportunities and treasures.

The Treasure Hunt continued... as determining an overall winner was far too early with more than a week to go.

Chapter 307: Treasure Hunt: Exchange

Jake hated to admit it... but Eron was a genius. And no, not the hyperbole version of a genius, but an actual genius. Even before the system, he had been a damn monster in human skin. Jake even had suspicions he was doing things that could be considered magical before mana and magic was even a thing.

He was awfully open about his bloodline too, not hiding many details. He explained how he saw sparks and how he believed these sparks were the representation of life and existence itself. He told Jake about how he had forged his path entirely around these sparks... entirely around his bloodline.

In some ways, it wasn't that much different from Jake. The main difference was that while Jake had grown up and lived in the old world suppressing his bloodline, Eron has explored and embraced his. This was also why Jake reckoned the guy had a far higher understanding of his bloodline than Jake did. Or maybe they were just vastly different bloodlines?

Another interesting point of discussion was arcane-affinities. Eron's affinity was interesting if a bit odd. Jake was pretty damn sure his own was better. Eron's was far more limited, and the man confessed he didn't acquire his arcane-affinity before he was already D-grade. Another point for Jake.

There was one thing that still bothered him, though. An ultimate question of sorts.

“So, if it gets down to it... could I kill you based on what you’ve seen?” Jake asked Eron. He thought, hey, the guy had been truthful so far, so no harm in asking.

Eron looked at Jake a bit before nodding. “Yes. As I said, I am not invincible, at least not quite yet. If we continued our battle, I do believe I would eventually be withered down. To regenerate my body takes mental energy and concentration. Differently from yours or most other’s vital energies, mine does not simply reform my body passively... it requires active input.”

“So if you get knocked out and then your body is destroyed, you die for good?” Jake asked.

“Astute observation. This was the first weakness I worked to alleviate, so no, not quite. I do have fail-safes in place for most scenarios I have come up with, but not all work as well as others, and some I cannot test out as doing so means risking true death,” Eron kept explaining.

Jake nodded, a few plans already forming in his head. Eron easily took damage, so what if he made a poison specifically engineered to make it harder to regenerate? He already had experience with poison working not only on the body but in the metaphysical plane of existence. Some type of hemotoxin, perhaps, considering that poison already made healing harder.

“So... what’s the drawback?” Jake finally asked.

Such power had to come with significant drawbacks. Jake did not believe a D-grade could achieve immortality or near-invincibility without it having severe consequences. He was already aware that Eron’s physical abilities were pretty damn bad, and his offensive prowess with his magic was also bottom-tier. The only reason he held some fear towards the magic was due to his lack of understanding of it. But if they were to fight? Jake would just summon an arcane barrier around his body to block the white flame as it sucked against mana-based shields.

“Hm... that I believe would be unwise to disclose. But I guess I can share the simplest one. I have no mana or stamina, and any task requiring either forces me to manually convert my health points to either. This includes a constant conversion of health to stamina for me to simply be walking and talking right now,” Eron divulged, making Jake stare at him for a bit.

“That just sounds fucking exhausting,” Jake noted, shaking his head.

He was aware that the transformation of energy from one type to another was possible. He did this in part when making potions. But it was not one-to-one, and if he tried to make his health into stamina as an example, it would take concentration and time, and he would spend way more health than he would get stamina. In other words? It was practically never worth it.

Yet apparently, that was how Eron now lived. What the fuck?

“Oh hey, what does your endurance and wisdom stat even do now?” Jake asked curiously.

“Add to health instead of their respective resources,” Eron answered.

“Let me guess, you also put all free points in vitality?”

“A significant amount, yes, but I also invest in willpower. As I said, abilities that take away my autonomy in any way, or any attacks that hamper my mental faculties could prove potentially deadly,” Eron reiterated. “In fact, the soul attack you used earlier was a great example. While incapacitated, I was unable to heal myself even if I wanted to, allowing you to trap me.”

Jake nodded. "Got it; I'll have a special vat of toxins ready to trap you next time."

Eron didn't answer but just smiled as Jake began asking him more about the control of vital energy. The man gladly explained his insights, with Jake listening and learning. He even did some basic testing as the two of them casually strolled down the tower and into the plains.

The man had a level of insight into vital energy that was quite frankly insane, only matched by his willingness to teach Jake. Of course, Jake also taught him in kind. He talked about how mana shaping and manipulation worked and how Eron could possibly try and better stabilize some of his magic or possibly even control his arcane-affinity more. His white flames were crude, and Jake believed that their corrosive properties could be significantly improved.

There was truthfully no bad blood between them. Jake learned that the reason Eron helped the Holy Church was because they offered him a certain treasure, as well as the ability to study those who had died and become Holy Spirits.

Holy Spirits were apparently what happened when someone with a blessing or even just a baptism died. While regular folk would just die when they were killed, the Holy Church somehow saved people in their ranks. At least partly. Their souls would be extracted and taken to an artifact in the closest Holy City, and from there, be sent to the Holy Land, the realm of the Holy Mother.

Jake had to admit it all sounded kinda shady, but Eron explained his own Patron god had assured him it truly did work like that. This was probably why the Holy Church was the most prominent religious organization in the multiverse. Who didn't like the thought of a life after death?

Well, Jake. Jake didn't like the thought of that.

Eron admitted he would also just prefer to avoid death altogether, but how a soul could exist without becoming undead was still of interest to him. Jake also tried to get Eron to spill the name of his Patron god but got no answer. Just a long tirade about how the god had the most beautiful spark he had ever seen, besides Eron's own.

On that note, Jake also learned that Eron was well and truly a narcissist who believed himself superior to everyone else around him. Well, nearly everyone else, as he didn't seem that obnoxious when he talked with Jake, even if there was a hint of superiority. Eron liked to be the one teaching Jake and was standoffish when Jake gave him tips in return, even if he did ultimately acknowledge them. Perhaps because Jake was the only other person with a bloodline and at least publicly recognized as possibly the most powerful person on Earth.

Jake was totally fine with being on the receiving end, as he learned more about vital energy and even how to control it than ever before. Eron even enthusiastically placed a hand on Jake's shoulder and showed him how he could direct his vital energy to heal a wound faster. Of course, to be like Eron and just pop in and out of existence wasn't possible for Jake... but to learn to regrow an arm within a minute or two if he used a healing potion? It should be possible.

He even got some ideas about his own arcane-affinity and vital energy, but nothing worth testing quite yet. It also became more and more evident that Eron truly didn't have any bad intentions towards Jake or Haven or pretty much anyone. Instead, he seemed apathetic and openly stated that he believed killing others was such a waste, and he believed all life should be preserved if possible and sparks not snuffed out.

Finally, as they walked through the plains and Jake saw that they were closing in on the Mistless Plains – Eron didn't as his perception sucked – the healer asked Jake a favor, clearly a bit uncomfortable doing so.

“Would it be possible for me to see your mask for a moment?”

Jake stopped up as he looked suspiciously at Eron. “Why?”

“I believe you know why,” Eron said, giving Jake a knowing smile. “The spark is faint, but most certainly there. It burns in a way and glows in fashions I have never seen before. I merely wish to observe and inspect it, nothing more, nothing less.”

“What once was inside this mask has died, notification, experience, even a title and everything confirming that,” Jake rebutted. He did know there was something about the King slumbering, but he didn’t truly believe it was the King of the Forest.

Perhaps it would be a vision of the King or some fragment of it, but the Unique Lifeform itself? Villy had told him that one doesn’t simply circumvent true death. It wasn’t like Jacob and his skill to avoid it... the King had truly died, just like William. William had only returned to life due to some special and incredibly valuable item. Jake didn’t think the King of the Forest could do the same.

“You are only making me more curious when you say that... and you killed this being at least before the World Congress, yet the spark grows only brighter,” Eron said, his eyes practically shining.

Jake looked over Eron once more, seeing his unabashed curiosity. “Got anything to trade? Also, you can only look at it with me right here and not for that long.”

He didn't fear Eron stealing it. The item was Soulbound, so Jake could always feel its location, and no one else could bind it. So letting Eron see it wouldn't even be a risk as Jake knew the guy couldn't put the mask in his inventory or anything like that either. But that didn't mean he wasn't going to get something in return. Sure, they were friendly, but this entire interaction was ultimately an exchange of knowledge.

Eron looked even more reluctant as he sighed. Finally, he took out a small notebook. It didn't look to be larger than a few dozen pages, but the man held tightly onto it. "This notebook contains some insights I have into the metaphysical existence of the living. It may seem inadequate in your eyes, but these are things I've discovered through the sparks of existence. Do with it as you wish... but do be aware this knowledge may not be useful to you, as it deals with concepts I have only theorized and not proven. But... do keep it safe."

This was the most serious Eron had been since they met, as he looked Jake dead in the eye. Jake was confused for a moment before he took the notebook and began reading through it. He saw odd diagrams and runes, drawings with lines that messed with his head as they seemed straight yet curved, and everything on the pages seemed to move as he looked at it. What the hell is this?

Yet a part of him understood soon after... Eron was a researcher. Did he fear that what he had learned and discovered would disappear if he died and chose to pass it onto someone he believed could keep it safe? Was that maybe why he wanted to become unkillable in the first place? Was Jake just theorizing based on little to no information and deciding this entirely on gut feeling?

Probably yes to all these, definitely yes to the last one.

Having been shown sincerity, Jake relented as he took off his mask for the first time in he didn't know how long. He usually just made it invisible, and as he could eat and drink potions through it, there was no reason to ever take it off.

It did feel a little weird to have it off as he held it out to Eron, the man staring intently down at the mask. "You got a few minutes, okay?" Jake asked, not really asking.

"Of course," the healer said as he took hold of the mask and looked at it curiously. He examined it all around and even took out a tool and tried to pierce it, all to no avail. Finally, Jake saw the guy enter the final stage as he poured his weird energy into the mask and peering deeply down into it, as Jake felt like he saw two faint sparks in the man's eyes, and then...

Then Jake lost connection to the mask

His mana fell by 25%.

He reached out towards Eron to grasp it back as the man stood in a daze... and then everything returned to normal. The connection was back, the mana enchantment back, and Jake hurriedly identified the mask and saw the description was exactly the same. The only trace of it ever happening was that he truly had lost the mana as the increases to his maximum had temporarily disappeared.

Eron still stood there in a daze for a moment before he handed the mask back to Jake, his hand shaking slightly.

Jake glared at him suspiciously as he took the mask from the man's shaking hand. "What did you just do?"

"Nothing..." Eron answered. "I couldn't scour any information... I apologize."

Looking down at the unchanged mask again, Jake seriously couldn't find anything different, and his danger sense was utterly silent when he went to put it on. Once he did so... still nothing.

"I... I believe we should separate from there. It would not be good if the Holy Church believes we are in collusion after I allied with them temporarily... I shall take my leave," Eron muttered out as he turned around, not even giving Jake time to respond or keep asking him what had happened.

Jake could only stare confused after the man. Then, after Eron had gone into a building in the distance, Jake took off his mask again and looked at it inquisitively. "What happened back there?"

It was not quite certain if he was asking himself or the mask.

Eron walked inside a small secluded building. He appeared relatively normal except for his one shaking hand, not showing anything outwardly.

But once inside and away from any prying eyes, he fell to his knees as his body started quivering. He balled his fists as blood began dripping down from his fingernails digging into his skin, and he took long, heaving breaths as he stared at the floor, trying to make himself stop uncontrollably shaking.

His eyes were bloodshot as the image kept replaying in his mind. He felt a genuine fear he had not felt since the tutorial. The horror he had seen was not one he wished to ever lay eyes upon again. Yet, at the same time, he felt an equal level of excitement and relief from the encounter. Relief that he was alive.

For he had just gazed upon death and escaped.

Chapter 308: Treasure Hunt: Phase Two

Jake had, in usual Jake-fashion, returned late to the center of the Mistless Plains. As there was no mist in the Mistless Plains – hence the name – it was easy to see everything, far and wide. He saw several basecamps scattered about, some of them even having tall walls and magical barriers.

Finding Miranda and company would have been difficult if he didn't have a living GPS locator in the form of Sylphie. Jake made his way over, feeling many gazes upon him as he did so. Scouts from the myriad factions keeping an eye on his casual stroll, none of them approaching him or making him aware they had even seen him.

Oh, but someone did come to meet him.

A fluffy green ball of feathers soared through the plains right towards him with incredible speed, kicking up a cloud of dust in her wake. Jake opened his eyes as the small hawk barrelled into his chest, and he hugged the cute little bugger.

"You got faster!" Jake commented as he cuddled the bird as she nuzzled up to him. He kept walking towards the place where Sylphie had come from; his pace picked up a bit.

"Ree!" she heartfully agreed, proud of herself as she kept making screeching sounds and green apparitions of wind narrating her adventures manifest around them as they got back to Miranda and the others. Jake didn't even know she knew how to make those wind constructs and honestly thought they were kinda cool and very artistic-looking. Primarily due to their fluid forms, making them look very abstract. What he did piece together was that she had hunted down vampires and cursed armors like everyone else.

He did get a bit confused about the part with a giant bear-looking creature that Sylphie, for some reason, depicted as looking a bit like a cartoon bear that kept getting whacked around by a vampire.

She was still putting on her little show when Jake spotted Miranda in the distance, surrounded by quite a few people. He recognized them as ones associated with Valhal right away, including that Sven fellow and the woman Carmen whom Sylphie had been hanging with. He was a bit surprised not to see Sultan or Neil and his party, though. If they had left the Treasure Hunt or were still out there was hard to know. But, then again... did they need to return to the middle? They had their own stuff to do, and the event about to take place wasn't anything they could affect.

"Lord Thayne," Miranda greeted him with a respectful bow when he made his way to them, putting on her courteous persona in front of the onlookers. The aforementioned onlookers kept a watchful gaze, with Carmen staring at him with an odd look.

Jake nodded to Miranda in response. "Good job as always," he said, not quite knowing what she did that was a good job. She had been part of getting a key, so she had done something good. Also... he was just happy she was still around, so he had someone to handle the talking.

Although... Nah, it was still too early to begin beating disagreeable people up and taking their stuff.

Dispelling his thoughts, Jake turned to Carmen. "Thanks for taking care of Sylphie."

He had noticed that Carmen didn't look weirdly at Jake alone, but also Sylphie. The bird had now climbed from his chest and shoulder to stand atop his head, establishing her dominance.

“So, the hawk is your pet?” Sven asked him as he saw the bird standing on top of Jake’s head. It was more a statement of fact than a question, as the man had made assumptions Jake quite frankly found insulting.

His response was to look at the people behind Sven as he asked. “So, are those humans your pets?”

Instantly the entire mood became weird, but Jake didn’t care. The guy had insinuated something Jake wasn’t cool with, so he pettily shot back in kind.

That the guy didn’t understand newer cultural nuances of post-system sapience and autonomy wasn’t Jake’s problem. In fact, from what Villy had told him... then a human having humans as pets was more normal than a human having beasts in the multiverse.

Everything was still for a moment until suddenly the silence was broken as Carmen began laughing loudly. “That was a damn good one! Sometimes it bloody feels like it, them doing everything he says like loyal little puppies!”

She kept laughing for a few more seconds, with Miranda smiling a bit uncomfortably as she stood beside the laughing woman. Carmen followed up with a question after she stopped laughing as she looked at Jake. “Anyway, what is your relationship with Sylphie?”

Jake returned her gaze as he answered. “Eh... she is the kid of some friends? So, kind of my niece? Not sure exactly how you would classify it, but does it really matter?”

He kept rubbing the bird’s soft feathers that sat on top of him, her happily just sitting there like his hair was her nest.

Carmen looked at him and shrugged. "I guess it doesn't."

The entire atmosphere got a bit better, and Miranda took the chance to redirect the conversation. "How did it go? Did you get the items you wanted?"

Jake shook his head. "Nah, the Holy Church got two and the Noboru clan three as far as I can tell. So yeah, it sucks; I only got three myself with Sylphie getting one."

"Ree!" Sylphie agreed, proudly puffing herself up.

"What happened?" Miranda asked. "I was told by Arnold he estimated you would make it in time."

"Eron got in my way as well as some defensive measure to seal off the Count's chamber. On a side note, Eron is pretty much unkillable, so yeah, that's a thing," Jake explained, fine with the people from Valhal also hearing him. Heck, he half-expected them to know already, considering they were a major faction. And if they didn't know, the only thing he did was spare them wasting their time.

"He's a healer, right? Can't you just wear him down," Carmen butted in.

"You would think so, but I'm pretty sure I could blow him up a few hundred times without him minding," Jake shrugged in response. "Either way, if you meet him, I would just recommend walking away. The dude is slow and can't really do any worthwhile damage, so just ignore him."

“He sounds lopsided as fuck... did you try separating his heart and head from the rest of the body?” Carmen asked in a wondering tone.

“He totally is lopsided, and when I tried to wrap him up, he just blew up his entire body and reformed, so I reckon he could do that if you try to separate his body parts,” Jake theorized.

“Anyway!” Miranda came back in, clearly trying to stop the conversation from derailing more than necessary. “As you have the keys, should we head for the center? It has already been scouted out, and the nine alters for the keys found. The other factions are there too.”

Jake agreed, and Miranda began explaining about the placement of the altars designed for the keys. She made a construct of mana, showing the Mistless Plains and how they were spread in a circle around the center of the Plains. It all matched what the projection had told him so far, and it did look like they would open up some kind of hidden tower.

The Noboru Clan, Holy Church, more people from Valhal, the Court of Shadows, and many other factions were present to see what would happen when the nine keys were brought together. Notably absent was the undead faction, but Jake didn’t consider it further. He seriously doubted they could have been wiped out, so they were probably just up to their own shit with their own weird undead agenda.

Jake and the others soon met up with a group of people that had clearly been waiting for them, making Jake feel pretty good about himself for wasting their time just a little bit. It was the pettiest of revenge, but short of going on a murder spree, it was all he was gonna get.

At the front of the group stood the Sword Saint and Reika together. At their side were Jacob and Bertram, as well as a few parties of decently powerful people. He saw his brother and his folk gathered a good distance away, Jake throwing him a nod before he went up to the group with Miranda, Carmen, and the others. A big crew from Valhal had also joined them at some point.

"I must admit... this competition did not transpire as I had hoped," the Sword Saint said, opening the conversation. "In the end, perhaps it was foolish for only two individuals to make a bet with so many uncertain factors."

The old man said this but still smiled at Jake. "Nevertheless, despite the flaws, It appears I won. I possess five keys, and to my knowledge, you have four."

Jake looked at the old man and his way too cheeky smile. Patience, Jake, we got like three-quarters of the Treasure Hunt left... you'll have your duel.

"Seems so. I guess you were better at splurging and hiring help," Jake answered.

"Indeed, yet it proved barely enough to win out over the power of nepotism," the Sword Saint counterattacked.

The two of them stared at each other for a bit until Reika broke it up. "Patriarch, should we not focus on the matter at hand?"

"Mm, we should," the Sword Saint acknowledged. "We both agreed on the terms that I shall be the first to explore whatever opens up, correct?"

Jake just looked at him as he reluctantly nodded his head, throwing Jacob and Bertram a look, with perhaps a bit of Gaze of the Apex Hunter mixed in.

“Well then, should we begin? Each altar requires a key, and from what some of the good folk at the Holy Church discovered, we need to input all keys at roughly the same time,” the old man said as he motioned to Jacob. Jacob tossed over four small stone medallions of some kind that the Saint then handed to Jake.

“We have nine of those medallions, and when one of them breaks, all nine do,” he explained as Jake inspected the medallions, finding just a small magic circle on each. Simple stuff, really.

“Sure,” Jake agreed as he tossed a medallion to Miranda and another to Carmen beside her. The last two he kept for himself for now.

“Half an hour should be enough for all to be in position to insert the keys, I hope?” Jacob suddenly butted in.

“I don’t know Jacob, are you sure I won’t get delayed?” Jake asked as he looked his way.

Jacob winced a bit as he made an apologetic smile while Bertram just shook his head and palmed his face. The other people behind him looked downright hostile at Jake, clearly not happy that he had dared take a jab at their glorious Augur.

“Half an hour it is. Simply insert your key when the medallion breaks,” the Sword Saint un-derailed the conversation as he made a circle with his finger, showing nine dots and a general outline of the Mistless Plains. “We shall take these five while you handle the other four. Are we in agreement?”

Jake once more just nodded as he turned back to the other people. He nonchalantly handed Miranda and Carmen a key each and let the two of them pick out two altars. For the last two keys, he went over and gave his brother one along with a medallion, and he and Sylphie would handle the last one.

No, he didn’t trust Sylphie with doing it. Sure, she probably could, but then again, she was not even half a year old. It was a lot of responsibility to put in someone so young.

The entire process was easily handled as everyone wanted to get the next phase started. They all got in position, and Jake saw that each altar looked to be made of the same black metal the doors were. He spent his entire half an hour trying to figure out if he could steal it but found the task impossible.

Once the half an hour was up, he felt the medallion crumble, and without further ado, he inserted the key in the very obvious slot on the altar. For a brief second, nothing happened until suddenly he felt it.

Red light exploded out from both sides of the altar as it created a wall of pure energy towards the two adjacent altars. All of the altars around the Mistless Plains fired off these walls of energy all at once as a circle was formed, with the interior of the circle slowly being filled with red runes.

It was a giant magic circle... one far more powerful than any he had ever seen before. Well, besides the one in the vision from the Path of the Heretic Chosen skill.

The entire magic circle kept powering up as Jake spotted quite a few panicked faces around the circle as they were unsure of what was happening. Jake was relaxed as his danger sense was silent... also, he didn't believe the system would be so dickish as to make this into some suicide ritual. The charge-up of power continued for a few more seconds until finally, it culminated.

It felt like the entire Treasure Hunt world shook as the ground opened up and a mighty structure began ascending. What came was a spire that looked to be made entirely of some pure-white crystalline material that sent shockwaves through the land as it finally made its way into the world after countless years of being hidden away.

Energy washed across the plains as the spire pulsed with power and grew taller and taller. It didn't simply get elevated from the ground either... it truly grew. So much power had been packed into it that Jake quite frankly found it insane.

Finally, the tower made it all the way up to where the dark mist began, and the moment it touched, the true purpose of this creation became clear.

Like soap touching dirty water, the cursed mist parted as it exploded out to both sides, the sky seeming to be torn open. The sound of thousands upon thousands of screams echoed through the entire world as the spire attacked not only the black mist but the curse itself.

From the beginning, this spire had not been built as a treasure tower or residence... it was created with the purpose of one day when the curse had weakened enough, and the spire accumulated enough power, to strike back at the curse and try to reclaim their world.

Looking at the sky far above, he saw the darkness of the mist throughout the sky begin to turn white as the darkness and the power of the curse slowly faded away. At the same time, the entire crystalline

spire began growing darker as Jake realized it wasn't dispelling the curse... it was absorbing it. Containing it.

What also became clear... was that this tower could not be entered. Thus the Sword Saint's price for winning their bet meant nothing.

"Lucky one!" Jake cheered as he high-fived Sylphie sitting atop his head, just as the system notification signaling the second phase of the Treasure Hunt appeared.

Chapter 309: Treasure Hunt: Vaults

Jake and everyone else in the Treasure Hunt all got the notification at the same time.

While the curse slowly claimed their world, the inhabitants of Yalsten did all they could to fight back. As a final gambit, they created a device to seal the curse forever and banish it from their homeland. Yet the curse was too powerful and the device too weak... so they waited - empowering the device as the curse slowly weakened.

During this time, when Yalsten deteriorated and the nobility began weakening, they sought ways to preserve their heritage and wealth for future generations. To do this, Vaults were set up with the most priceless of items, hidden away within the cursed mist till the day Yalsten was ready to rise again.

That day never came... and now the Treasure Hunters from another universe have come to seek them out. Nine Counts have fallen, the keys assembled, and the spire summoned. As the curse is made to retreat and the mist washed away, the vaults have been reactivated once more.

However, the keys to these Vaults have long been lost and forgotten. To acquire the treasures in the Vaults, the Treasure Hunters must overcome their defenses, and whilst these defenses have weakened with time, they are not to be underestimated.

Be warned... that legends long forgotten may be released as the Vaults begin to open.

May your continued Hunt be fruitful.

What is a good system message without ending with a warning and then telling you to do the exact thing it just warned you about, Jake joked with himself.

He was a bit surprised at the system just spelling things out like that, but perhaps that was a part of the rewards for clearing the first phase? Or maybe it was to get everyone up to speed, as it assumed most of the influential forces who had hunted down Counts knew this already.

Which, from what he had gathered, they did. Most had found out through old recordings or messages or such left behind. Jake was pretty sure he had lucked out with the projection, even if the information he had received was a bit flawed. It said there would be a treasure left by that True Ancestor in the center of the Mistless Plains, and Jake had a hard time seeing that be the big crystal spire. Primarily because the True Ancestor should have left the treasure there long ago, while the spire was made to fight a curse that came to be later on.

Jake also wasn't sure if that crystal tower could be called the "greatest treasure" either, so he felt pretty damn lied to.

Well, technically, the projection hadn't lied... for in the eyes of the vampires, this tower probably was the greatest treasure to be found in this world. It was their final hope of fighting against the curse - a way to seal it in and then possibly take the entire spire and toss it away somewhere.

Of course, that would still leave all the usual vampire problems, but at least they would have cleaned up one issue.

But... there was still one thing bothering Jake a bit. Why was this entire plain devoid of mist while it existed everywhere else? The spire didn't remove the mist itself; it only absorbed the curse in it. Perhaps the altars had absorbed the mist? Or was it something else?

While he saw many others around the plains begin to group up again, Jake headed straight towards the spire to get a better look at it. The red runes still dominated the inside of the circle, with the energy walls still present, but Jake didn't feel any danger towards the energy. It was just there for the spire and not harmful to him.

He made his way towards the spire and, with his sphere, saw complicated devices that appeared to be made of the same black beneath the ground. All of it was organized in a highly complex matter, giving the magic circle both a magical and physical form.

Jake kept getting closer and saw the complexity only increase the closer he got to the crystalline spire. Sadly, he had to stop when he got within a hundred meters of it as the power of the curse began invading his body, proving that while it was contained, it wasn't fully suppressed.

This would have stopped him if not for his special little Root of Eternal Resentment. He summoned it, and instantly the curse let him pass as he moved closer to encompass more of the spire, but more importantly, what was below the spire.

A coffin.

The bottom part of the spire encased a coffin that was even more intricate than any of the other ancient-rarity coffins. Within it, Jake saw a figure lay, and the moment he did, a shiver went up his spine. Strong. Below the coffin itself was not an altar, but what looked like a giant safe of some kind... a giant safe that was pure darkness when he tried to look inside it. Like a system lockbox, Jake noted.

He was pretty damn certain he just spotted the final boss of the Treasure Hunt as well as that special reward.

Jake was uncertain if he should share this knowledge and decided to do it with his closest allies. Primarily to tell them to move their basecamps out of the Mistless Plains, as he had a feeling whatever was sleeping below the pillar wouldn't be in a good mood when it awakened. At least not if any of the other creatures he had awakened during this Treasure Hunt were used as references.

Now, when he said: "tell others to move their basecamps," he naturally meant his allies. So Caleb, the folk from Valhal and, of course, Miranda, in case she wanted to warn anyone.

He was confident the Noboru Clan and Holy Church could handle things themselves and didn't need a heads-up, right? And if they didn't prepare, and some powerful creature went on a rampage and began tearing things up... those in the camps better be fast on those Hunter Insignias. If they weren't? Well, that was just too bad and not Jake's problem.

Oh, who am I kidding...

Jacob probably already knew with his weird-ass prediction skills, and the moment the factions saw everyone evacuate the Mistless Plains, they were sure to follow.

Jake shook his head as he made his way over to where Miranda was supposed to be. He sprinted to meet up with her and Carmen but was surprised to see that Caleb had also come and was currently conversing with the two women. Sven and his 'pets' weren't anywhere to be seen.

"... it was really funny, and you just had to be there. Jake's face was priceless, and he was so embarrassed."

He heard his brother's voice as he got closer and only began rushing even more as the little traitor was clearly sharing stuff he shouldn't. Miranda was smiling, and Carmen laughed loudly at whatever he had said.

"Anyone wanna clue me in?" Jake said when he appeared before them.

"Oh, no, it had nothing to do with you," Caleb confidently stated with a smile, the two women not even trying to hide their smirks.

"I heard my damn name."

"Must have misheard. It happens," Caleb dismissed it, still grinning.

"I wanna bet I have more perception than all three of you combined," Jake argued.

"And yet you managed to mishear... truly a wonder of the multiverse," his brother said as he stared questioningly at the sky, acting all philosophical.

Jake nodded as he smiled and turned to the two women. "Caleb faked having diarrhea for eight hours straight because he was too scared to ask out his now-wife and hid away in the bathroom."

Caleb just stared at Jake for a moment. "It wasn't eight whole hours, and it wasn't like I hid away all the time..."

"No, you just ran back there every time she tried asking you something," Jake kept piling on.

"I was like sixteen, and-"

"She ended up asking him out because he was too much of a chicken."

"Now, let's just move o-"

"He then booked them a table at a family restaurant but accidentally chose the wrong day."

"I believe we have something more important to do!?" Caleb yelled, waving his hands dismissively, muttering under his breath. "Besides... it was fine... they had plenty of free ones..."

"What?" Jake just asked his dear brother. "I didn't say anything; you must have misheard me. See, that's what happens when you don't invest properly in perception."

"With these Vaults opening up, I assume you will go and explore them?" Miranda finally came in, saving poor Caleb.

Jake finally showed mercy and nodded in agreement. "For sure. Also, tell everyone to evacuate the Mistless Plains. I believe we have a final boss on our hands, sleeping right below the large crystal spire. No doubt it will be released at some point, and ancient entities that have been sleeping for a long time tend to be grumpy when woken up."

Caleb returned to a more serious mood, too, as he nodded. "We already planned on de-centralizing all control personnel to not risk a direct attack on us. The members of the Court of Shadows will spread even more out from here... do be warned that when three days remain of the Hunt, we will switch from simple thievery and obtaining loot ourselves to acquiring treasures more forcefully."

"Should we be worried?" Miranda asked, a bit in doubt.

"I hope not; they should be aware of the members of Haven," Caleb answered, turning to Carmen. "I cannot say the same about the members of Valhal. While those unassociated with larger factions will be prioritized as targets, those from Valhal will undoubtedly also be hit. The orders are to avoid lethal force if possible and just make people leave... but accidents do happen."

“Oh, that’s fine,” Carmen said dismissively. “I don’t really give a shit.”

“I... alright?” Caleb answered, a bit perplexed before just shaking his head. “I’ll have to head back now. See you guys and gals around.”

Carmen and Miranda gave him a nod in acknowledgments, with Jake giving him a big wave as he headed off, soaring into the sky, Sylphie mimicking his waving movements, looking cute as hell. Jake felt the intensely jealous gaze of Carmen, and it was easy to understand why.

Everyone wanted a cute feather ball like Sylphie, but only his head was a satisfactory home for one.

He chose to ignore her jealousy and instead simply asked: “I wanna go and find these Vaults and possibly do near-suicidal and reckless things to clear some of them quickly... would you two be fine taking care of Sylphie meanwhile? You can always contact me through her if any problems come up, and I can feel her location at all times.”

While he liked spending time with Sylphie, the reality was that she simply wasn’t powerful enough to travel with him, and his entire style just functioned better alone than with others. Miranda and Carmen also both seemed to have taken a liking to Sylphie – especially Carmen – and the woman from Valhal also felt pretty strong, so the little hawk should be safe.

Not that Jake had seen anything he believed could slay her in the Treasure Hunt quite yet, besides maybe that Shade of Eternal Resentment, but his belief it could was primarily based on him not knowing what it was capable of. In truth, he wasn’t aware of what Sylphie could do either, but he did know she was incredibly difficult to put down.

“Of course!” Carmen answered before Miranda could answer. She even tilted her head a bit towards Jake and Sylphie, expectantly. Sylphie looked at her and then down at Jake. Jake just shrugged, letting the bird do that she wanted to.

Sylphie decided to meet Carmen halfway. She jumped down onto Jake’s shoulder, rubbed her head against his cheek in goodbye before she flew over and landed on Carmen’s shoulder. While the hawk had not graced Carmen’s head with her presence, Sylphie had still granted her the privilege of having the mighty Sylphian Eyas stand on her shoulder.

Truly an honor.

Jake smiled as he waved them goodbye, once more reminding them to take care of the little hawk. Mentally, he also sent Sylphie a message telling her to take care of Miranda and warn him if anything bad was happening. Once he got a mental approval from her as well as a semi-angry screech in his mind, admonishing him for how he dared believe there was anything she couldn’t handle, he left.

Casper stood with the other undead as the energy washed over them. The darkness and curse-energy within the mist were pushed back as the mist around them returned to pristine white once more. Casper held out his hands to feel the energy and sighed.

“They activated the device,” he concluded.

The curse had been pushed back in all directions and had more or less expanded the scope of the entire Treasure Hunt as it opened up areas otherwise dominated by the curse, allowing only those of the undead race to enter. Yet now, it was open to everyone as the curse disappeared.

They continued their travel for a bit longer until finally, the pulse of energy reached the edge of the Treasure Hunt world.

At that moment, not far in front of them, a red pillar of light fired up towards the sky like a massive flare. Not long after, a similar red pillar arose in the distance to the side, followed by a third and then a fourth.

“The Vaults have been revealed,” Priscilla said with surprise before quickly recomposing herself. “Remember, our primary goals are the Seed and the Core. The Core should be in the Vault we are headed for, but be warned that finding the Seed may take longer. Not even the Shades were sure of its location.”

She spoke primarily to the Risen, who had been scouting the immediate area until the system message appeared, getting them all up to speed and on the same page. “Additionally... do not enter any Vault without proper preparations, and hand over all acquired loot before doing so in case you are forced to teleport out, or the worst happens.”

They all nodded as the group continued towards the red pillar of light, as they suddenly reached a cliff... if it could truly be called that.

Casper stared down into the abyss as he stood at the edge, knowing where he was. He had reached the edge of the world... at least he was close to it. For before him was the Vault they had been looking for. It was on an island floating in the middle of nowhere, the dark abyss below.

Yalsten was not a planet in the multiverse but a separate dimension. One that had been slowly eroded and begun falling apart many, many years ago. It remained stable enough to not break entirely as an equilibrium had been reached... but the edges were still damaged.

Casper looked back at the others as he looked towards the Vault in the distance. "I'll handle this one alone. Go for the next Vault before other participants arrive."

They had already looted everything that had been within the mist on the way to where they were now. It was done partly hoping that it would make people believe the area was desolate of treasures... but they hadn't known the red pillars would appear, marking all the Vaults. While there were many of them, people were bound to come sooner or later, so they would have to move fast to press their advantage.

"Remember to hand over what you acquired so far first," Priscilla reminded him. "I promise you will get it all handed back when you return successfully."

He just turned to her. "No."

"We have a protocol and a process, you are not excluded fro--"

"I said no," Casper said again. "If I fail, we all fail. So just do your job while I do mine."

Dark energy began revolving around him as he jumped off the edge and began flying towards the floating island in the distance. The turbulent space mana in the area tried to distort and rip his body apart, but the moment it got close, it was rebuffed... the curse of Yalsten still echoing out of Casper's body, blessing him and granting him power.

Chapter 310: Treasure Hunt: Out Of Place

Casper flew towards the island with the Vault on, the curse energy revolving around him as he soared through the unstable space. The cause of the disturbance in the natural balance of space was naturally

the world having been partly broken by the curse, but also due to the battles that had taken place within.

Many high-level beings, including A-grades and possibly even S-grades, had fought within the world known as Yalsten, and such battles rarely left the area unbroken. Yet space also had a natural inclination to always stabilize itself. It wanted to be as solid and as stable as possible while returning to its original form. This was why space could so often be shattered and the world borderline torn apart, yet space would nearly always find a way to stabilize once more. Of course, if large parts had been broken for good... those parts remained broken, and space simply had to find an equilibrium not to cause a chain reaction.

In these unstable places where space had been shattered, the physical realm constantly shifted and turned, overlapping in places to keep this equilibrium. It was patterns of failed attempts at repairing itself, which meant that any outside entity entering often resulted in space simply trying to shift and stabilize around them. Diving head-first into unstable space would be a quick way to be torn into several pieces.

However, Casper didn't fear this. The curse that empowered him helped shroud and protect him, but even without it, he was confident. While his class revolved around curses, his profession did not. He was a Dungeon Engineer, and one of the basic elements of dungeons was space magic. His understanding was still simple and very specialized, focusing on dungeons and not general combat or even making things like spatial items... but what little insight he had was more than enough to survive the unstable space in the Treasure Hunt. In fact, his knowledge was especially suited for this kind of thing.

Now, if this world was one actually amid collapse or he found himself in a full-on space storm, he would be utterly fucked, but luckily it wasn't that bad. Though Casper doubted it had much to do with luck and more to do with design. All of these system events were designed, after all.

They were set up to challenge those who participated, not that much different from most dungeons, albeit far more tailored to the participants. It was interesting, as the system even made its own dungeons, and in some aspects, one could view this entire Treasure Hunt as a collaborative dungeon of

sorts specifically made for Earth. The comparison was actually quite apt, as this was even a completely separate space, and none would likely ever enter Yalsten again. At least not this version of it.

Just focus on your task, Casper reminded himself as he made it through the unstable space and got close to the island.

Once he got close enough, he noticed that a bubble of stable space had formed around the island. In fact, it was the reason why this island was even whole and not broken into tiny fragments like everything else around it. This was no doubt due to the Vault that had been formerly hidden on what had likely once just been part of the plains.

This was evident from the blue grass and the familiar-looking environment. The only real difference was a single structure smack in the middle of the island, emitting a giant red pillar of light. Casper ignored everything else as he made his way towards the structure.

When he got close, he saw it looked just like an old house with unassuming features. It was camouflaged well, or at least it had been. The issue now was that the building was whole with no broken parts and even looked recently cleaned, giving away the high tier of the materials used and the enchantments placed on it.

Casper walked up to it and placed his hand on the door handle. He knew something was off the moment he did so, feeling the enchantments, but frankly, there was nothing he could do about it. He sighed as he opened it without any problems and stepped inside to see a perfectly regular-looking room, at least by post-system standards. It was an entrance area to greet guests, and once more, it all looked way too clean. The door automatically closed behind him, startling him a bit as he upped his guard.

He slowly made his way forward as he spoke. "Lyra, do you detect anything dangerous yet?"

“No... it feels almost too safe. I can’t even detect the outside,”

she answered him, her voice echoing in his head.

This made Casper frown as he turned around and opened the door he had just entered through. When he did so, he saw a living room where the outside of the island had been before.

“Great... a damn maze,” he sighed as he got to work. The worst part? He was pretty sure he hadn’t even found the actual Vault yet... this was just the automatic defenses to trap people, probably until someone could come and investigate. But, naturally, no one would come to investigate, so all this meant was that Casper would have to find a way out himself.

Closing his eyes, he took out a small compass-looking item and tapped it, sending out a pulse of space-mana, mapping out the building – or at least attempted to. It projected a structure to him, and when he saw it, he sighed again as all he got was a jumbled mess, showing the same rooms repeating tens of times over.

“I think we’ll be here a while,” he said to Lyra, in all honesty, not finding the situation that bad. At least he could now be alone with her with no other annoyance around.

Someone else who was also heading towards a Vault was naturally Jake. He used One Step Mile through the plains, not taking any detours or finding any distractions. At least not that many. He passed several people and parties on the way, and he even noticed a few of them changing course when they saw he was headed towards the same Vault they were.

The Vaults themselves were damn far away. Past all the towers and buildings, all the way to where the black mist had dominated in the distance before. Jake did wonder if he could have scouted it using the

Root of Eternal Resentment before this second phase began, and while he probably could, he didn't really regret his decision not to.

Even with Jake's speed, it still took him over one and a half hours to make it to the Vault. He only had a handful of brief stops on the way to take some loot that was too good to pass up on. A part of him just couldn't run by a rare-rarity herb or a super shiny piece of metal giving off dense mana.

Jake didn't encounter many enemies on the way, but there were some. It was the vampires from before, those weak ones that had avoided him before, but now at a far higher level. He even encountered a few variants that were even more powerful.

Not that any of them were a threat.

The most usual kind he found deeper in looked a lot like the usual Ekilmars he had seen before – with the long fingers, willow form, and sharp claws – but instead of their pure white and sickly-looking body, these were an almost impossibly dark shade of black.

[Young Nocturne Ekilmare – lvl 132]

When he fought one, he found out it was because it was an impossibly dark color. They used magic to make themselves appear even darker than usual and even had some dark-affinity magic and illusion magic tossed in there. Overall? A lot stronger than the usual ambush predators.

They did have one little problem though... their stealth abilities were shit. With the mist turned white again, they stuck out like sore thumbs. Luckily for them, they were far stronger, so they couldn't only ambush things.

Jake killed only a single one of them in a 2-minute bout, mainly to just get a look at what it could do before executing it.

He did find it interesting how these had clearly been living within the black cursed mist. It seemed to run contrary to the notion of the curse being anti-vampire and wanting them all dead. Actually, thinking about it, with vampires having to feed... had these vampires just evolved and mutated to feed off the mist? It was fascinating how both cursed and non-cursed variants appeared. Maybe they were both cursed?

Anyway, it was interesting but not at all something he should spend his time trying to find out with only a bit over a week of the Treasure Hunt left and many Vaults to loot.

The red pillar of light soared towards the sky right in front of him as it soon entered his line of sight, and as he passed over a small hill and into a valley... and... it was honestly hilarious.

Within the valley, he saw several broken trees that were little more than stumps. They had clearly been eroded by the curse combined with a lack of proper mana to feed them as they slowly died. Yet, smack in the middle of it all stood a perfectly normal-looking tree – at least by this world's standards - utterly unaffected by anything. It was so out of place Jake couldn't help but chuckle under his breath.

He was confident that back in the day, this place had been a forest of some kind. In fact, the only stumps remaining were those closest to the totally-a-real-tree, as whatever had protected it likely had extended slightly to those around it. He couldn't detect anything suspicious about the tree with any of his senses as it really did just look and feel just like a regular tree.

A long time ago, when this place was a forest, he didn't doubt it would be pretty much impossible to find. A single unassuming tree in the middle of a forest wasn't exactly what many would assume was a hidden treasure vault. Jake made his way into the valley and towards the tree, and once he got closer and it entered his Sphere of Perception, it all began making a bit more sense.

It wasn't a tree at all – shocker that one – but was actually just covered in a thin layer of bark-like material and fake leaves. Below the bark was a metal structure shaped like a tree with advanced runes carved into it, with the top of the crown concealing a sphere of metal.

Walking up to it, Jake decided just to poke it to see what would happen. He extended his finger and lightly touched the tree, expecting something to happen.

A few seconds later... nothing.

Jake tried casually punching it, with it still doing nothing. Then he tried infusing a bit of mana but found that the bark-like coating shielded the structure beneath. Which, funnily enough, was what bark on actual trees did after the system arrived.

He did find that at places in the bark, a little bit of mana seeped in through small holes if he tried to direct his mana into them, with each hole corresponding to a hidden rune. So Jake did a quick run around the tree and found hundreds of these tiny openings.

Okay... totally some sort of password system.

It was also notable how this worked with mana and not that weird blood energy. Was it made by some other enlightened race? Probably. The core of the whole tree structure was also obviously the metal sphere on top, and when Jake peeked into it, he saw how complicated it was.

Is the sphere the Vault?

It was large enough to contain some valuables, but if it had the name 'Vault,' he assumed it was more likely a spatial storage of some kind. No doubt he would have to input the correct password on the tree to make the sphere unlock and grant him access to the loot. It was the logical solution, and he was sure the creator had spent a long time making an elaborate puzzle.

Anyway, Jake set it on fire.

He pressed his hand on it as his Alchemical Flame began slowly eroding the bark. Now, could Jake have tried to solve it? He sure could, but that honestly just seemed like a lot of work. Was it possible this would end up breaking the tree and thus barring him from any treasures? It was possible... but he doubted it. It would be a horrible way to design the device as there was a big chance someone would try to break it. Also, if he did break it, then all he would lose was an hour or so of travel time. Way better than spending what could be days trying to figure out the password as he could just head for another Vault.

It didn't take him more than a few minutes to get off a small patch of the fake layer of bark, and the moment he breached the outer shell, the tree got mad. Really mad.

The entire structure lit up as all the runes began humming with power, destroying all of the fake bark at once, revealing a metal tree with the sphere cradled where the crown had been. At the same time, the entire valley Jake was in began glowing, and he came to learn that those burned-out-looking tree trunks did serve a purpose.

A wave of mana was sent out, followed by a dozen of beams of light descending from the metal branches of the trees into all of the broken black trunks. The entire process took only a few seconds, and soon Jake heard creaking sounds from all around him.

The trunks all began growing with insane speed as branches resembling arms spewed out. Some of them with only two branches, while others summoned over ten. He felt the curse-energy be emanating from all of the growing creatures, and he had a strong feeling this entire defense system was kind of scuffed from the long exposure to the curse and the passage of time.

Nevertheless, the creatures weren't entirely broken.

Around him, eleven figures were rising as feet of roots erupted from the ground as the creatures uprooted themselves. Finally, a twelfth figure erupted from below as it crawled out of the earth. It was larger and more brutal-looking than any of the other creatures, and Jake Identified a few of them, including the biggest one.

[Cursed Vault Guardian Treant – lvl 140]

[Cursed Vault Guardian Treant Lord – lvl 150]

[Cursed Vault Guardian Treant – lvl 140]

“Treants, huh,” Jake muttered. This was his first time fighting those, but it was quite the common enemy as far as he knew. They were also objectively superior creatures compared to the accursed fungi. Yes, even if these treants were literally cursed, Jake still believed that the natural existence of a mushroom was more cursed by default. Because fuck mushrooms.

The treants began closing in on him from all sides, the largest of them in the back. They were all semi-large, around five meters tall, with the Treant Lord standing at eight meters. Their bodies were all sorts of messed up too. Long, squishy tentacle-like vines were coming out from all over the Lord’s body, flailing around, with the other treants having far too many arms, and some even had more than seven leg-like appendages. They had really been fucked up by the curse, but they were still relatively dangerous - at least for the usual Treasure Hunt participant.

As for Jake? Jake was just happy he had skipped the overly long and unnecessary puzzle-solving sequence and found the more straightforward solution. Taking out his bow, he cracked his neck and got to work.

It was time to do some deforestation.