

## Hunter 331

### Chapter 331: Treasure Hunt - Target Prioritization

Jake observed as Eron stood before the Cursed Monarch unbothered as flames wormed across his body. The Monarch took a step back as he asked: "What are you?"

"A rude welcome followed by a rude question. I have had not the best time these last few days, so please excuse my own rudeness... but I have never seen a more disgusting spark than what glows within you," Eron said as he looked visibly upset while looking at the Monarch.

"Broken and flickering like the wind can snuff it out at any moment, you burn out your very essence and need to consume the sparks of others to keep yourself alive... disgusting beyond belief. Truly your existence itself is cursed, Monarch or not."

The white flames exploded out of him as the Cursed Monarch was pushed back, or rather, chose to fly back. He didn't take much damage from the flames but was still left disturbed. As Jake already knew, then the flames were more eerie than dangerous. A bit of exposure did nothing but some damage to health, but with enough time, Jake could see it becoming lethal.

Jake also learned for the first time today that Eron could also actually heal people. He wasn't just an immortal wall but a wellspring of health. One that would make this battle even more one-sided as now they also clearly had the advantage in durability and had the resources to outlast the boss.

It was clear to see that the Cursed Monarch hadn't learned this yet. Perhaps he didn't believe Eron was truly unkillable, or perhaps he just couldn't comprehend it even being possible. Without any hesitation, the Monarch attacked the healer that had just called him disgusting. He opened his palm towards the healer and sent out a red wave of energy.

Flying out, it touched Eron's body and made it erode, yet the man just kept standing there staring at the vampire. A second after the wave passed through, obliterating his body, he was back. This made the Monarch frown even more.

Jake totally got the frustration. He had been faced with it himself. And he was sure the Monarch could figure something out with just a bit of time, but that time wasn't something anyone else present planned on giving him.

An arrow was nocked and released, a sword brought down, and a fist smashed forward. Black lightning fell from above, and Sylphie attacked with blades of wind, having been told to relax it with her powerful dive attacks.

Once more, the Monarch was on the back foot.

For a while, he tried to keep up the same tactic as before, but the arrival of Eron made that plan unfeasible. Jake noticed how Eron didn't use any shields or buffs or anything like that; he only healed people. In many ways, his white flames were a kind of reverse healing, too, making it clear the guy really was the purest form a healer could take, with a bit of immortality sprinkled in for good measure.

When it became apparent this passive approach wouldn't work, the Monarch switched gears. He took a step back after blocking a sword swing and turned to mist.

Jake felt a sense of danger as he stepped down on the platform of mana he was standing on. He appeared on another one a hundred meters away just in time to dodge a red claw trying to penetrate his chest. The Monarch had clearly chosen to switch the focus from the melee fighters and take down Jake first or incapacitate him. Jake felt that the claw the Monarch used wasn't like any attack used prior. Instead, it gave off a very familiar and much-hated feeling: it was a curse.

One had to remember, this Cursed Monarch was born from the remnants of what had once been an A-grade King of Blood specialized in curse magic. So for him to retain some knowledge and abilities to curse people was only to be expected.

Turning around, Jake fired a potshot that missed as the Monarch turned to mist again. Jake, in turn, dismissed his bow as his scimitar and Nanoblade appeared. Just in time, too, as he blocked a claw coming from behind.

He was still sent tumbling back, being outmatched in strength, but was otherwise unhurt. The Monarch had hit his Nanoblade, and Jake quickly saw the result as black veins began spreading on the sword. Not good.

Jake was forced to block again as the Monarch didn't let up. The others tried to get to him, but the Monarch purposefully made Jake retreat away from them as he repeatedly attacked. Each time the Nanoblade was hit, he felt it become more and more damaged, but the scimitar took the blows without any problems. In fact, it felt almost like the blade enjoyed the power of the cursed claws.

"Once more, this is not personal," the vampire boss said without letting up for a second. Jake found it funny the guy was still worried about Jake getting mad from this entire situation, but even more funny that the Monarch seemed so sure of this victory.

"Neither is this," Jake answered as he counterattacked. The Monarch had a sliver of hesitation within him to attack Jake. A faint opening. A weakness to exploit was blown right open as the infused presence of Pride of the Malefic Viper spread around him, attacking the vampire's psyche.

For a brief moment, the Monarch hesitated. It was barely there, but that was enough. For the first time, Jake activated Limit Break at 10% and dove in. The Nanoblade was dismissed as the scimitar was stabbed into the arm of the Monarch, making him unable to attack. Meanwhile, Jake placed his palm on the chest of the vampire, channeling Touch of the Malefic Viper.

The Monarch reacted fast as the other arm attacked, but Jake didn't stop. The claw was just in front of Jake's face when a sword narrowly passed by behind Jake's shoulder, stabbing the Monarch's hand and pinning it to the vampire's body.

With a groan, the Monarch freed the hand Jake was trying to block with his scimitar, but Carmen came in from the side, twisted the arm, and held it in an armlock. At the same time, Caleb attacked from behind by placing the tip of his staff on the body of the Monarch.

Jake kept channeling Touch of the Malefic Viper throughout it all, and he saw the chest of the vampire begin corroding and rotting away as black veins spread from the wound. The Monarch released a red wave of energy, but to the surprise of both him and the humans attacking him, it didn't go as expected. Well, surprised everyone besides Caleb.

The red wave didn't release in all directions but shrank instantly as black lightning ate at it, with Caleb's staff consuming it. Jake's brother was blasted back, but he had managed to buy them a second or so more before the Monarch could make another move.

At that moment, a loud shriek sounded out from behind them. Casper had come over, hundreds of Shades flying around him. Jake saw the eyes of the Monarch open wide as the many spirits flew towards him and wormed past Jake and the others to enter his body.

Casper directed them like a maestro as the many spirits entered the body of the boss vampire. The Monarch, in turn, groaned with a pained expression. The five strongest people on Earth were currently holding him down, with Sylphie and Eron also incoming to keep up the assault.

Yet Jake didn't feel confident. He met the eyes of the vampire as he looked at Jake and smiled with a sinister smile. "Impressive."

The vampire tore his hand through the blade of the Sword Saint as he also kicked away the old man, the freed hand aimed at Jake's head. The arm Carmen held was twisted free as he willingly broke it, and his entire body began burning in a deep crimson flame as the ghosts shrieked – this time in pain and not delight at getting a chance to get revenge.

Jake watched the incoming hand as he narrowly moved his hand to the side and answered. "Likewise."

Twisting his body around, Jake got to the back of the vampire, only taking a small claw attack in return. The Monarch was distracted by the descending blade of the Sword Saint, and a few wooden stakes fired off by Casper, allowing Jake to summon his Nanoblade again and stab it through the back of the Monarch.

Carmen punched him in the side, too, with Sylphie flying over and cutting his one arm deeply. The Sword Saint managed to land a few more nasty wounds, with Caleb now having regrouped with Casper, and joined him in making range attacks of wooden stakes and needle-thin bolts of lightning that seemed to pierce the Monarch's body like a poison.

The crimson flames barely hurt Jake, clearly being focused on incorporeal beings and the vampire's insides. With the shades still weakening the vampire, they all went all-out to deal as much damage as

possible without revealing any of their most powerful cards, Jake going ham with his blades and plenty of poison.

Within a minute, the group had managed to leave hundreds of wounds, a few of which would be lethal to a human, yet the Monarch took it all. The shrieks of the shades slowly died down until suddenly they fell silent – a moment that served as a shift of momentum too.

The Sword Saint brought down his blade, but the clawed hand of the vampire flew with incredible speeds as he caught not the blade but the arm of the old man. The Sword Saint's eyes opened with surprise, but he still reacted swiftly as he practically tossed his sword to the other hand and cut down in a fluid movement.

With a snicker, the Monarch just let go of his arm to dodge the blade as he opened his palm and fired off a blast of red energy, sending the unprepared Sword Saint flying back. Then, with both hands free, he pointed a finger above his own shoulder, aimed straight at Jake.

Jake's danger sense exploded as he let go and jumped back just before a beam cut through the air, making space crack in its wake. The rest of the humans and the one undead were also pushed back, as several globes of blood were summoned and began sprouting tentacles of blood that whipped at them.

The vampire tossed a glance at everyone and chose his target. Out of everyone present, Jake had been the one to cause the most damage, and from his Sense of the Malefic Viper, he felt the poison burn through the Monarch's body, but that did not mean he was necessarily the most dangerous.

Because he also felt how the Monarch had a harder time healing himself. The cause of that was clear as another energy mixed with Jake's poison, not amplifying it per se, but making anything harmful to the Monarch more effective and harder to heal: curses.

Which is to say, the Monarch had recognized Casper as his first target to take down. Permanently.

Casper – to his credit – had predicted this too, and the moment the mist coalesced to his side, the area exploded in black curse energy as a pre-prepared trap triggered. For the most part, the Monarch ignored it, his claw ripping through the energy as he pointed towards Casper. The undead dodged back, but two red beams were released, one of them penetrating his chest and the other his stomach.

Everyone else tried to come to his assistance, and Jake glanced towards Eron and noticed something. The man didn't even attempt to heal Casper but just frowned... Jake realized fast the guy wasn't just being an ass. He couldn't heal undead.

Shit.

If Casper was forced to leave the Hunt, it would make things difficult, as the Monarch was still quite healthy, and Jake also feared the current effects of the curse would disperse.

Clearly, the Monarch was aware of all this and moved to finish off the man. The clawed hand descended towards Casper, cutting up his chest as a long deep wound was left, and the other hand penetrated his chest, his heart skewered and grasped in the hand of the Monarch.

Jake's eyes opened wide, afraid Casper was at the risk of dying but saw that his friend just grinned. His undead friend pulled the Monarch closer and stabbed him in the stomach with a wooden stake, and the next moment the Monarch fled back in fright just in time as the locket on Casper's neck released a ghastly light and gave off a powerful aura as something flew out.

A figure collided with the Monarch, sending him flying back in a bright explosion of energy, the vampire forced to block with a barrier.

“You aren’t simple either, huh? A servant of the Blightfather?” the Monarch said as he saw the ghost that now stood in front of Casper protectively. Jake also Identified her.

[Blightwraith – lvl 146]

Jake didn’t recognize her but knew from what he had heard that she was called Lyra and had also been in their tutorial. He wasn’t aware of everything that had happened but knew Casper had made a deal that ultimately resulted in her being resurrected as a ghost and was now residing in the locket. What he hadn’t known was how powerful this ghost was.

She was stronger than most anyone present, and from the energy she gave off, Jake had a feeling she and Casper working together was the primary cause of his strength.

“Not quite,” Casper answered as he took out an odd potion Jake didn’t recognize and chugged it down, his body healing at a visible rate afterward.

The Monarch looked towards the sky, muttering. “This is harder than I thought... you are a bunch of monsters aren’t you? Or has the average level of the enlightened races heightened so much? No... doubtful...”

Shaking his head, the Monarch just got back to the action, red energy burning around him as he charged Casper again. Lyra blocked him as she screamed and released a shockwave of blight energy. The



Monarch turned to mist and avoided it, appearing right beside Casper, who reacted quickly once more and blasted himself to the side – in the direction of Jake and the others.

Carmen managed to get in front of him just in time to block an attack from the vampire. She managed to stay still as they clashed, using some skill to negate the impact, much to the annoyance of the vampire. Two red globes of blood still floating some distance away suddenly flew towards her and exploded as they hit her on the back, but a second later, her wounds began healing, courtesy of her own magic and Eron.

Seemingly having realized that Eron was too annoying, the Monarch finally decided to deal with him. He turned to mist and appeared right behind the man, who released a burst of white flames out his back. The Monarch ignored it as he turned to mist again and appeared right in front of Eron.

The Monarch stared into Eron's eyes and spoke. "Sleep."

He then turned to mist again to avoid a barrage of arrows from Jake – Eron falling to the ground unconscious.

The dude really needed to work on mental defenses.

Chapter 332: Treasure Hunt: Will of the True Ancestor

Reika manipulated her weapons as she battled the Royal Guard in front of her, the male vampire using an odd mix of blood and water magic against her. The other Royal Guards also assisted him but were otherwise busy as they got swamped by everyone else present.

The people from Valhal were absolutely pummeling one of them, another one being dominated by the party from the Holy Church, and the fourth primarily fighting the undead woman Priscilla and her

followers. Behind them, many others assisted or simply killed the many Soldiers also coming in and disturbing their battle.

Durability-wise, the vampires were all high-tier, but they simply didn't get any opportunities to properly show their offensive might. Especially not after each of them was stabbed by one of the cursed Stakes originally intended for the Counts.

So while the battle still took a while, it was an utterly one-sided affair. Reika had wanted to join the fighting in the air with the Monarch very much but knew it was beyond her. She had caught glimpses of the fight and knew she wouldn't last long and possibly only be a burden.

Among humans on Earth, she had always thought she was at the pinnacle, but she had to admit that her combat prowess was lacking behind that of others. Reika had perhaps focused too much time on her profession and not enough on actually improving her combat skills. This didn't mean she was weak, though.

Four swords flew through the air, burning with blue fire as they cut at the barrier of the vampire before her. A Soldier approached from behind, and she directed two of the swords to stop it. They flew towards the vampire, and while one was blocked by an old rusty shield, the other stabbed the Soldier in the arm. The flames instantly began spreading, but instead of heat, they left signs of frostbite.

Reika had formed a cold flame that she used primarily for alchemy, as she found that most of her crafting worked best in low temperatures. She wasn't an alchemist like Jake or others with a more classical approach. Instead, hers was more modern, at least by human standards, where she used a cold environment to preserve the effects of the medicine more effectively as she combined it through a hardening process.

This flame had also proved very useful when it came to fighting foes. The flames spread on the Soldier as Reika used her hands to manipulate the swords, and at the same time, she drew a simple magic circle using her feet and pure mana manipulation.

Her attack on the Soldier didn't impede it, as it kept charging her. Reika finished the magic circle just in time as she flew to the side, the Soldier stepping where she had just been. The circle activated as chains of frost emerged, stopping the vampire.

Without further ado, she took out a small crystalline bottle and tossed it at the Soldier. It exploded with a cloud of odd silver dust, and a moment later, she tossed another bottle that exploded in blue light. All of the silver dust was activated and expanded as it froze, forming thousands of localized ice explosions. The soldier, caught in the middle, was completely frozen both inside and out.

With that done, Reika gladly turned her attention towards the Royal Guard again. The vampire had tried to do something but was hit by a blast from the side by the odd ship of the merchant from Haven, making it fail its spellcasting. This gave her ample opportunity to direct all four blades as she spotted one of the Royal Guards be finished off by the fire-using archer named Maria from the party from the Holy Church.

By now, it was only a question of time before the Royal Guards would all be wiped out.

The many Soldiers not faring any better as they were so heavily outnumbered.

Jake fired another arrow, hitting the Monarch on his thigh as he didn't turn to mist fast enough – courtesy of the Sword Saint trying to cut his head off and Carmen attempting to rupture whatever organs could possibly remain within the Cursed Monarch.

Lyra had reentered the locket with Casper too. Based on him only really attacking after that, he proved Jake's theory that the two of them were using some combo-attacks together by channeling both their energies.

Caleb and Sylphie kept up their work as strikers, occasionally hitting with powerful glancing blows when the Monarch was unprepared and often at the same time. Finally, the Sword Saint and Carmen kept the Monarch engaged in melee, with Jake shooting his bow from only a few hundred meters away.

Eron was uselessly unconscious on the ground below, still under the effect of the Monarch's spell. The vampire had tried to use a spell on the Sword Saint at one point also, but it appeared to have little to no effect. Carmen was affected, but the pain she caused herself with her magic seemed to snap her out of it instantly, rendering her effectively immune. Below, the Royal Guards and soldiers fell one by one.

Reflecting on the entire battle – while still shooting arrows – Jake had a feeling this couldn't be it. The Monarch was around 190 as far as Jake could tell, which meant he was nearly C-grade, but so far, that battle hadn't been that hard at all.

He did think that the Monarch wasn't at the pinnacle for someone his level, quite the opposite actually. He was clearly severely weakened, and the Cursed part of his name was not a positive moniker. It was something that restricted him, same as how the Counts had been starved.

There was also the fact that the Monarch still had a far too casual approach of just dragging out time. He had landed some wounds on them but primarily Carmen, who self-healed. While he had gone for Casper earlier, and even Jake and Caleb had taken some blows, it was nothing serious. It was like the Monarch was waiting for something and still hiding a part of his power... not that Jake was particularly worried.

They were all holding back.

Every single one of them present had more to show and were just waiting for it to be required. Blowing your load too early was an excellent way to turn a good situation bad, after all.

But, more so than any of his own postulations and belief that the Monarch had more to show were the actions of Jacob. The Augur was still preparing some ritual with hundreds of people below, hidden behind a barrier meant to obscure them – a useless attempt before the power of the full-perception-build.

Alright, entirely useless it wasn't as the Monarch hadn't noticed yet. Perhaps just specially designed to be hidden from vampires? Either way, the ritual proved that Jacob was preparing for something that was to come, clearly having at least some sense that there was more to the Monarch.

Which made perfect sense... what boss fight was good with only one phase?

The fighting kept up for a few more minutes, the Earth-side more dominant everywhere. After the first of the four remaining Royal Guards fell, the others quickly followed as they were swarmed and overwhelmed. The Soldiers were slaughtered wholesale, many of them having ten or even twenty people gang up on them. Rituals from the undead side and the Holy Church activated to blow them up continuously, and the Noboru clan even joined in with some long-range barrages that had pinpoint precision. Not to mention all of the parties like Neil's who were killing the vampires with almost machine-like efficiency.

Jake kept up the assault of the Monarch, feeling his poison accumulate, especially the large dose he injected with Touch was still doing harm. He also discovered that the stake Casper stabbed the Monarch with earlier was a modified version of the ones used on the Counts, this one able to be used on the Monarch, even though it appeared to be way less effective. As to how he had learned this? Well, because Casper had more of them as he saw him summon another, which allowed Jake to get a better look.

In a final clash, the Sword Saint managed to land a deep cut on the Monarch just as Jake hit the vampire in his hand as he tried to block. Carmen, Sylphie, and Caleb also all hit at once, with the final attack made by Casper being dodged as the Monarch turned to mist.

He appeared floating far above them as he looked down. Jake stared up and saw the vampire stand there, his clothes shredded in nearly all places, his body filled with wounds and marks as black veins spread across it. Yet he smiled.

“I must admit... this is not going as I had imagined. This body is truly not what it once was... if it ever was. I am beginning to question if I am truly a King of Blood or merely a specter formed of his memories. Perhaps a bit of both? I am not certain it matters, but one cannot help but question,” the Monarch said as he looked down at them and then up towards the sky.

Jake considered shooting an arrow, but he wanted to see what the Monarch would do next if he was perfectly honest. Also, it would not hit for sure, and none of the others seemed to want to attack too right away but just took the breather instead. Jake knew it could be mentally taxing to constantly fight and be on your toes, so he got it. Partly.

“Back when Yalsten was founded, the True Ancestor handed a treasure to the founder. A treasure meant to preserve the Legacy of the True Ancestor, hidden here away from sight. Perhaps this treasure was the cause of the fall of Yalsten to begin with... did you know that I caused the isolation of our world on purpose?

“The Church, undead, and many others were closing in, and on my way back after I collected sacrifices for the grand ritual, I was discovered. I was forced to sever all spatial channels leading to the outside world to stop them from getting in and safeguard the treasure. Naturally, this could not be shared with the inhabitants. I just had to say that the curse damaged the channels and eventually broke them. I was

even made to kill all those who wanted to leave and make those who stayed behind believe their relatives safely got away.”

The Monarch spoke as he floated in the air. His wound dripped down blood as he ignored everything and kept speaking.

“This was not a proud moment but one of necessity. I believed we could restore the connection... do something. But no, the curse ritual was tampered with or failed. Everything began breaking down, and I was forced to seal myself while working on a device to try and restrain my own curse.”

He sighed, shaking his head.

“An utter display of failure. All of it. Now, I am a mere husk of what I once was... but one thing remained with me. For I had kept one promise. To safeguard the treasure left by the True Ancestor. I was unable to do anything with it myself; all vampires were due to the Law of Ancestry... but the rule is gone, it seems. I had hoped to avoid using this, as even I am uncertain of its effects, but would the system have left it with me if it led to catastrophe?”

On the ground below, the coffin that the Cursed Monarch had been lying in suddenly exploded as a hidden compartment was opened. A small glowing red item soared up and stopped right in front of the Monarch, him looking at it with excitement and reverence.

“Behold.”

He spread out his hands as the red item was revealed to be a necklace. A necklace that held a small glass bauble with some red liquid stored within it.

“The Blood of Sanguine.”

Jake identified the necklace as fast as he could as his eyes opened wide.

[Sanguine’s Blood Legacy (Divine)]

He failed to see any more information than that; his Identify perhaps not good enough or the item too far above him. Yet, he could not understand how a divine-rarity item could be present in the Treasure Hunt of D-grades, and he didn’t have time to find out.

The Monarch looked at the necklace as it responded. Not to him or anyone else, but it simply imposed its own will upon the world around it. The sky became red as it released a subtle red wave of energy that pulsed across the entire Treasure Hunt, nearly unnoticeable.

It passed through Jake and everyone else without any effect... but the same could not be said for those of the vampiric race. The first to be hit was the Monarch, who simply let the energy wash over him, and as it did, he began changing.

His husked form healed instantly as his wrinkled skin tightened up, deep red hair grew on his head, and a black beard appeared at impossible speeds. Muscles grew and wriggled as his entire body went from a deathly-looking dried-up husk to a man who looked to be at his prime. At the same time, all traces of the curse of Yalsten left his body.



On the plains below, the wave hit all of the corpses of the vampires. Hundreds of Soldiers had been slain, all of the Royal Guards dead. Their bodies released black smoke as the curse disappeared. Even more so, when the wave hit them, their bodies melted into red puddles and joined the blood they had already spilled in the battle before. All of this blood began gathering as humanoid vampire-looking shapes of blood formed.

Jake looked down as he saw dozens of these blood creatures form all over the plains and quickly peered down to Identify them.

[Vampiric Blood Elemental – lvl 143]

[Vampiric Blood Elemental – lvl 151]

[Vampiric Blood Elemental – lvl 164]

Their levels varied widely, and so did their strength. Jake saw the many people below, many of them exhausted and now faced with powerful enemies once more. The most powerful elemental was level 169 and had been formed around where the Royal Guards had been slain, and he already saw the people from the Holy Church prepare to face it, looking almost as if this was expected. Perhaps because Jacob had seen this coming. In the end, hundreds of those elementals were formed.

Finally, Jake turned his gaze to the Cursed Monarch... and noticed upon using Identify that he couldn't use that name anymore.

[Monarch of Blood - 170]

The newly-born Monarch of Blood stood with his eyes closed as Jake wondered what exactly had happened. The level of the Monarch had dropped by more than twenty levels... yet when he gauged the vampire in front of him... he was stronger. By not just a little.

"I see... all is planned indeed," the Monarch said as he opened his deep red eyes, magic circles glowing within as he looked at them. "The True Ancestor was truly crafty."

The necklace that had released the pulse continued upwards as the red sky intensified and the mist all over Yalsten was completely and utterly evaporated. Then, the necklace above transformed itself, releasing a flash of red light before revealing a blood-red celestial object hanging above, Jake uncertain if it was a moon or a sun.

At the same time, the Monarch of Blood released his aura as the unstable space of Yalsten appeared to shake and quiver at his display.

Jake felt the power and could only smile. He exchanged a glance with the Sword Saint and saw the old man return a nod. Outwardly he displayed worry... but Jake saw the man's excitement.

The Monarch also smiled as he spread his arms wide and yelled:

"Come. Let the Will of the True Ancestor be done!"

Chapter 333: Treasure Hunt: A Leveled Look at Power

Levels truly worked in peculiar ways, and the correlation between levels and actual combat prowess was often muddy and difficult to pin down. For example, a low-tier genius D-grade could sometimes beat even pinnacle D-grades who focused primarily on crafting if they also happened to counter their skillset well, and the individual they fought was just overall weak for their level.

Jake was a great example of this, having even a class focused on fighting more powerful foes and a profession offering him many benefits in combat too. For him to fight an enemy tens of levels above himself was just to be expected. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper, after all, and a Progenitor. He had titles making his stats far exceed what one of this level usually would have, a class and profession offering, even more, stats further amplified by this, powerful skills, and so on.

This did mean that level itself was truly a poor indicator of actual power, yet it was the best people often had if someone didn't outright release their aura and kept their presence and whatnot suppressed. Of course, anyone could still feel the grade someone was, but it was uncertain if the Monarch had any idea as to Jake's actual level considering he couldn't be Identified.

Now, using Identify not being a good way to gauge anyone's strength didn't mean there was no way. In fact, almost anyone with any talent in fighting could get a rough estimate for how powerful someone was merely by looking at them.

Jake's bloodline didn't create new instincts; it merely enhanced those that were there before to wholly ridiculous levels. As many beasts had displayed, some basic danger sense was present, some spatial awareness was to be expected, and even intuition was just a natural occurrence everywhere.

Intuition and danger sense working in tangent was what allowed one to estimate how powerful someone was by simply looking at them. Jake had both these boosted to levels beyond perhaps any other being in the multiverse meant his instinctual gauge of how powerful someone was proved far more effective than merely using Identify. Of course, it was not entirely perfect. Something like the

damn blue mushroom down in the biodome was a good example of this, as while Jake could feel it was strong, he simply couldn't properly understand it either.

Now, all of this is to say that Jake noticed some people be relieved for a moment after they saw the now-named Monarch of Blood had dropped more than twenty levels. Perhaps they believed he had given up some of his own power to spawn the elementals and the huge blood-like celestial object hanging above. But, unfortunately, this was an entirely incorrect assumption.

Because while they breathed out in relief, those in the air all prepared themselves. The Sword Saint got into a defensive position, Carmen used some magic to fully heal herself right away, and Sylphie, Casper, and Caleb all backed off even further away, knowing the situation had changed.

The Monarch made his speech as he talked of the True Ancestor as he spread his hands and launched the final act.

"Come. Let the will of the True Ancestor be done!"

Jake had no time to think about what the whole 'crafty True Ancestor' thing was about before he was attacked. He wasn't the only one either. The Monarch had raised his hand and fired off a beam in each of their directions.

The Sword Saint pointed his blade up as water revolved around it. The beam struck the tip of the sword and was redirected away, hitting a Vampiric Blood Elemental below. Carmen crossed her arms as she blocked, her bracers activating some enchantment to facilitate this. Caleb dodged to the side along with Sylphie while Casper summoned a black wooden shield, successfully blocking the blow.

Jake simply stepped to the side, his danger sense having given him ample warning as he released an arrow in return. Not towards the Monarch, but someone else. He had noticed that the many spawning elementals below actively ignored a certain unconscious man, making Jake guess something.

If Eron was so useless that he could be knocked unconscious and die for real to a single arrow, he wouldn't be worth shit anyway, so Jake decided to take a gamble and shoot him with one. The arrow fell and exploded when it hit the man below, blowing up his body entirely.

He didn't have time to observe the result as mist condensed behind him. Jake took a step forward, appearing on a platform ahead of him just as the air ripped where he had just been standing, the Monarch now standing there with a sword made of blood-red crystal in his hand - clearly summoned.

The Monarch didn't seem to be in a mood to talk much more but attacked Jake again, this time simply flying towards him. In response, Jake decided to get a bit more serious himself. Mana began condensing around him as crystalline orbs of highly explosive arcane energy appeared.

He drew his scimitar and his Nanoblade to block. Jake clashed with the vampire, finding himself outmatched in both skill, speed, and power. But not diversity and defensive abilities. Dodging the sword several times, he didn't manage to retaliate but only finished his arcane bombs.

Jake wanted to pack a bit more power into them but found himself forced to block more and more from the left side. That is when he noticed the Nanoblade that had already taken a beating begin to struggle. He saw a faint smirk on the face of the vampire as suddenly a red aura washed over Jake, restricting his movements slightly.

Fighting back with his own Pride of the Malefic Viper to wrest control of the domain back, he was still not fast enough. The crystalline sword of the Monarch grew to resemble a two-handed heavy sword

and, with a mighty swing empowered further by the vampire's energy, barrelled for his left side, trying to bisect him at the stomach.

He was forced to block with the Nanoblade despite knowing it was a bad idea. The Monarch hit him as Jake prepared himself to be launched away. He heard the crack as the heavy sword hit the far more narrow and fragile-looking Nanoblade, and Jake could only grit his teeth as he was blasted away – the only thing remaining being half of the body of the Nanoblade.

Oh, and a dozen or so arcane bombs.

A second shockwave rocked the terrain as an explosion blew up where Jake had just been, sending him flying even further away. He didn't have time to mourn the loss of his weapon as he instead drew his bow again and fired into the remnant arcane energy left by the bombs. He ignored the wounds left by the blade and his bruised arm and side, not having time to deal with it right away.

The arrow split into five as it got close, and soon after, another explosion sounded out. However, Jake knew that this one had done nothing as he still vividly felt the Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter he had left on the vampire, and with this attack, the charge did not increase.

Two crescent blades – one of water and one of wind – cut through the terrain towards the Monarch, parted the arcane energy, and impacted the barrier the boss had made around himself. Two large cuts were left on it, one leaving a barely noticeable trace, while the other caused faint cracks. The Sword Saint was naturally superior to Sylphie when it came to fighting prowess, but the bird was no slouch either.

With a swift hand-motion, the Monarch made the barrier explode as shards of glass-like blood crystals flew everywhere, even hitting the people below who were now in a bitter battle with the blood

elementals. A few of the weaker ranged fighters found themselves taking deadly injuries, while others were caught off-guard.

Gotta get him away from here, Jake reckoned.

There was also a risk the Monarch could absorb the blood of those below like the Counts could, making them all living health potions. He didn't want to risk that happening at all cost as he could see what kind of shitty situation that could lead to.

Jake fired another barrage of arrows, but his shots were swiftly dodged by the Monarch who chased him again. By now, it was clear he was the primary target. Perhaps the Monarch believed Jake was dangerous if left alone, or maybe the boss just wanted to fight him as he was the one the vampire saw as the strongest. Either way, Jake invited it.

Retreating as he blocked, the Monarch gave chase as the crystalline blade repeatedly fell. To make it more difficult, the weapon changed shape to a heavier version sporadically as it seemed everchanging. Yet when he focused on being purely defensive, Jake could handle it.

His danger sense and ability to survive were what had allowed Jake to get where he was today. The first truly strong foe he had fought was the Alpha Badger back in the first tutorial dungeon, and against that beast, he had been so outmatched it wasn't even funny when it came to physical stats... but he had still won and survived.

Because while Jake was good at archery and magic and all that, it was his survival instinct that was his greatest weapon.

The Monarch cut and changed the weapon, summoned magical attacks one after another, yet Jake was always one step ahead – sometimes literally with One Step Mile. The game of cat and mouse was one where the mouse clearly had the upper hand as every move of the cat was predicted and countered near-perfectly.

Jake saw and felt the frustration of the Monarch but paid it no mind as he was in the zone, focused only on his sphere and danger sense. Every faint movement of blood energy, every twitch of a muscle, or slight tension in the vampire's body lay bare before him as the two of them got further and further away from the Mistless Plains.

He felt Sylphie chase after him, followed by the others, with the Sword Saint dragging along Eron. She kept him updated so Jake could focus on the Monarch and not divert his gaze for even a moment. Finally, the Monarch made a too wide swing, and Jake pounced like a starved beast as his own scimitar flew up and left a cut on the Monarch's arm.

Instantly, the Monarch refocused and tightened up his technique. Magic began burning brighter around him as blood clones appeared all around him, all of them summoning their own crystalline weapons of blood energy.

Jake swiftly used One Step Mile to get away as he left a Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter on each of them to keep track. There were five clones in total, and three of them headed towards the approaching humans – and Casper – while the other two joined the Monarch in his assault.

Arcane bolts condensed around Jake as he took this slight reprieve to counterattack and sent all of them towards one of the clones as he prepared himself. The clone dodged two of the arcane bolts but was hit by two as they blew up, sending it tumbling back slightly, meaning only two figures appeared before Jake a moment later to strike him.



The Monarch teleported to his back while the clone attacked from the front. Jake chose to charge ahead towards the blood clone and engage that, avoiding the blow of the Monarch by a slight margin as he clashed with the far weaker clone.

Yet even the clone was able to block Jake and fight him rather well, giving the Monarch ample time to get close again and attack. Narrowing his eyes, Jake went back on the defensive for a while as the wings on his back began secreting poison mist. He knew this would have little to no effect on the Monarch, but the blood clone was another story.

He also noticed that his arcane mana burned strongly within the clone. As a magical construct, it was far more susceptible to his arcane mana, he reckoned. The poison also seeped into the clone quite happily, and while it didn't affect its movements, it did put it on a timer.

Dodging back even further, he let the chase continue as he finally detected the destruction in the distance. Not towards the plains but far away from it. The cataclysmic power of the world breaking apart as space collapsed could be felt from over a thousand kilometers away, and it was clear that it was coming closer by the second.

Far enough now, Jake decided, not wanting to get any closer to the spatial collapse. Even at this far distance, his danger sense made him acutely aware that he didn't want to enter the edges of Yalsten and experience that kind of destruction firsthand.

This meant Jake changed up his tactic and began fleeing downwards instead of flying through the air. Throughout his time, Jake had gotten quite good at aerial combat, primarily through practice against birds on the cloud island, but he still felt more comfortable on the ground. Sure, it could be argued that dodging in a fully three-dimensional space was easier than when you only had to the sides and upwards, but he still preferred the ground.

Flying down, the Monarch chased him as Jake dodged orbs of blood and beams during his descent. The clones were lagging slightly behind, not releasing any ranged attacks, making Jake believe they could only fight in melee. Or maybe ranged attacks were just a waste of their limited energy pools.

Honestly, Jake had to admit that he was surprised at the lack of diversity in the vampire's skills. He had many types of blood magic, but most of it could be boiled down to orbs, beams, clones, and melee fighting. Alright, he also put Eron to sleep and some mental magic, but nothing Jake had noticed so far really put him on edge.

It was inarguable that the Monarch was still powerful, but there was no way he retained the skills he had as an A-grade. Far from it.

After his transformation, he had gotten stronger, but not overly much. It was more the reset that had caused that had the biggest impact, as it healed his wounds, and as far as Jake could see, the guy now had more resources than before and used them more liberally.

But... ultimately, the question was... could Jake win? Because while this was indeed the strongest foe he had ever faced, that didn't mean it was the most dangerous foe. Jake was also more powerful now than ever.

Could he beat the Monarch alone? Uncertain, but maybe? It would take a while, though.

Could he beat the Monarch with the help of nearly all the strongest people on Earth?

Well... yeah.

Unless the Monarch had more interesting things to show, that is.

#### Chapter 334: Treasure Hunt: One Down

Strong.

Carmen saw the old man from the Noboru clan obliterate the blood clone within a few dozen seconds, his blade moving incredibly fast and seeming like it could cut anything. She really didn't want to block that sword directly, that was for sure.

Yet the other person Sven had warned her about was even worse. She had just finished off the last of the blood clones with help from Sylphie, the Judge, and the undead called Casper taking care of the third one. This still meant they had only destroyed three clones, while that Chosen guy had been faced with not only two clones alone but the far more powerful true body of the Monarch.

She was worried as he had quite the firepower and was an archer that this would be problematic. Archers were ranged fighters, and while their agility and perception both tended to be high, their durability often wasn't up there.

But what she saw when she looked at him again as he had landed in the distance wasn't what she expected. Two clones attacked him with the Monarch, blood magic flying everywhere, yet he kept dodging and weaving better than any fighter she had ever seen before. It was uncanny to the level of being straight-up ridiculous.

If there was the slightest gap, he was in it the moment it formed; the tiniest opening to escape a pincer attack was chosen, and it didn't matter what angle the attack came from. He was aware of it and reacted, clearly possessing some skill to give him vision all around him.

Is he specialized in avoidance? she wondered as he somehow ducked and jumped at the same time to avoid two strikes and blasted a mana attack out of his hand to send himself flying back slightly to avoid a red beam from the Monarch.

Carmen wasn't delusional. She knew she was strong but not the strongest. Yet, she still felt like there was a gap wider than expected. Sure, she could see herself put up a good fight, and with all of her boosting skills, she could deal great damage... but could she even hit him?

Moreover, his constant focus was just too ridiculous. One would think that there was a chance to get distracted or that a wayward thought could sneak in and toss you off for a brief moment, yet such a thing had yet to happen. She herself had many times taken a hit because of a moment of inattentiveness, but that didn't look to be a concept the Chosen even had to deal with.

He was just a monster.

The Sword Saint drifted through the air as he used a skill to move faster and struck at the Monarch from behind. A clone moved to block his blow, and the old man reacted by simply empowering his blow further. His blade seemed to be surrounded by water for a fraction of a moment as it fell. It warped around the weapon the clone wanted to block with and cut off its arm, and before it could reform its body, the Sword Saint used another skill as his blade flashed, and the clone was cut into six parts.

Another damn monster, Carmen thought, just shaking her head. Yet, she didn't want to see herself too beaten as she also used a movement skill. Golden wings of light condensed behind her as she sped up and charged straight for the Monarch.

Energy whirled around her as she struck forward, releasing blasts of pure kinetic force. The vampire naturally noticed her and summoned a circular barrier to block her blows, as the Chosen guy also moved to attack – with his blow clearly being prioritized and viewed as the most dangerous.

She didn't blame him. Poison was nasty.

Shattering the barrier in a few blows, she got in closer. The Monarch was now forced to address her. And address her he did.

He moved his hand as a magic circle appeared beneath him, and before she could react, one appeared beneath her too. Carmen tried to get out of it, but before she knew it, her vision turned entirely black for a moment before she found herself in new surroundings.

Carmen instantly recognized that they had been teleported back in the direction of the Mistless Plains. More than a thousand kilometers passed in a moment. That the Monarch also knew some kind of space magic was something she nor anyone else had expected, and Carmen cursed herself for not having any proper resistance against such attacks.

This was one of her weaknesses... she couldn't do jackshit against most magical effects due to the way her class and profession worked. Not having any mana did have some downsides.

The Monarch looked her way as she saw him flash a creepy smile. He wants to make me leave before the rest get here?

He didn't talk or taunt her. He simply attacked, more or less proving her theory. Mist suddenly appeared behind her, as she was too slow to react as she was cut across her back. The Monarch she had just been looking at dissolved into nothingness. Mental magic?

She twisted around to block and found herself faced with three identical Monarchs. All of them gave off power, and when they attacked, she had to block all of them. That is when she noticed they were all "real" to some extent. More clones.

The clones were usually just red... but these weren't, and without spending a long time, she couldn't tell the difference.

It would take the others several minutes to arrive at a minimum, and it didn't look like the Monarch wanted to give her that long. All of the clones began burning with energy as they charged her. Carmen blocked what she could, but it was a losing battle as she was pushed back and took several severe wounds that would be lethal to a pre-system human.

Fuck.

Originally, the fight did seem to extend into more of a marathon than a sprint... but she couldn't afford to keep a steady pace as things were.

Carmen smashed her fists together and released a shockwave as she at the same time jumped back. When she landed, she pressed both her fists to the ground as she spoke.

"Sacred Battlefield."

A faint pulse went through the terrain as the battlefield was established, and she felt herself grow stronger. But this was far from enough... so she went all out.

“Regalia of the Fallen.”

“Runes of the Valkyrie.”

“Exaltation of Valhal.”

“Blessed Echo.”

“Ruinous Drive.”

Golden armor covered her body as she began burning from the inside. Runes covered her skin, as she was blessed with power far above what she could usually handle. Skills from both her profession and class working in tandem, making her far more powerful for a short amount of time. The entire summoning process of all the skills didn’t even take a second, and by the time the Monarch reached her, the clash was far more even.

On her battlefield, the masking of the clones faltered as she saw the real Monarch. Her fist clashed with the blade of the Monarch, and this time she didn't lose out. An explosion rocked the area as the two separated, but Carmen charged again as she pressed the assault.

Usually, it would seem smarter to be defensive, but when Carmen was in this state, she had to fight. Her entire power burned with stamina, and her health depleted by the second, and her only way to remain stable was to both release the energy and lifesteal through dealing damage to her foe.

Carmen attacked the Monarch, who met her blow for blow. She gritted her teeth as her hits were blocked every time, but at least she managed to release her pent-up stamina. She pushed more and got in closer as she began trading hits. Her fist connected with the flesh of the vampire, and she felt her energy intrude and pulse through his body as she herself got some health back.

"Truly a warrior of Valhal... Impressive," the Monarch said, as he jumped back and pointed towards her to release beams of blood energy. Her golden armor blocked the blows as she stormed forth again. The clones attacked her still, but they had trouble breaking through her armor and outmatching her self-healing, meaning she could keep it up for now.

But not for long.

The Monarch was clearly aware of her powers, yet he kept fighting her in melee. For now, she actually had the upper hand, but she felt herself slowly begin to run out of fumes. She had to do something and quickly. The others were coming. She just had to hold on.

Carmen pulled out as much power as she could as she charged for the umpteenth time. Her fist glowed with energy as she smashed it forward. The Monarch smiled and turned to mist at that very moment, but Carmen had expected it.



“Honor’s Call.”

Instead of teleporting away, the Monarch appeared right in front of her, compelled by some unknown concept Carmen didn’t understand herself. It appeared that the Monarch did, but understanding and being able to counter something wasn’t the same.

“Fist of Ragnarok.”

Space imploded as her fist struck the blocking blade of the Monarch. The crystal sword shattered into thousands of pieces as the energy from her fist penetrated through the stomach of the vampire and released a massive shockwave as her energy invaded the body of her foe. Her physical fist failed to penetrate, however.

Right as she had finished her blow, her entire arm up to the shoulder exploded in a mix of golden energy and blood. Golden veins spread from her shoulder and down her body as she watched the Monarch be blasted back several kilometers and into a hill that now found itself with a newly-made cave.

Carmen quickly used her other hand and took out a special potion she had one of the alchemists of Valhal prepare. It had a golden liquid within that made the energy that ravaged her insides subside. She would be able to regenerate her arm again in only a-

“You know, this reminds me of a fight I once had.”

She hadn't seen him. The Monarch suddenly stood right behind her, the wound still on his body with her energy also pulsing through his body. Yet he smiled.

Carmen tried to get away, but her skills were weakening. She only managed to get a few meters away before the Monarch attacked, not giving her any time. Raising her remaining arm, she tried to block, but the vampire didn't let up. Claws tore into her flesh, it not healing as it should.

"I would recommend leaving this system event," the Monarch said as he blasted her with blood energy. She summoned whatever energy she could muster to block it, but all that did was create another opening. The claw of the vampire flew forward and closed around her neck, Carmen focusing all her energy on strengthening it.

Dark energy spread in her body as she felt her limbs become limp. She knew it was a curse and that she had no way to fight it. Carmen cursed both the curse and herself as she resigned herself and activated the Hunter's Insig-

And then she was free. The claw on her neck suddenly let go, and she opened her eyes to see the Monarch gone from where he had been as he was flying into the distance - an arrow stuck in the side of his head.

A millisecond later, she saw a figure pass by surrounded by a mix of green energy she recognized as Sylphie's mixing with pure burned stamina. A crude and wholly inefficient method of boosting the body... but clearly enough. The archer had only appeared before her in a brief flash before he stepped down again and appeared right in front of the vampire, which he proceeded to kick in the head, embedding the arrow further.

She had to admit... that was very satisfying.

Jake had to admit that he was kind of miffed. He had baited the vampire so far away, wanting to fight him. Yet the fucker had just teleported himself and Carmen away like an absolute asshole, leaving him and everyone else hanging. A serious dickmove, in his opinion.

His Mark of the Avaricious Hunter at least told him where they had gone, and he noticed it was quite the distance. To make it worse, four wayward globes of blood from earlier suddenly transformed into blood clones to get in their way. Jake knew he couldn't stay behind and exchanged a look with the Sword Saint, who nodded.

He also sent the message to Sylphie. While Sylphie was faster than him in a sprint, then there was simply too far to Carmen, and he let her know this. She seemed worried, so she did what she could. She used some magic as she flapped her wings, and Jake felt a green aura envelop him as the wind around him seemed to give away and even support him. It was like his old bow enchant, except way more potent.

"I'm off!" Jake yelled as he sprinted – only a few seconds having passed since she was teleported away.

Jake used One Step Mile faster than ever before as he pushed Limit Break to 20%. He flashed across the rather flat ground of Yalsten, and he even felt how it was easier to travel here than anywhere else. Space was more fragile and bent more than before.

The wind carried him forward, too, making it all easier and faster. The terrain passed him by in flashes, and within only a handful of minutes, he was close. It didn't take much longer before he felt like he was close enough. He took a step that sent him slightly airborne as he drew his bow. While still in the air, he drew his bow, nocked a stable arcane arrow, and as time slowed down, he charged the Arcane Powershot, his vision amplified just enough to see the head of the Monarch far in the distance.

An explosion ravaged the area around him, but he had barely released the string till he took another step – the just-fired arrow passing over his head just as he landed. He kept running and squinted as he saw the Monarch far in the distance. He was holding Carmen by the neck, and Jake reacted.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated as the Monarch froze. The boss vampire was frozen just long enough for his arrow to pierce into the side of the vampire's head and blast the vampire away. With another five steps, he appeared right beside Carmen, who was falling limp to the ground, and two steps more placed him right in front of the Monarch, which he proceeded to kick in the head, making the arrow pierce through and out the other side – straight through the brain.

No way he thought it would be lethal... but it had to hurt like hell, didn't it? Besides, poison on the brain was never fun.

Jake wasn't done yet either. He drew his scimitar and cut at the Monarch a few times, it having been soaked in his own blood to poison the boss.

To his credit, the Monarch reacted fast. He used one hand to blast at Jake and the other to pull out the arrow in a pained groan. Jake dodged the blast by using another One Step Mile and appeared right behind the vampire and tried to cut his head off. His scimitar was sadly blocked as he failed to sever the spine, it having been magically reinforced.

Finally, the Monarch managed to get him off as he grasped the blade and used it to make Jake choose against losing the weapon or be thrown off – he chose the latter. Jake flew in the direction of Carmen and used one Step Mile as he went over to her, as he didn't want to give the vampire any chance to finish her off.

He looked at her form as she kneeled and breathed heavily, her entire body weak. She tried to stand back up, but her legs wobbled, and she fell to the ground, her eyes barely open as she tried to stay conscious.

"I believe that is one opponent down," the Monarch said as Carmen lay unmoving due to the curse, now truly forcing Jake to relocate her to relative safety.

#### Chapter 335: Treasure Hunt: Paths

Jake stood defensively in front of Carmen as the Monarch looked at him. The others would be arriving, but it would still take a bit. Carmen had closed her eyes, and Jake felt like her energy had become calmer, making him think she had passed out.

"You have no need for concern. I possess no desire to slay her or you for that matter; I merely need to win and make you leave," the Monarch said casually.

"Yeah... don't fault me for not trusting you," Jake answered, totally fine with talking for now. "Also... you said earlier you sealed off the entrances to this realm. Does that mean no vampires escaped Yalsten?"

The Monarch gladly answered, for some reason not in a rush either, or maybe he genuinely wanted Jake to know the answer. Or maybe, just maybe, it was the gaping hole in his stomach with wriggling flesh trying to heal. "Some did make it out beforehand. Quite a lot, actually. Yalsten also was only one of many places where we vampires lived, just one more sealed off than most others, hence a great refuge and easier to defend from outsiders."

"To be honest, I would find it odd if an entire race just died off like that. I have a feeling the system or at least interested parties wouldn't want that."

"I would agree under normal circumstances... but the vampiric race is not a naturally-occurring one. It is difficult to say to begin with if the system cares for the survival of any race, and as for allies and interested parties... the Malefic Order was one of them," the vampire said as he shook his head.

"Yeah... again, the Order could be filled with vampires, and I wouldn't know. I've never been there or met any members of the Order, for that matter. At least not any normal members," Jake explained.

"...How has the Chosen of the Malefic Viper never been in the Order or met anyone from it?"

"Eh, it's complicated, but as the universe is newly integrated and all that, I haven't had a chance to go anywhere and have only met him a few times. We do speak quite often, though," Jake kept explaining, not really caring that much about giving information out.

Jake wasn't leaving the Hunt, so either he would kill the Monarch or the Monarch would kill him. Either scenario would end in whatever he said not mattering. Also... he didn't really care.

"You speak directly with the Malefic One?" the vampire asked after trying to figure out who 'him' was, being more and more confused.

"On a regular basis, yeah. The last time we met in person, it was to do some alchemy and chill together with him and Duskleaf. We had a good time. The time before that, we had beers and talked about life and all that," Jake kept saying, dealing mental damage with every sentence.

"..."

The Monarch just kept staring at him, Jake staring back. Carmen lying on the ground was apparently still conscious, and her pained face had changed to one very visibly saying: "what the fuck?"

Yeah, he had actually assumed she had passed out. Turned out she hadn't. Well then... Nah, it should be fine.

It wasn't like him, and the Viper being buddies was a secret anyway, and he didn't see it causing any problems. Even if it did, he would deal with those problems whenever they arose. There was no reason to make things more difficult than they were. He would just keep things simple and take the complications as they come. Same as always.

Luckily he didn't have to keep narrating about himself as reinforcements arrived.

Black lightning stuck down beside him as Caleb appeared, electricity running across his body. The Monarch regarded him as Caleb asked Jake: "What happened?"

"Curse."

Jake didn't need to explain anything more as Caleb threw him a glance. Jake nodded in response as they moved simultaneously. The brothers went in opposite directions, with Caleb picking up Carmen and Jake engaging the vampire. Not fighting was what Jake would have preferred... but they had both felt it.

While the Monarch may speak the truth about not caring about killing Carmen, he sure as hell did want to kill Caleb. At least his killing intent flared as he looked at the younger of the two brothers.

“Just a shot in the dark, but let me guess that the Court of the Shadows were on the anti-vampire side?” Jake asked as he appeared in front of the vampire. He only had his scimitar after the destruction of the Nanoblade, so that would have to do for now.

The Monarch responded by blocking his weapon and paused as he simply held Jake in a standstill. “The Holy Tyrant and her slaves, together with the undead, were our true enemies, but the Court of Shadows sure happily took payment from both to speed up the genocide.”

Jake was pushed back as the Monarch got free and tried to turn into mist again, but Jake quickly used Gaze as he froze the vampire for a brief moment. He engaged again, noticing that the Monarch took it relatively slow at the moment. Maybe because of that entire gaping hole-situation in his stomach.

Yeah, that was probably it. Carmen’s ultimate attack had left quite the injury, and Jake had to admit it was powerful. Likely as strong as a fully charged Arcane Powershot with an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, if not stronger. Which made sense, considering it was a skill that had clearly left her severely drained afterward, while for Jake, it was just a bit of mana and stamina gone.

The wound left by Jake firing an arrow through the guy’s head had already healed like it was never there. Probably still did some good damage, but the vampiric race’s durability and natural regeneration skills were honestly quite insane.

“It has been a long time, not sure it makes sense to judge the current factions for crimes of the past,” Jake argued, mainly just trying to waste time. He had left a Mark on Caleb and Carmen both to keep track of them.



The Monarch held out his hand as blasts of blood magic was released, Jake dancing in between them while the boss answered: "Perhaps, but just as the Will of the True Ancestor echoes true so many eras later, so does the will of Umbra, the Holy Tyrant or the Blightfather. While the mortals may have changed, perhaps even the Pantheons underwent a transformation... those ancient gods are still in command. Their power is unshakeable because their will is unchanging in principle. Their paths are set in stone, so to not blame someone for choices made in accordance with their path only shows your inexperience."

Jake frowned as he dodged the final beam as Jake stopped up. "People do change, no matter how ancient. The gods you know of are now more than tens of times older or something like that. That should be plenty of time for at least minor character developments."

"Hah, truly words of naivety. It surprises me you know so little of how the world works. They became gods because they followed their paths. They remain the most powerful because they keep following their path. Their path is the deepest creed they follow, their very fundamental principle of life. Their meaning. If your dedication to your path was so weak that something such as time could change, they would have never become gods or stayed powerful, to begin with," the Monarch explained.

"Even if a basic principle does not change, so can many other things. There is nuance to everything," Jake countered, more just to argue than anything else. He was out of his depth, and he knew it. He had never understood that entire paths thing entirely... he was just argumentative.

"The Malefic Viper is a god that believes in freedom through power, that the pursuit of progression and improvement is the only true path of the multiverse. He is uncaring towards most, sees little value in nearly all mortal life, and views those who he deems unworthy as less than insects, not even worth acknowledging the existence of. He will stop at nothing to achieve his goals, and while he may show kindness towards those he has shown interest in, that kindness only extends to them and not anyone else he does not view as valuable. I would bet that even as his Chosen, the Malefic Viper has no interest or sympathy towards your family, friends, or anyone else. To him, they are insects that will become dust in the blink of an eye, forgotten by both of you. You say he is a friend... if that is so, the only reason is that he genuinely believes you will become a god, hence worthy of being seen as someone of value. Anyone that does not at least strive with all of their heart to attain immortality is but blips on the canvas

of time. Beings that only exist to be forgotten. That is the Patron you serve. You said a long time has passed... but you also know that every one of my words was as true then as they are now," the Monarch said as he went on a lengthy speech.

Jake stood there, taking it all in... and he couldn't really outright dispute anything. He didn't know if what the vampire said was true or not, especially the second half... but the first half sure was spot-on. The Malefic Viper did seem to care little about mortal life, he viewed killing as natural, and he did treat Jake as equal to him in some ways, and Jake had no delusion to think that wasn't in large part due to his bloodline and potential.

But this did make Jake think... what exactly was his path? What was something so fundamental to him it wouldn't change? For the Viper, it was apparently all about getting stronger all the time or something like that, and while Jake was on board for that, that wasn't really something he would call his path. In fact, just thinking about his path felt like a waste of time. Because while he did like having some conversation once a while... well...

Caleb was far enough now.

And another person had just arrived.

The old man's hair whistled in the wind as he seemed to almost skate across the landscape. His stance was strong, and some faint energy from the slain clones still remained on his sword. Jake felt Sylphie was also not that far behind... but the Sword Saint was faster.

What was even more surprising was that clearly, the old man had heard their talk. Either his perception was stronger than expected or... well, actually, the Monarch did kind of project his voice all-over. The Sword Saint addressed the vampire's words as he stopped right beside Jake.

"I cannot argue with your view of a path, but to make meaning so static shows a rigid mind. Freedom has many forms, and while I do not know this Viper myself, far less what impact of having walked a path for time immemorial can have, then I do know a bit of having walked through life with a single path from start to end. While the fundamental drive and motivation may not change... the person walking it can. His perspective may shift... and his dream be realized through achieving other goals than originally intended," the old man said as he smiled.

Jake looked at the old man and vampire, who stared at each other. One, a vampire with age at least in the thousands, and on the other side, an old human who, even if he was the oldest on Earth, couldn't be more than a hundred and some change.

Yet the Sword Saint gave off the aura of a wise old man far more so than the Monarch. Guess his looks as an old man ain't all for show, Jake joked a bit with himself.

"The goal is always immortality and godhood. It is power. That is the root of all progress. Protecting your clan or the survival of your race, trying to better the world or bring it to ruin, attempting to become known as a saint or a calamity... in the end, it all returns to power. Without power, nothing can be achieved. All else is merely a justification. Power is the ultimate goal, always. At least it is for gods or those who reach the truly high grades, for if you do not pursue power for power's sake... what happens when you achieve your goal? When you do save your clan and ensure its safety? What if it dies out due to something you failed to stop? Does that mean you perish with them? Or do you wish to protect your race forever? An impossible path is a way to ruin just as much as a too unambitious one is. No, in the end, the only true path is the pure pursuit of power for power's sake. In your mind, you may view this as false... but my words will only ring true to you when you fail your breakthrough and hit the wall that is your limit," the Monarch argued with the Sword Saint.

"Perhaps a path you do not view as worthy is merely one not properly explored. Power comes in many forms... do you merely quantify it as levels? Skill rarities? Is there no power in the growth of a group? In the prosperity in your family? In what you build and the legacy that is made to further empower the new generation after you? Perhaps this may not be the path to godhood for the individual... but it may make you a god in spirit when your child, grandchild, or many generations later achieve it, and you will be the one whose shoulder they stood on to reach there," the old man said with a grandfatherly smile.

"I myself have walked this path... for to me, death was merely a fact. In the end, we all die in body, but our souls can attain immortality through history. To become a name that would never be forgotten as long as humanity existed... was the closest to immortality a human could ever come. Some achieved this through good or bad, but all had an impact on the world. They were not remembered for their own power but for what they built, for what they shared, or what they destroyed. Some were monsters, some heroes... but in the end, is godhood not the same? A god has many faces, for, ultimately, they are people. A god that has not left an impact on the world to be remembered by is far less worthy of being viewed as immortalized than a mortal man who will be eternally remembered."

The Monarch looked at the Sword Saint, as Jake also just listened. Through it, he kind of understood the old man's philosophy.. or perhaps his path. At least somewhat.

"Words of someone who will forever stay a pathetic mortal."

"Spoken by he who died as one."

The Monarch's smile instantly faded as Jake just smiled under his breath. That was a damn good burn. One the Monarch really didn't appreciate.

"I think it is time to stop wasting any more time."

With those words, the wound left by Carmen healed nearly instantly. The vampire had clearly focused on getting himself fixed up during the conversation. Sylphie, Casper, and even Eron had also arrived during this time, with Caleb still a good ways away, towards the direction of the Mistless Plains to place Carmen somewhere safe.

The Monarch spread out his arms as the dark red celestial object hanging above began glowing more than before. The light descended towards the many towers spread throughout Yalsten as something was pulled to them. Soon enough, he felt a large blob of blood begin condensing far up in the sky, making Jake guess the Monarch had another trick up his sleeve.

Jake cracked his neck as the old man wryly smiled as he chuckled and readied his sword.

While the Sword Saint may have won in the battle of words, it was now time to begin the battle of killing, Jake thought, instantly regretting what his own mind made up.

Alright... that was bad, and I should feel bad... I suck at this...

For some reason, Jake was fairly certain being a wise old master filled with sage words wasn't ever going to be part of his path.

Chapter 336: Treasure Hunt: Countermeasures

Sven and Jacob stood side by side as healers from both camps surrounded Carmen, who now lay unconscious to preserve her resources and heal faster. She had chosen to pass out, and Jacob had to admit that her perseverance was admirable.

"So?" Sven asked as he stared at the two healers who inspected her.

"The curse is embedded in her veins and throughout her body, both physically and spiritually. It isn't harming her, but..."

“She won’t be able to join anymore fighting?” Jacob asked pointedly.

“Right,” the healer responded with a nod. The other one also concurred while adding. “Trying to heal it as an outsider might do more harm than good, and it looks like it will disappear in its own time within half a day or so.”

Jacob sighed. The Monarch of Blood had been a master of curses before his death, so for him to have such means was only to be expected. These kinds of curses were of an incredibly high level, and Earth simply didn’t have anyone who could deal with them yet. Moreover, Carmen was an ideal target after she used all her temporary boosting skills and was in a weakened state. All the curse effectively did was to extend that weakened state while amplifying it slightly.

“Do you think they will win?” Sven asked Jacob, a worried look on his face. Jacob understood... Carmen was the most powerful person from their faction on the planet and top five overall on Earth. She was powerful, but so were others.

Besides... he knew both he and the undead had more cards up their sleeves.

“I do. Especially if they bring the Monarch back here,” Jacob answered – the magic circle they had hidden now finally ready to be fully activated. He had mentioned the circle to Caleb, and Jake’s brother had promised to pass it on or lead the Monarch back himself.

Looking out over the Mistless Plains, it was just a slaughter of Vampiric Blood Elementals. A near-endless struggle that seemed to just keep going as the creatures reanimated again and again due to the Blood Moon hanging above. Luckily, they also got weaker every time.

Sven looked out over the area with him as he muttered. "If anyone can, it's those two monsters."

Jacob had to agree with that one.

The Sword Saint swept his blade across the ground as it cut upwards, making the Monarch block. An arrow flew right past the old man and hit the Monarch in the stomach, injecting poison and doing plenty of damage.

Blood magic condensed around the vampire, but the old man responded as curtains of water surrounded him. Each of them reflected the images of the blood orbs, and before they had a chance to attack him, the old man cut all of the reflected images, also making the real orbs disperse.

He smiled as he lunged forward, but the Monarch was ready as his weapon suddenly transformed. The Sword Saint was forced to retreat as a long spear suddenly stabbed towards him. The Monarch waved his other hand as a blood-red crystal shield appeared, and he took up a more defensive position.

Jake, who stood behind the two fighting old geezers, and took aim once more as he fired. The vampire blocked with the shield, as he also kept the Sword Saint at bay with the spear.

He shifted things up... Jake thought. He wasn't the most talented when it came to fighting, but he did know that spears tended to be good against swords due to the longer range, especially if one could make sure the other person never got close. If the Sword Saint managed to enter his range, he would have an advantage, but the Monarch didn't let him do that.

Well, normally, he wouldn't, but that is where Jake came in.

Jake took a step as he appeared off to the side, and two more put him at a ninety-degree angle. He began running as he fired arrows, circling the Monarch who was dealing with the Sword Saint. The cocky vampire wanted to block his arrows with a shield? Well, that seemed hard to do from behind.

Something the Monarch clearly also noticed as he was hit with an arrow in the shoulder that held the spear. Another arrow came for the back of his head, but the Monarch summoned a helmet of crystal that was heavily nicked when hit and still made him rattled from the impact.

At the same time, the Sword Saint managed to close in and force the Monarch even more on the defensive. The spear transformed again into a sword as he blocked, but Jake also attacked him at the same time, making him take a few injuries here and there.

It seemed to be going well until suddenly the Monarch grinned. The Sword Saint cut down, and Jake fired an arrow, and both were surprised when they hit. The Monarch was struck in the back of the head with the arrow, the helmet pierced, and the sword nearly bisected the vampire from the shoulder to the groin.

Yet, just at that moment, Jake's danger sense reacted. "GET BA-"

\*BOOM!\*



A shockwave rocked the terrain as an explosion sent the Sword Saint flying back and made Jake summon a barrier of arcane energy in front of him as he was also pushed away. However, the Sword Saint was hit the hardest, and the old man barely managed to stabilize himself as he landed, several wounds now covering his body. All of them pulsing with some odd energy.

Now it was pertinent to mention why Eron, Sylphie, and Casper weren't helping. Well, they were busy. Three new blood clones were now fighting them, but another figure had also suddenly appeared from above. A monstrosity of blood and magic, wriggling and evershifting flesh marred its form. It was an absolute monster.

[Blood Abomination – lvl 160]

It was what had been resurrected by the Sanguine's Blood Legacy item from the nine dead Counts of Blood and the thing that had dropped down from above earlier. It was another unexpected newcomer to mess up their plans and one the Monarch had clearly been waiting on during their whole speech and path discussion.

Speaking of the Monarch of Blood...

When the Monarch had exploded earlier, he had simply switched places with and detonated a blood clone – him now standing right in front of Casper, who had been dealing with three clones.

Casper reacted fast but was still taken by surprise as the blade dug into his body. He gritted his teeth as the curse-energy revolved around him, but the Monarch just smiled as he held out his hand and sent out a faint pulse that dispelled whatever Casper was trying to do.

Just before the Monarch managed to land another hit, his body froze as an arrow arrived. While the Monarch's disappearance was a surprise for sure, it hadn't fooled his Mark and allowed Jake to adapt instantly.

However, this entire interruption had let the clones run wild. The only positive thing was the obvious lack of intelligence in the Blood Abomination, allowing Eron to handle it alone for now. Perhaps the Monarch had some control over it, but clearly, he couldn't spare the mental focus to do so even if it was possible... until he could, as suddenly the Abomination charged for Jake.

With Carmen out of the picture and Caleb still returning, they were rather short-staffed. Sylphie was helping out Eron to keep the damn Abomination busy too before. To call the entire situation frustrating was an understatement, as the Monarch clearly didn't want to just fight Jake... he wanted to kill a select few people - Casper and Caleb clearly among them.

Jake supported Casper as much as he could, but soon the blood clones who were fighting his undead pal before came for him along with the Abomination that luckily Sylphie and Eron held back for now. All of the clones were just getting in the way of his arrows after the first one, giving the hulking monstrosity time to arrive. This seriously isn't good.

The Monarch had wanted to isolate Casper... and he was doing a pretty good job at it. Repeated blasts sent the undead flying further and further away, as Jake could only try and kill the blood clones as fast as possible.

Luckily, he was soon joined by the Sword Saint, who was back on his feet and engaged the clones. He threw Jake a glance, and with a nod, the Saint engaged the Abomination as Jake fought the clones before he took off to follow the Monarch and Casper. All he could do for now was hope Casper could hold on until he arrived.

Casper concurred... this situation wasn't good. His curse magic was repeatedly dispelled, the Monarch having hidden that ability. He repeatedly summoned his pre-prepared wooden shields, but seeing them breaking one by one made it clear he couldn't hold on for long.

Ultimately, Casper was not a fighter but a trapper. He created pre-prepared tools and traps to battle his foes and take them down, but to do that, it required research. Casper had used these ten days primarily to do the Vaults and spent all time in between preparing for this exact fight.

Several modified Stakes, weapons created from the research of the Pure Ones, traps, devices, shields made specifically to battle the blood energy of vampires... all of it ultimately faltered before superior power. Without Lyra lending him her power, he would have been downed already.

"We need to use it,"

Lyra stated in his head. Casper groaned as he blocked, sending him flying even further away from everyone.

"If we-" Casper tried to argue but was interrupted both by Lyra and a beam of blood that penetrated his chest and sent him tumbling even further back. A follow-up beam nearly severed his arm as he registered Lyra's voice.

"NOW!"

Casper was blasted back one more time and only had time to react because Jake fired an arrow at the Monarch from far off in the distance, forcing the vampire to redirect his attention momentarily. Focusing his energy, Casper activated a seal as his locket began glowing.

“Blightform.”

His flesh began melting as the white bones were revealed beneath, and at the same time, Lyra came out of the locket as her body superimposed upon his. Power surged through Casper as he felt himself transform. This was their ultimate weapon and their most potent temporary boosting skill.

Soon, all of the flesh on his body was gone, and Casper had transformed into a lich-like creature with ghastly eyes and the blight energy revolving around him as his entire body glowed. The Monarch looked his way as Casper held out his hand and released a beam of pure blight energy.

The Monarch turned to mist to avoid it as Casper prepared another attack with the intent to-

“Ah, blight,” the vampire suddenly said with a huge smile as he appeared off to the side. “A potent affinity that is difficult to grasp even to me... much less you... one used to kill countless vampires.”

The Monarch made four clones all around him as they spread out in a circle. Casper tried to release another blast to get them away, but he found an odd barrier covering each of them.

“Is it not only to be expected we made countermeasures?”

All of the clones exploded at once as a giant spherical magic circle was created all around him. Casper’s eyes opened wide as he tried to release an attack but found his blight magic completely ineffective. Soon after, his vision began blurring as the magic circle truly powered up until he was entirely blinded.

“Casper... what’s happening? I can’t see anything...”

Casper was truly panicking now. He still felt his body, but nothing else. Blightform made him rely entirely on magical senses as he lost all the usual biological ones, but now it didn’t work. Instead, he felt the burning blight on his body suddenly dim as he weakened.

He needed to escape. He tried moving to the side, but he didn’t know if it worked. He couldn’t feel anything. There was no way of knowing if he had moved or just stayed where he was. There was no way to know anything besides his own dimming strength as the blight energy began burning out.

Blightform was supposed to be their ultimate attack. A skill that allowed him and Lyra to perfectly fuse and temporarily grant Casper powers far above usual and even allowed him to use the blight-affinity far more liberally than the few skills he was experimenting with.

Yet all this form had done was to make him fall into a trap. The undead had hunted down the vampires in a pro-longed war... perhaps it was foolish to think they had not made up ways to fight it - barriers and spells explicitly made to counter their magic.

“I’m sorry, Lyra... I didn’t see this coming,” Casper told her through their connection. She was no longer able to respond as she was weakened at an even faster pace than he. He innately felt that she couldn’t hold on for much longer, and with her demise, so would he most likely die. Perhaps he would have a faint chance of surviving... but that wasn’t a life he would want to live.

Only a bit more time passed before Casper cursed loudly to himself before he activated his Hunter Insignia and left the Treasure Hunt. His only recompense was that at least the treasures he had acquired were brought back to Earth safely. He, along with most others, had given their treasures to someone else from their faction before this final battle began to have it be teleported out during the grace period, as they all knew it was a risk to stay.

He had just never expected to be forced to leave like this.

An arcane explosion consumed the terrain as the Monarch was pushed back. He summoned orbs of blood to impede Jake, but he merely stepped down twice as he appeared off to the side with the first and right behind the Monarch with the second.

His entire body burned with stamina as he pushed himself even harder than before, his eyes filled with anger and annoyance. The vampire reacted to Jake's attack as he summoned a barrier, but Jake's scimitar descended surrounded by dark and arcane mana as he stabbed through it and into the Monarch.

That is when he felt his Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter he had left on Casper disappear. Momentarily Jake was afraid that his old office pal had died, but he quickly noticed that wasn't it. Instead, he had just teleported out... which in itself was also enough to piss him off.

The Monarch had managed to get some distance as the damn Abomination and blood clones had impeded him when he tried to help Casper, allowing the vampire to cast his magic. Jake had only just reached the Monarch again when Casper was encapsulated by the sphere, and the moment he was, the entire sphere disappeared – teleported back to where he had fucking teleported away with Carmen last time. In other words, it was a way too long distance away that Jake had no way of reaching.

If he did so, then Sylphie, the Sword Saint, and the recently returned Caleb would be screwed. The entire situation was so fucking frustrating as Jake felt like the Monarch actively tried to avoid fighting him as the vampire instead picked off the others.

“Just fucking fight me,” Jake growled as he pushed his blade into the chest of the vampire.

The Monarch looked up at him as he smiled. “That wouldn’t be in my best interest. I have a mission, same as you.”

An explosion of blood meant to send Jake flying back came out of the Monarch. Jake, however, was done. Scales of the Malefic Viper covered his body as the blood energy washed over him, and instead of blowing him off, he just leaned in closer.

“It wasn’t a request,” Jake said as he infused even more mana into his presence as mana bolts condensed all around him and the Monarch.

“Truly the Chosen of the Malefic One,” the Monarch answered with an impressed tone. “I admit, I legitimately have no confidence in defeating you. But-”

The vampire suddenly ripped himself free, allowing Jake’s scimitar to rip through his flesh. Quickly, Jake released his stable arcane bolts as they flew forward, penetrating the body of the Monarch. The vampire took the blows, and his body began glowing red as he sped away far more swiftly than Jake expected.

“-you cannot contain me either.”

Jake cursed under his breath as he chased after the vampire who had changed his target yet again, this time going for Caleb, who was helping the others deal with the Abomination. After the Monarch had given the monster new instructions, it no longer bothered only fighting Eron and Sylphie but had forced the Sword Saint to join in and fight it, with Caleb also coming. Primarily he had done so due to how Jake was dealing with the Monarch quite well at the time.

Caleb, to his credit, noticed he was the next target and reacted instantly.

“Ascension of Tenlucis.”

For a moment, the red sky darkened as lightning stuck down, and an all-encompassing pressure covered the area – perhaps the entirety of Yalsten – for a brief moment before all returned to normal.

The only target of the lightning strike was Caleb himself as his form emerged shrouded in it. Yet, he did not engage the Monarch directly but began flying back in the direction towards the Mistless Plains. Jake followed close behind while the others stayed to finish off the Abomination.

I fucking hate team battles.

Chapter 337: Treasure Hunt: Holy Blade

Jacob opened his eyes as he exited his brief meditation. He felt the currents of fate, and he knew that the Monarch of Blood was coming towards the plains. Of course, detecting anything was hard with all of the people present in the Treasure Hunt, but he at least could read something that simple.

He used a skill to swiftly contact Bertram and his team, telling them to retreat from fighting the Vampiric Blood Elementals while also tossing a quick message to the undead through tokens they had exchanged. The parties out fighting had a rotation of sorts in place for people to retreat and regenerate, and with Sven and the people from Valhal recently rejoining the battle, Bertram and the others had more space.



It didn't take long for Bertram to make it back, joined by the healer of his party. The swordsman, Maria the archer, and their caster had stayed behind to finish off some more elementals before returning themselves. But that was fine, for Jacob only really needed Bertram.

"They are returning?" Bertram asked, some concern in his voice.

"Yes, they are. It is time to use the Holy Sword," Jacob stated. His guardian gravely nodded as he knew what it meant. They went over to the ritual grounds as Jacob saw the people who stood around the ritual circle.

"My friends, our time has come," the Augur said as he went into the middle of the ritual and, out of his spatial storage, took a weapon. It was a gilded sword that seemed to be made of pure gold. He didn't hesitate to stab it into the ground at the center of the circle as holy energy breathed to life. He hurried out of the circle as he motioned for the ritualists to begin the infusion.

There were fourteen people in total. All of them had barely reached D-grade and, under normal circumstances, would have little reason to remain when they were given a chance to leave the Hunt. They were individuals who had only just reached D-grade through a final push of resources, and many of them would likely never even reach mid-tier of D-grade.

So... this was for the best.

The ritual began as they all kneeled, and Jacob closed his eyes as he summoned his lantern and held it out.

"Thank you."

One by one, the fourteen ritualists collapsed as the holy energy in the ritual circle intensified. Bertram stood solemnly beside him, Jacob knowing the man disapproved. However, Jacob stayed determined that this was for the best.

Wisps of light came from each of the bodies as they entered his lantern – at least their souls saved to be given entrance to the Holy Realm where their lives would continue in some form. It was the least they could do for those who sacrificed their lives for the Holy Church.

When the final ritualist lay dead on the ground, the ritual circle collapsed in-upon itself as the sword was fully infused and ready. Jacob Identified it as he sighed, glad that at least it was a significant success.

[Holy Sword (Ancient)] – A blade infused with intense holy energy, forged by a talented blacksmith with unquestionable faith in the Holy Church. The sword has been further elevated through a sacrifice of faithful believers to infuse the blade with further power and Records. Using the blade will grant the user incredible holy power for a limited time at the cost of their own life. Due to the intense holy energy in the blade, it can only be used once. Enchantments: Holy Ascension.

Requirements: Soulbound

“I don’t like this,” Bertram said, vocalizing his distaste of what they were doing. Jacob understood. It seemed unsightly from the moral perspective of the pre-system world. But... things had changed. Life had less value than before, and sometimes the best destiny was to at least die for the greater good of others.

“Do not speak ill words of those privileged to ascend before others,” Noor, the priestess and healer of Bertram’s party said.

“It is fine,” Jacob soothed her, continuing. “The choice was ultimately theirs, the same as the choice is yours if you want to wield the blade or not.”

“Not much of a choice when I am the only one who can be resurrected,” Bertram countered but walked forward nevertheless till he stood before the Holy Sword, ready to claim it.

Jacob conceded that one, as Bertram truly was the only one who could use it, outside of maybe the swordsman Lucian. However, Bertram would undoubtedly be the best, as his toughness allowed him to wield the Holy Sword longer than anyone else.

Truly, for anyone else to wield it would be a waste and potentially make the sacrifices of all those involved in its creation in vain.

Now, Jacob had considered many times if this was even worth it, much less required to defeat the Monarch of Blood.

To answer the question, if it was required, then the answer would likely be no. Jake, the Sword Saint, and all of the others could likely defeat the vampire without the Holy Church even doing anything. However, ultimately this didn’t matter due to the answer to the second question.

Was it worth it? Most definitely.

There were few chances to so directly contribute to the community more than in an event like this in the multiverse. Jacob was fully aware that a single talented person being uplifted was worth more than ten ordinary people getting benefits. In this way, their deaths would directly contribute to Bertram gaining a higher level of contribution against the Monarch of Blood, netting him a better reward, and through that, ultimately making the Holy Church on Earth even stronger as a whole.

Reality was simply cruel like that. Jacob – or Bertram, for that matter – didn't have to like it, but they did have to adapt to it. A fact that at least Bertram accepted. It did help that the Holy Church had ways to still keep people alive in some form by allowing them to pass on to the Holy Realm.

His thought process was interrupted as he saw the dark sky in the distance and the approaching aura of the Judge, AKA Jake's brother. Swiftly, he took out a small token and sent a message to the undead faction, communicating for them to be ready as he tossed Bertram a look.

"The time has arrived."

A high perception stat was great. Jake loved being able to see far away usually, but sometimes it just led to more frustration.

He was flying and using One Step Mile as he chased Caleb and the Monarch, who were both flying at incredible speeds back towards the Mistless Plains. The Monarch was slightly faster and intermittently clashed with his brother, but luckily Caleb could handle himself in his current boosted form.

It also helped that whenever the Monarch did manage to touch Caleb, his claws just seemed to phase through the dark lightning mage, not truly injuring him. Jake was aware this situation was only momentary, and after only a few minutes, Caleb was beginning to get a little bit slower, showing his boosting skill was beginning to weaken.

This did allow Jake to get slightly closer and even fire off a quickly-charged Arcane Powershot here and there. His eyes were also hurting from using Gaze of the Apex Hunter, every use of it allowing either one of his arrows to hit or for Caleb to smash the Monarch back a bit with his staff.

Luckily, they soon got close to the Mistless Plains. The Monarch did try to summon a clone or two and send them after Jake, but he just ignored them as he flew past or used One Step Mile, showing that the Monarch wasn't the only one who could act like a little bi...

Anyway, when they got close, Jake saw the fighting in the distance between the humans and the Vampiric Blood Elementals. He saw far fewer on both sides, making it clear a lot of humans had either died or been forced to leave due to the prolonged battle.

He also noticed that some Ekilmares had joined in on the fun at some point but had been swiftly slain. No doubt they had still contributed to the chaos of it all. Honestly, this entire final phase of the Treasure Hunt had just been a fucking mess, and Jake would have preferred if he could just have fought the Monarch alone. But, sadly, things hadn't worked out like that.

Jake kept following and firing potshots and saw that Caleb had slightly changed his direction with a clear target in mind. Frowning, Jake wondered what the plan was... an answer that came just a moment later.

A large figure of pure ghastly light raised itself towards the sky right behind Caleb as he flew by, separating him and the vampire, surprising both Jake and the Monarch. Countless chains suddenly shot out of the hooded phantasmal figure, with the Monarch trying to turn to mist and get away, but at that moment, Jake felt like something had changed in the environment. His one One Step Mile failed, and so did the vampire's escape as the chains connected to his body and pierced into his body.

They didn't appear to actually interact with his flesh but simply phased through it and held him in place. The Monarch tried to release a blast of energy, but it failed. Before he could do anything more, a pillar of light shot up, this one of pure, holy light.

Jake felt a familiar aura from the light, and a moment later, it subsided and merged with a person who flew upwards. Glowing wings of holy light were on his back as his entire body was covered in similarly golden heavy armor. In his hand, the person wielded a shining blade that made Jake's danger sense react as he became clear that the weapon wasn't simple at all.

Bertram was behind the armor and wielded the blade as he attacked. The Monarch reacted with clear concern at the approaching figure. Armor of red crystals covered him, and he also summoned a multi-layered barrier as quickly as he could.

However, it all quickly proved in vain. The holy blade tore through the barriers and impacted the vampire's armor, sending large parts flying off together with blood and gore. The first slash broke the armor on his chest, the second cut off a blocking forearm, and the third one tore through the shoulder and down to just where the heart was supposed to be.

Every attack released shockwaves of light and burning holy power that ravaged the terrain around Bertram and the Monarch, and even the ground below looked scorched. Every attack was more powerful than Jake's fully charged Arcane Powershots. Jake didn't idle during this time but split his attention. Trying to attack would prove meaningless, but that didn't mean he couldn't prepare as he held out his hand and began channeling Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, never taking his eyes off the two fighting figures.

Not even five seconds had passed since Jake became aware of Bertram before he noticed something that didn't seem right. The armor on Bertram was already beginning to fade, and when it did so, Jake saw the glowing veins spreading all over his face as the skin around it flayed.

He is overloading his body...

It was like when Jake pushed Limit Break far further than ever intended during the fight with the King of the Forest, except with even more potent energy. The holy energy clearly came from the sword, and Jake was absolutely clear that whatever was happening couldn't be stopped. Whoever chose to use that weapon would die doing so.

Bertram didn't seem to let it bother him as he kept attacking, likely due to the bullshit powers of Jacob allowing him to resurrect him. A bullshit combo, actually. The Monarch was lined with golden cuts, his entire body filled with holy energy. For the first time, Jake saw the Monarch truly be stressed and filled with anger as he visibly bared his sharp teeth and appeared to almost hiss at the golden warrior.

Blood energy exploded out as his hair was raised, and his eyes began glowing an even deeper color than before. The forearm and hand that had been cut off regenerated as the vampire attacked back, tearing off a large part of Bertram's armor. Bertram countered by cutting a leg off the vampire, with the Monarch going for even more. The Monarch released a massive beam of energy that cut Bertram apart at the stomach – his legs falling to the ground below, not even able to hit it before the holy energy turned them to nothing.

The man seemed entirely careless as he raised the holy sword above his head. The Monarch attacked again and stabbed a large spear through Bertram's chest just before the already-dying man released the final attack.

"Judgement's Fall."

For but a moment, it felt like the entire Treasure Hunt was enveloped in light, as the faint mirage of a six-winged angel appeared behind Bertram. The blade extended as it grew, and the man cut down. Jake

didn't see exactly what happened next as everything flashed, and an explosion of holy light pushed him and everyone else back.

It was like a new sun had appeared, and without his high perception, Jake would have been blinded. The aura of Bertram disappeared with the appearance of the explosion as his body was unable to handle the power he had just deployed.

But...

Light subsided as the sky returned to normal, and in the air, the spectral chains from the undead, as well as all traces of Bertram, were gone. All that remained was a tattered robe with what looked like wriggling flesh within.

For a moment, Jake wondered if the Holy Church had actually managed to do it, but his senses told him otherwise. His intuition once more proved correct as the vampire's form was revealed beneath the robe. He lived but was far from fine.

A long golden scar now went him the top of his head and down to his one thigh, crossing over the already present mark left by Carmen's fist. His entire body was a mess, and he was even weaker than before. Both legs were gone, only one arm remaining that just dangled uselessly. It was the perfect time to strike.

"Thunderfall of Tenlucis."



At that very moment, a figure dropped from far above. The Monarch barely had time to look up as Caleb descended and passed right through him like a living thunderbolt. A shockwave of dark electricity was released as Jake once more found himself slightly pushed back.

However, he didn't miss the opportunity as he raised his bow and channeled Arcane Powershot while flying back. Then, before the blast from Caleb's blow had even subsided, he released his own attack as the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was released.

It flew true as the Monarch once more failed to respond, and the arrow sunk into his body, sending him tumbling back. Jake had nearly expected a notification from that... but the vampire still lived. He quickly followed up as he activated his Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter charge, making the vampire flash up one more time.

No mercy was shown by anyone else as attacks began arriving from all over the plains. Sultan fired from his ship, arrows, bolts, beams, and all manners of ranged attacks bombarded the already battered form of the Monarch. Although individually, most of these were too weak to truly do anything, combined, they still had to add up. Under usual circumstances, the Monarch would have dodged them easily, but he was in no condition to currently.

Jake nocked an arrow to keep attacking but stopped at the final moment. On the tip of his arrow, he saw a reflection of the moon above. He looked up in shock and saw the moon looked different.

An eye stared down upon Yalsten from above.

The eye of the Monarch.

Jake stared back as the red glow of the eye intensified, and the voice of the Monarch of Blood echoed all around him.

“Color of Night.”

And the world turned the palette of blood:

Sanguine.

Chapter 338: Treasure Hunt: A Final Fight

“Iskar, I pass on the responsibility to you,” the leader of Yalsten said as the vampire handed him the necklace in his cupped hands. “Know that even if Yalsten is to fall, the Legacy cannot enter the hands of the Church or the undead. No matter what.”

Iskar nodded as he accepted it. He stared at the beautiful item with the Legacy Blood of the True Ancestor within. An item more valuable than his entire world and the lives of all of them combined. Iskar closed his eyes in reverence, storing the Legacy as he prepared to send it somewhere safe. Even back then, he felt its influence on him, but he accepted it. No, he welcomed it.

The leader never returned after that, slain by the Holy Church in battle. All of the other Kings fell one by one, too, leaving only Iskar left as he desperately tried to save his world. They starved. The Bloodless Night left them all starving as they were now forced to feed to survive. He tried to fix it... but the ritual failed. In the end, he was forced to seal off his own world and kill his own kin to keep them hidden.

All to protect the necklace.

He was brought back to the present, the memories flashing through his mind. Reminding him of why he was there.

Iskar, the Monarch of Blood, stood in what had once been Yalsten, a massive world filled with billions of proud and powerful vampires, now crumbling to nothingness all around him. He stared up at the bloody moon. He felt his own weak body breaking like the world around him. Iskar wasn't sure if there was much sense in struggling... but he had a task. A final mission entrusted to him by the True Ancestor. Or was it simply the system that made him think so?

He didn't know, and it didn't matter. The Monarch smiled as pain ravaged his body, and he spoke. Not a single trace of regret in his mind.

"Color of Night."

Jake had felt it before. For a brief moment, an aura dominated the entire Treasure Hunt, one so powerful none of them could resist. Below, the Earthlings fell to their knees against their will, the pressure not allowing them to fight back in any way.

He saw Jacob fall down, all of the members of the Noboru clan, the surviving fighters. Only two humans stood standing from the pressure – the Thayne brothers. Jake felt the aura was similar because he had felt it many times before.

It was the aura of a god.

Yet as soon as it appeared, it was gone again. But the echoes of what had been remained. Also, while the aura had disappeared... the true effect of the skill had not. A dark red color hung over everything as they bathed in the sanguine light of the moon.

Then, Jake felt something was off. His scales absorbed mana, despite him not feeling like anything attacked him. He wondered what was happening until he heard screams from below. Looking down, he saw several of the weaker people in the larger camps fall to the ground as blood seeped out of their skin.

Within a few seconds, it multiplied as the humans began bleeding from every orifice and even out of their skin, sending tens of thousands of tiny droplets flow upwards. Even the undead began letting out black blood.

It wasn't only the humans and Risen who were affected. The remaining Vampiric Blood Elementals also began dissolving as they floated upwards, all of them heading partly towards the moon and another part towards the Monarch of Blood.

As if hundreds of rivers of blood formed, it all funneled into him and the moon. Humans below began making barriers, and the Holy Church activated some magic to try and defend themselves, but it was far from enough.

In less than a minute, hundreds of D-grade humans died or fled the Treasure Hunt – more than 80% of those who remained. Jake looked down and saw Neil and his party together with Sultan, and he hurried over to them as he saw Silas struggle.

He had a strong feeling attacking the Monarch or the moon would be completely useless right now, so he chose to help those from Haven instead. Jake touched down as he spread out his hands and infused a bit of mana into his presence as he erected an arcane barrier in the area. It was a bubble more than ten

meters across, and in not that long, it was entirely filled with people who took refuge under it – courtesy of Neil teleporting them in to save them.

Caleb had flown down to the rest of the Court and protected them, but soon enough, Neil also teleported them over. Reika also activated a powerful barrier as she defended herself and others. People everywhere around the Mistless Plains did what they could to survive, but the death toll was still high.

Jake sent a message to Sylphie and got confirmation that she and everyone else at the Abomination were fine. The Abomination had apparently gone into some berserker rage as the red light hit it, and the Sword Saint, she and Eron, were handling it. Honestly, it was expected as all of them were powerful enough to fight the magic currently deployed by the Blood Moon. Especially Sylphie and her overpowered Green Shield thing.

Seconds passed by as the Treasure Hunters on Earth simply tried to survive. On the other hand, the Monarch was having the blood channeled into him as his broken body began regenerating at a rapid pace. If Jake's guess was correct, then the moon absorbed the blood to keep the spell going, and with the supply cut off, it would be forced to end in not that long.

The only problem with this was the many blood elementals still being absorbed even after all the affected humans were either protected, dead, or teleported out. A few humans here and there still failed to keep up their defenses and found themselves exposed, but it was few and far between, and they often just teleported out right away using the Hunter Insignia.

Jake just looked on as he maintained the barrier. He didn't need it himself, but he was fine keeping others safe. Could he have perhaps interrupted the regeneration or something like that? Potentially... but he didn't want to. He wanted to see what this final skill or ritual or whatever it was called was all about.

Finally, after the entire thing had been going on for over five minutes, the Blood Moon began dimming slightly, and the constant funnel of blood from the elemental finished as there was nothing more to feast on. The forces of Earth were in shambles, and just when Jake thought it was over, the eye on the Blood Moon opened as wide as it could and the iris became a narrow slit.

A new kind of pressure appeared, pressing down on everyone within Yalsten. A mix of magic and the same god-like presence before.

Jake dispelled his arcane barrier, and those around him looked sluggish and barely able to move, many even falling to their knees once again. He exchanged a glance with Caleb, who stood beside him, his brother breathing heavily as his boosting skill had long expired.

"I'm spent," he said with a smile.

Nodding, Jake stepped forward and summoned his wings. The pressure didn't affect him, and even if it could, his scales would have kept it out. He felt the blood magic inherent in the pressure and how it was almost physical. It was almost as if people's own blood made everyone heavier, making only a handful of humans able to move. Even Jacob was completely downed.

Jake jumped and flew upwards. He stopped in the air not far from the Monarch. The vampire stared up at the Blood Moon and didn't even look his way as he spoke to Jake.

"I made a lot of mistakes, you know?" he said, and for the first time, his voice was not infused with willpower. Instead, he just spoke normally, and his voice sounded far less imposing than before.

He finally turned to Jake, continuing. "Some parts of me think that the True Ancestor knew a day like this would come. Everything I have done, I did to fulfill the mission I had been given. It took far longer than anyone could expect back then... but I believe that today I will finally complete that mission."

At the same time, Jake got the message that the Sword Saint was coming back towards the Mistless Plains together with Sylphie. The Abomination had collapsed along with Eron the moment the pressure appeared, with only Sylphie and the old man able to keep moving.

It was odd. Jake was completely unaffected, and below he saw Carmen sitting up unbothered with a sweat-covered Sven right beside her, unable to do anything. Reika also managed to stay upright, but everyone around her couldn't. It wasn't a scale of suppression... it was either-or. Jake felt absolutely nothing.

"What is this pressure?" Jake asked the Monarch, genuinely curious.

The Monarch smiled as he gladly explained. "Judgement. Only those deemed worthy can stand and are allowed to keep participating."

Jake looked up at the moon. "A test of some sort related to the Legacy of Sanguine?"

"Exactly," the vampire confirmed. The two of them stood there a bit longer, just staring up the moon, neither in a rush to begin what would no doubt be the final battle.

"All those unaffected are worthy, and I must say I am surprised there are so many. You being worthy is obviously no surprise, but for three more to be too? Truly a surprise. Ah, with two more coming, it seems."

Jake had obviously already felt them. The Sword Saint and Sylphie reached his side not long after, the Monarch not making any moves. He looked wholly healed, with not a single wound left from their fight... but Jake felt he was weaker. Everything had taken a toll. Jake and the Sword Saint weren't at full power either, but they weren't that weakened, just a bit tired and potentially low on resources. However...

"Sylphie," Jake said to the bird.

She looked at him and understood. At this point, she was only posturing, and Jake knew she was barely running on fumes. Sure, she had a few good attacks left in her, but he would rather not risk it. Sylphie, a bit reluctantly, jumped off his shoulder as she flew down to where Carmen was. Caleb had also joined her, as pretty much all the surviving humans had sought to the same area. None of them could fight, and even those who could stand knew they couldn't truly interfere.

Jake saw the Sword Saint throw a glance down to Reika. Jake agreed. While she was strong, this wasn't a fight she could join.

The Monarch approved of their decision as he summoned his blade and took a defensive position. "Come. Let us finish this."

Both humans took a step at that moment. One of them flew forward, his sword brandished and ready, with the other drawing a bow as he teleported backward and nocked an arrow. Jake took aim and fired, the Monarch ready as blood magic condensed in front of him to block it, as he also moved his blade.



The Sword Saint and vampire exchanged several blows, seemingly even. Jake broke the balance as his arrows flew in, hitting the Monarch or forcing him to divert his attention and block. Black curse magic began revolving around the Monarch as he summoned the otherwise mostly unfused school of magic.

Black tendrils spread all around him, aiming to infect both Jake and the Sword Saint. The old man spun his blade as planes of water appeared and functioned like shields. When the tendrils touched the water, they simply sunk into it like the thickness of the water was far more than it was.

Jake, on the other hand, just teleported away from them, and those he didn't view as worth dodging, he tanked with Scales of the Malefic Viper. He had feared for a moment the scales wouldn't block curses, but that didn't appear to be a problem with the legendary version.

Blood clones then appeared, followed by a lot of the other usual tricks. Some of them flew for Jake while some stayed at the Sword Saint. Shooting them down one by one, Jake also assisted the old man as he bombarded the clones around him.

Their teamwork didn't rely on them knowing how to work together but on trusting the strength of the other one. Jake felt like he understood the Sword Saint well enough despite them having interacted so little. Because even if the old man talked about responsibility and how he did everything for his clan... Jake knew.

The old man enjoyed it. Perhaps not as much as Jake, but the Sword Saint just loved fighting.

That gleam in his eye whenever he clashed with the Monarch, the faint smile that he failed to suppress when the vampire managed to block his blow and counterattack... it was unmistakable. He could swear up and down how everything was for others, but Jake would call bullshit on that any day of the week. The old geezer was a battle junkie, pure and simple.

Jake also grinned as the two clones made it to him, both wielding their weapons. Jake's danger sense activated as one of the clones exploded, while the other one dove through the explosion to attack Jake. In the distance, another clone exploded too. This time it included a teleport as the Monarch appeared right in front of Jake, his blade gone and claws at the ready.

Back at the Sword Saint, the old man had been ready and, unlike last time, managed to cover his body in a faint layer of water, taking the brunt of the impact. Another clone came for him, making him unable to keep up his assault on the true Monarch right away.

Not that Jake needed it. The claw of the Monarch tried to pierce Jake's chest, but he blocked it with his scimitar as he quickly deposited his bow. With the other hand, the Monarch grasped Jake by the shoulder, with Jake also grasping the vampire in kind.

Leaning in, the Monarch tried to bite Jake, and he blocked as he raised his arm, allowing the vampire to bite down on it. Jake, without thinking, did the same as bit into the arm holding him. He felt pure vital energy be drained out of him along with his blood, but he swiftly responded as he channeled mana into Blood of the Malefic Viper.

At the same time, he pumped in venom with his own canines, courtesy of Fangs of the Malefic Viper. Jake had to admit, at that very moment, it would be hard to say who was the vampire and who was the human. However, one thing was clear... the Monarch was the first one to stop. Not because Jake was winning out, but because an old man with a sword tried to cut off his head from behind.

Jake tried to keep him still, even using Gaze of the Apex Hunter, but the Monarch still managed to wrest himself free through a combination of pure physical power and blood magic. Jake was sent tumbling back as the Monarch barely managed to duck as a sword flew overhead, cutting a bit of his hair off.

Using the given space, Jake reequipped his bow and continued his ranged assault. The Sword Saint was now pushing the Monarch again as their melee brawl continued. Jake and the old man exchanged a quick glance, as it was clear they were both enjoying themselves, and amazingly enough, even the losing Monarch didn't seem the least bothered.

Below, everyone just stared on as the two most powerful people on Earth battled the Monarch with a clear advantage. Jake was tired, so was the Sword Saint, but the Monarch was far from healthy either. The humans had spent a long-ass time with boosting skills active, and the Monarch had taken enough blows to kill someone like Jake tens of times over.

In the end, the three monsters battled as Yalsten crumbled around them, all of them having the times of their lives.

Twenty minutes after the final phase began, deciding the winning side couldn't be more straightforward as Jake and the Sword Saint truly proved themselves the two most powerful humans on Earth.

Chapter 339: Treasure Hunt: Vanity & Patience

The Monarch stumbled back, four arrows in his chest and a newly made deep cut that nearly severed one of his arms. He reacted by pulling the arrows out and tossing his sword to the other hand as he barely managed to block a blow from the Sword Saint.

His movements were slower, and he didn't heal as fast anymore. Every action looked draining, and Jake felt how tired the vampire was. However, that didn't mean he stopped as he and the Sword Saint kept pushing the Monarch repeatedly, making the wounds accumulate.

Everything had been pulled out at this point, and the Monarch was clearly out of tricks. At least it seemed so. Jake and the Sword Saint also weren't at their full either, far from it, but they had already won several minutes ago. All three of them knew it.

An understanding had been reached, and the Monarch got the final fight he had wanted.

A final clash sent them flying away from each other, and the Monarch stopped in mid-air. His stance made his exhaustion evident, and anyone could see he was on his last legs. Yet, a smile remained on his lips as he chuckled.

"I genuinely thank you... I never thought I would ever get a chance to experience something like this ever again when I entered slumber," the vampire said as he made a slight bow towards Jake and the Sword Saint.

His body began flaking as his skin peeled off, revealing glowing red energy beneath. At first, Jake thought it was his body had run out of energy to sustain itself, but that was overturned as he felt the Monarch's aura spike.

"Now, if you will allow me a final moment of vanity."

Before Jake or the old man could react, the vampire turned into a blood-red mist and appeared down below in the midst of all of the remaining humans. Jake had a very bad feeling and was about to use Gaze as suddenly the Monarch teleported again – taking every single remaining member of the Holy Church with him, including Jacob and the party members of Bertram. In the final moment, before he disappeared, Jake had placed a Mark on Jacob.

Jake felt his Mark reappear several hundred kilometers away, only to disappear a second later. Jacob's disappeared just a moment before that as he no-doubt left the Hunt. As for the Monarch's Mark, it disappeared not because the Monarch had dispelled it... but because he died.

\*You have slain [Monarch of Blood– lvl 170] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 141 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 136 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 142 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 143 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points\*

\*'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 137 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points\*

The levels came in as confusion struck him for a brief moment. At least that is until he saw the red light in the distance.

An earthquake hit the entire Treasure Hunt as space shattered, and a massive shockwave of pure energy washed over him and everyone else present. It was by far the most powerful display of power Jake had ever seen by anything since back during the-

At that moment, it felt like so many things happened at once. The notifications from the kill, the shockwave of power, the realization of what the Monarch had done in his final moments, and the feeling he suddenly got from within himself... or perhaps more accurately, what was connected to his inner-self through the mask on his face.

The first thing he addressed was the thing on his face. Jake ripped his mask off as he stared down at it. The only lucky thing was that no one was looking with the Monarch's final moment of vanity taking away all of the attention. He stared down at the mask as he got heard a faint murmur in his mind. A familiar voice he had heard many times before whenever he was too deep in meditation or distracted as he remembered the most hectic fight he had ever been in.

"Patience."

It was a single word, but enough for Jake to go on full alert. Eron had dropped not-so-subtle hints. The description described the King slumbering... but now it was confirmed. The King of the Forest still lived, at least in some form. He identified the mask and instantly spotted the change.

[Mask of the Fallen King (Legendary)] - A mask born from the Records of the one once known as the King of the Forest; a mighty Unique Lifeform that died just as its path began. The mask is made of a wood-like material unique to the lifeform it comes from and does not obstruct vision when worn and regenerates itself from any damage taken. The Fallen King remains within. Enchantments: Living Wood. Passively absorbs mana in the atmosphere, increasing mana recovery rate by a large amount. Increases maximum mana by 25%.

Requirements: Soulbound

"The Fallen King remains within."

That was all the changes to it, and when Jake probed it further, he felt nothing different compared to before. If not for the changed description, he would have been inclined to think that voice earlier was simply his imagination... but something had changed for sure.

Jake wondered why something had happened now, but as he looked back at his level-ups, he understood. The King of the Forest had been level 136. Now, Jake had finally surpassed the level of the first D-grade he had ever killed. He believed that was it, and his intuition was rarely incorrect about such things. His intuition and danger sense didn't give him any negative responses towards the mask either... so he decided to just do what the Unique Lifeform dwelling within his headwear suggested.

He would have patience. Also, there were just too many different things to deal with for now. Hence he just tossed on the mask again and decided to deal with it later after the Hunt. For now, he turned his attention to more urgent matters at hand.

In his final moments, the Monarch had struck back at his hated enemy. With every last shred of his power, he had teleported them away, leaving everyone else unharmed, and detonated himself. It was only a few dozen people, but it was all their elites.

He didn't even bother flying over there as he knew that they had either teleported out or died. That is until he saw a single figure in the distance speed towards the plains surrounded by flames. Jake recognized her as the archer that had been with Bertram, and she flew like a meteor as she crashed down onto the ground. He was impressed she had survived and gotten out and looked down where she had landed. There, he saw her body... which was barely a head and a bit of the upper body. Her entire body was also still on fire.

Just as he considered if he should go help, he noticed that the flames on her didn't seem to injure her. Quite the opposite. They spread as flesh visibly healed, and Jake recognized that she wasn't in need of any help. She had no doubt deployed some very powerful life-saving skill to get her out because even

Jake wasn't confident in coming out of that final suicide explosion from the Monarch without heavy injuries. It would likely even trigger his Moment of the Primal Hunter.

Also... for some reason, Jake couldn't help but chuckle a bit under his breath as he thought about the antics of the Monarch.

"Do share?" the Sword Saint asked with an amused tone.

"Just pretty funny the Holy Church did so much bullshit to get good rewards only to get shafted in the end by a miffed old vampire," Jake said with a shrug.

"I guess fate wasn't on their side," the old man answered in a playful tone.

Clearly, the Sword Saint wasn't a huge fan of the Holy Church in principle either. Additionally, the old man had clearly also gotten quite a few levels, so it made sense he was in a good mood. Now, Jake just wondered what would happen next.

Just as the thought appeared, the world flashed again. Jake and the Sword Saint both looked up as they saw the Blood Moon still hang above. Within a few moments, it shrank to nothing but a small blip, and a beam fired down and stopped right in front of them as a system notification appeared.

Quest completed: Fallen Monarch



The Fallen Monarch, given back his true form as a Monarch of Blood, has been slain as the Treasure Hunters stand victorious. Not only was the ancient vampire defeated, but the Treasure Hunters even passed the test of the True Ancestor. His Legacy is now theirs to claim.

Rewards will be given upon leaving the Treasure Hunt.

Due to the destruction of the world, the Treasure Hunt will end in: 9:41:41

Both of them had skimmed the message as the item appeared before them. A simple-looking necklace with a single marble of blood attached. Yet as the two humans stood there, they both felt the pressure from it, making it obvious it was no simple item. Jake naturally Identified it.

[Sanguine's Blood Legacy (Divine)] – A Legacy item left behind by the first-ever vampire and the creator of the vampiric race, Sanguine.

And it told him nearly nothing.

"Does your Identification yield any useful information?" the Sword Saint asked.

"Just that it is a Legacy item left behind by that Sanguine guy," Jake answered truthfully.

"Same as mine then," the old man said.

The two of them stayed there for a while, just looking at it. An obvious question was before them... who should get it?

Below them, the tomb the Monarch had slept in was utterly destroyed. There was nothing else to be gained from the Monarch, and with the Monarch's self-explosion, there wasn't even any loot from his body to claim. Not that Jake thought there would be anything to begin with. A divine item wasn't a bad reward by itself, was it?

Cutting it in half didn't seem possible either. It looked pretty durable.

"So..." Jake tried to break the ice.

"Quite the conundrum indeed," the old man agreed.

Neither of them made a move to just snatch it up. Jake trusted that the Sword Saint wouldn't do it, and the man extended him the same trust. The problem was... someone needed to. With how the Treasure Hunt worked, anyone could potentially steal it if they delayed.

"I do believe we had a duel planned?" the Sword Saint said as he turned to Jake with his eyebrows raised. "This looks like a good piece to wager."

"Deal," Jake instantly agreed. "Ah, but you can take it for now. Just to temporarily hold onto it."

The old man looked at him and nodded, and at the same time, also waved his hand as items appeared. To his surprise, Jake saw three ancient-rarity coffins and altars, as well as the three weapons from Counts, and even two legendary-rarity items. Clearly gained from Vaults.

“Then you can hold onto my bounty meanwhile. We shall simply reverse the exchange in the event of your victory,” the Patriarch of the Noboru clan agreed.

Jake didn’t look at all the items as he scooped them up, and at the same time, the old man put the necklace inside his Hunter Insignia. Or at least he tried to, but instead, the necklace reacted as it gave off a faint red light, and a figure appeared in front of it. A very familiar one.

“We meet again,” the projected figure said.

“I thought we just killed you,” Jake pointedly stated as he stared at the clear visage of the Monarch of Blood.

“Technically, I killed myself. But, I shall admit, I did not predict this even if I perhaps should have. It seems like I was only revived due to the Legacy and my existence is inherently tied to it,” the Monarch explained. “The will of the True Ancestor remains even after his demise. By his will, I am to serve as a steward of this Legacy and as a guide for its uses, as well as a teacher for any vampires created from it. Ah, yes, one of the abilities of this Legacy is to allow individuals of the enlightened races to become vampires.”

“Oh. Cool, I guess,” Jake shrugged, not voicing his thoughts of how much a demotion it was to go from Monarch to steward. Ah, he should totally call him the Steward of Blood now. Also... vampire

transformation? Jake had to admit, his interest level in that was nearly in the negative. He gave up becoming a half-dragon thing, so becoming a human with sharper canines didn't seem that attractive. He already had Fangs of the Malefic Viper anyway.

"What causes me to be unable to store the Legacy?" the Sword Saint asked, just taking it all in strides.

"My acceptance. I believe it to be a better outcome if the Chosen of the Malefic One obtains it," the newly named Steward of Blood said.

"Nah, we agreed on betting it on a duel," Jake just explained. "I'll get it if I win."

"I did hear your conversation; I merely disagree with such an approach. The Legacy of the True Ancestor isn't something to be wagered so carelessly and is worth more than-

"As I said, we already made a bet. Besides, would it be that bad if the Legacy goes to someone who beat a Chosen?" Jake cut him off.

"No, but if he chooses to renege on the-

"He won't," Jake just stated.

"I also find the insinuation insulting," the Sword Saint chimed in.

“See, all in agreement.”

With a sigh, the Monarch disappeared, not even bothering to argue with the two unreasonable humans. When the Sword Saint tried to deposit the Legacy this time, it went into his Insignia smoothly.

“We got over nine and a half hours until the Hunt ends,” Jake said. “I don’t know about you, but I would prefer to not fight while tired as fuck.”

Having had Limit Break active at 20% for long over an hour was quite draining. Amazingly enough, he didn’t really feel that strained, though. Probably because his body had just gotten a lot stronger, and in general, the strain from Limit Break after reading D-grade was just far less.

“I concur. Let us take this time to recuperate and fight at our best,” the old man agreed.

With that in mind, Jake and the Sword flew down to the ground with all of the others waiting. Caleb, Sylphie, Reika, and Carmen were all sitting on the ground, with the rest also sitting down on the bare soil that had once been covered by the blue grass.

All of them looked at the two of them, and Caleb gave him an approving nod. Jake nodded back and scooped Sylphie as she flew over to him. He placed her on his shoulder, and she didn’t hesitate for even a moment to rub her head against his cheek.

Jake scratched her little head as he sat down on the ground too. There were only a few hundred people left in the entire Hunt, with most having left earlier during the “Color of Night” spell. Surprisingly enough, many of those had now gotten up and made their intentions clear. They said they would try and go explore a bit more of Yalsten before it totally collapsed.

He himself had no interest as he closed his eyes and began his recuperation process, already looking forward to a nice duel with the old man. Nothing better than celebrating a good fight with another fight.

Chapter 340: Treasure Hunt: Limit Shatter

No set time for the duel had been decided, so for now, they all just sat and relaxed as they healed. Jake shared his potions liberally, and no one tried to start anything. Silas and two other healers even joined in to help set up a ritual to help everyone regenerate faster.

Maria, as Jake learned she was named, also came over after her body was done being healed by her flames. That is also when Jake became fully aware she was the maker of his current bow and seemed very interested in how he had quote-unquote “fucked it up” with his transmutation.

All-in-all it was all a very good time, with many of the strongest people on Earth just sitting together and chilling. Jake learned that everyone was pretty cool, and it helped a lot that he had his brother sitting beside him to make him feel more comfortable with the entire situation.

He had always been a good brother when it came to social situations with Jake. The kind of guy to deflect topics Jake wanted to not talk about and keep a conversation going, so it didn’t get awkward. Heck, Jake had a long-standing theory that his brother became so good at dealing with people and a teacher from learning to deal with having Jake as a brother.

The humans talked about a wide variety of topics, most prominently the battle with the Monarch and the general state of Earth. It was a bit odd with the Holy Church not present, but perhaps it was for the best. Because a lot of them had some doubts about the large religion’s intentions.

The undead were also all gone besides two random Risen hanging around for a bit before they left to try and find a few more treasures. Even Priscilla had left at some point without Jake even noticing. The same was true for the guy called Sven and all of those people. Honestly, for many factions, this final phase of the Treasure Hunt had just been a complete disaster, and they likely praised themselves for at least getting all their treasures out beforehand.

They also began sharing some things the nominal leaders would perhaps not be happy to see shared during this time. Well, some were just sharing stuff without a care, like Eron, who was excitedly talking with Silas and two other healers about how to better heal people and how everyone should focus more on pure healing and less on all that supportive magic stuff.

Jake didn't have much to share himself besides some tips on alchemy, but it wasn't something that could really be taught effectively with their limited time. The Sword Saint didn't have much either besides a few words of wisdom. Again, one couldn't really teach others swordsmanship in a few hours. At least not without sparring, and sparring would make the entire restoration process wasted. All of them were dealing with backlash from boosting skills, after all. Well, they were. Jake, right now, was just focusing on restoring his resources.

Speaking of boosting skills. Carmen, who had been blessed by the presence of Sylphie in her lap, turned to Jake as she was allowed to scratch the small hawk.

"You got Limit Break, right? What rarity?" she asked curtly. She, Jake, and the Sword Saint had ended up being left alone as other people spread out and went away from them. Some had left to get more treasure themselves or were just sitting a good distance away.

Jake looked at her, wondering what she was getting at. He had a feeling she already had a good idea as he answered truthfully. "It is, and It's at rare rarity."

"I figured," Carmen said with a smile. "Honestly, that a skill like Limit Break even has a rare rarity is a damn tragedy. It's basic as fuck. When'd you get it?"

"During the tutorial, so quite a while ago," Jake once more answered truthfully.

Carmen turned her attention to the Sword Saint. "Hey, your boosting skill is an upgraded version of Limit Break, right? It seems quite a lot better and far more controlled. Really playing into that entire water theme, you got going."

The Sword Saint simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"What I am trying to say is that you should seriously consider getting that shit upgraded," Carmen said, turning back to Jake. "I am sure you've noticed by now how you can easily handle it even at the "unsafe" level. That unsafe level is where your body is not taking any damage, but with a high enough Toughness, you can push it even beyond the twenty percent. Of course, it would be better to improve and not use stamina so crudely."

Jake looked at her for a bit, having not expected the unsolicited advice... but he appreciated it anyway.

"What would you recommend I do? I honestly haven't experimented as much with stamina as I should," he asked while explaining himself. However, it did feel a bit embarrassing to be called out like that.



“Well, first of all, do you have any other boosting skills interacting within the same archetype?” she asked.

Yeah, he didn’t really get exactly what she meant by that but made a guess. “No, my only real boosting skill is Limit Break. Outside of weapon skills, of course.”

He considered if he should mention his Big Game Arcane Hunter but decided not to as he didn’t think it was the same as Limit Break in any way. Sure, both gave stats, but he still found them very different. Primarily that the Big Game skill didn’t use stamina or any resources for that matter.

“Then you really need it upgraded,” Carmen said with a nod. “Boosting skills like Limit Break are the most fundamental kind there is, which means you can’t get something to fit in the same place. Like... you can’t have two skills that summon wings at the same time, or at least you need some special stuff to make that happen, and stuff like Limit Break is the same. So yeah, if you don’t upgrade it yourself, you need to either waste a skill selection on it to get it upgraded or be stuck with shit.”

Jake nodded along. He got that part. Getting two skills that did the same thing rarely worked. It was like wearing two hats at once or, as Carmen said, trying to summon two wings out of the same place on the body. It just didn’t work, and the system wouldn’t offer a skill to do that by default.

He brought up his current version of the skill and read it over.

[Limit Break (Rare)] - Sometimes, one needs to go above and beyond. Break your limits, temporarily increasing the effect of all stats at the cost of increased stamina consumption. Increase by up to 10% for double stamina consumption. Increase by up to 20% for quadruple stamina consumption, with the hunter afterward entering a state of weakness based on Limit Break duration and magnitude. Increasing by more than 20% will lead to severe consequences.

Jake hadn't thought much about the skill as it was still good. A 20% boost in all stats was just awesome, and it naturally scaled with him. It was super tiring to use when he first got it, and he sometimes took a bit of damage from overstraining himself. That strain was completely gone by the end of E-grade, and after D-grade, he could use it at both 10% and 20% without any issues. Even the period of weakness was often a short one. This time he had used for well over an hour, and here less than an hour later, all the weakness had left his body.

"Tips for upgrading it or just general tips for stamina usage overall?" Jake asked her. He had seen her fight, and she was clearly quite good at it.

"I am interested too. Also, young lady, if I may ask, you do not possess any mana anymore, do you?" the Sword Saint asked.

"No, I don't. I made it all into stamina after I reached D-grade," she shared openly. "Does have some drawbacks, but it also makes all of my stamina more potent and gives me a way bigger pool in return, so totally worth it as I didn't really do anything with my mana anyway."

Jake nodded along. That actually made sense in retrospect. He hadn't detected any mana from her, but he guessed that could just be because she didn't really use it during combat. That she didn't have the resource at all hadn't crossed his mind. He did wonder if it didn't lead to a lot of problems, but he assumed there were ways around everything. Maybe her stamina worked a bit like mana now when infusing it into items to bind it? Or did she transform it into mana? He knew one could do that.

"Anyway, for stamina use," Carmen began, as she regarded Jake and the Sword Saint, "have you two done any proper martial arts before the system? Well, you have old man, but how about you?"

"I did archery," he answered.

“Alright, then those Powershots of yours make way more sense. You know how to properly use your upper-body muscles for shooting a bow, but you are utterly useless how to use your entire body,” she stated. “Limit Break just circulates stamina at a faster pace where it is already going anyway. So it is just brute-forcing a boost, and it is damn ineffective and wasteful.”

Jake once more felt attacked but didn’t really disagree with anything. The way he controlled his stamina during both Infused Powershot and Arcane Powershot was far more effective and controlled than during Limit Break. Limit Break was just him speeding it up and having it go real fast without giving it a second thought. It was a switch he flipped.

“On the other hand, the old man has infused clear intent into his stamina. It is more gentle, probably with some form of water affinity merged into it or at least something mimicking the effects, making it not cause the same toll as it passes and making it flow faster and more naturally. Been told about such an approach before, and it’s a real good one,” Carmen kept explaining.

“Your body is stronger than his, so I would advise you to first refine the basics. Optimize the flow, direct it more, compress it, avoid unnecessary flow, and maybe speed it up a bit; you can then work on more complicated improvements afterward. Find a balance where maybe you lose a bit of health and be fine with it. Just push it to the limits of what you can handle for now. Should get you the Limit Shatter skill, which is just a better version.”

Nodding along, Jake took her words in. The Sword Saint also seemed to be in agreement with what she said as he added: “Recall how your body moves as you battle. The places where the stamina passes are the most important parts and should be focused on. Control the ebb and flow as you master your inner self.”

Mentally taking notes, Jake took it all in. He tried to focus a bit on his internal energy and moved it around his body. He hadn’t really done it much himself outside of using Limit Break, as he quite frankly

had some bad memories with doing it still. The first time he tried to freestyle it, he ended up blowing off an arm after all, and full-body stamina control seemed like a good way to make himself pop like a blood balloon. Perhaps that fear was unneeded and mattered more back when his body was far more fragile.

A few hours had passed since the Monarch had 'died,' and Jake was more or less fine now besides his still low resources. Hence he was fine doing a bit of experimenting. He activated Limit Break, and the energy began moving. He entered a half-meditative state as Carmen spoke:

"Now focus less on speed and more on control. Make it denser and lead it where you need it most. Focusing on where your muscles and bones are located tends to be the most effective. It may take a while, and moving around while doing it tend to be-

\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Limit Break (Rare)] --> [Limit Shatter (Epic)]

Jake's entire body exploded with stamina as the dust around him parted. It felt like his body was faintly tingling, and he noticed how he lost a health point after a few seconds, proving he had struck a balance of sorts.

The people around him just looked at him. Carmen looked weird, the Sword Saint began chuckling, and Sylphie looked like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"That was easier than expected," Jake commented as he got used to the feeling. It really had been easy. He just activated Limit Break, directed it a bit himself, and then pushed it over 20%. It quickly climbed to 25% and then around 30% before his danger sense tossed him the slightest warnings, making him instantly stop the increase and search for a new equilibrium. He compressed it a bit here and there and took some inspiration from Powershot, and then it just clicked in place. Then again, reaching an equilibrium was something he had gotten quite good at, considering his entire arcane-affinity was created by combining destruction and stability and balancing that.

With that done, he had gotten the notification, and he quickly checked it and saw the expected.

[Limit Shatter (Epic)] – Go above and beyond as you shatter your limits. Elevate yourself, temporarily increasing the effect of all stats at the cost of increased stamina consumption and straining your body. Increase by up to 15% for triple stamina consumption. Increase by up to 30% for six times stamina consumption, with the hunter beginning to take damage that worsens with prolonged use and makes you enter a state of weakness based on Limit Shatter duration and magnitude afterward. Increasing by more than 30% will lead to severe consequences.

Carmen kept looking at him for a moment. “Honestly? Fuck you.”

“What?” Jake asked, confused.

“Just...” Carmen looked more grumpy than usual. “It normally takes just a tiny bit longer, but fine, I guess it’s to be expected of the oh-my-god-he-is-so-cool Chosen one.”

“Sorry?” Jake awkwardly apologized.

“No need to apologize, the vice of others is no fault of yours,” the Sword Saint said, getting a glare from Carmen. “I do not doubt your body had already acclimated to the state of Limit Break long ago, making you prime for an upgrade. Often merely bringing attention to a blind spot is all it takes to get the final push when one is already at the precipice of enlightenment - only a slight nudge all that is needed for a major breakthrough. It is like this everywhere.”

That last one saved it a bit, as Carmen nodded as she agreed. "Yeah, I guess you were pretty much on the crux of the upgrade anyway."

"Still, I owe you one," Jake promised.

"I may just hold you to that. I do have a certain something I could use a hunter for," Carmen said, not willing to share more there and then.

They kept talking a bit more, sharing things that could potentially help the others. Jake even came with a few pieces of advice on things like mana control and even the application of Willpower through most of one's actions. Sadly, he really didn't have much to teach about his combat-related skills as all of it was just a bit too unique and suited to him specifically. It was all so heavily rooted in his bloodline, and it was hard to tell someone that the best way to dodge an incoming weapon was to just not think about dodging it and just let your body react instinctively.

Especially Carmen wanted some tips, as while she was happy tanking blows from most opponents, then in cases like when she was fighting against Monarch, she really had to dodge them. Jake just said that it wasn't something he could really share as it was an ability he couldn't teach anyone. Both she and the Sword Saint took his word for it.

As they got talking, the Sword Saint asked Jake about his weapon that had broken during the fight. Jake took out the remaining pieces of the Nanoblade, the handle and most of it still intact, but the blade itself broken. It sucked for sure, and he hoped Arnold could help him fix it. He really liked it.

"Do you not need a second weapon?" the Sword Saint asked. "You could simply use one of the Count weapons, could you not?"

"I guess I could," Jake agreed. It didn't feel as good as the Nanoblade, and it wasn't like Jake needed to dual-wield as having a hand free for magic and other uses was quite handy, but he did also like two weapons.

He took out the Count weapon he had fused from three of the rare weapons to get a feeling for it in his hand. The Sword Saint and Carmen both looked at it before Carmen commented:

"Why haven't you fused all nine of them yet?"

Jake was about to answer that he could always do that later until he identified it out of habit and saw that last clause.

[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.

It could only be done within the Treasure Hunt area.

Jake looked at the Sword Saint and saw the old man look away, showing the faintest level of embarrassment.

“Well, because we wanted to fuse it after regenerating a bit, and-“

“You forgot?” she asked, looking between Jake and the old man who still stayed silent.

“Yeah...”

“...”

Anyway, weapon fusion time!