

Hunter 341

Chapter 341: Treasure Hunt - The Duel Begins

In Jake's defense, he had a lot of other stuff to deal with than upgrading a weapon he didn't really plan on using anyway. It wasn't like he had all nine weapons before a few hours ago. Besides, the divine-rarity necklace kind of took away all other attention.

Now, while he was sitting around and waiting anyway, it was a great time to merge them. With the Sword Saint and Carmen observing, he took out the Count weapons one by one. He had a total of seven as he had merged three into one already.

First, he tried to merge the other six into the upgraded one but got no response.

It can't be.

He then merged three of the weapons, creating an epic-rarity version. He repeated this and now had three epic-rarity weapons.

For real?

Putting the three epic-rarity weapons, they all reacted as they began melting into black metal.

"A bit cliché, isn't it?" Carmen commented after the three weapons had all turned completely into liquid metal and slowly blended with each other to form something new, as its aura also grew.

“Totally,” Jake agreed. Nine turns to three, and three turns to one weapon. It was like another damn video game. Well, perhaps that was only to be expected, coming from vampire Counts with terrible boss dialogue.

The merging process was smooth, and soon the process stopped as the metal took a more stable state. The weapon now gave off a powerful aura, and Jake had to admit it was likely the most powerful weapon he had ever seen. However, it didn’t resemble a blade anymore but looked more like a black metal stick. Not a staff either, but a twenty-centimeter-long stick. It wasn’t even thick.

Jake used Identify on it together with the two others.

[Vampiric Chimera Weapon (Ancient)] – A weapon created by recombining the full Chimera weapons once wielded by Counts of Blood, all of which have been soaked in the blood of countless enemies throughout the ages. Now that it is whole once more, it still hungers and seeks to grow. Crafted using a special type of steel, the weapon can absorb the life force of vitality-based lifeforms to repair itself. Allows this weapon to steal a portion of the life force of anyone injured by attacks using it. Can change form between various weapons. Enchantments: Hemoabsorbant Self-Repair. Vampiric Weapon. Chimeric Transformation.

Requirements: lvl 150+ in any humanoid race.

Oh, so it’s like the Omnitool, but a weapon?

Jake thought as he read it over. It looked all nice and dandy until he got to the last part about the requirements. He needed to be level 150 to use it.

“Looks cool, I guess,” Carmen commented again.

“Indeed a peculiar tool,” the Sword Saint agreed.

“Yep,” Jake said and put it back into the Hunter Insignia. It looked like he would be stuck with only the scimitar against the Sword Saint their duel anyway.

“Can’t use it?” Carmen asked as she saw him put it away.

“Not 150 yet,” he answered truthfully.

“Oh.”

She looked at him up and down again. “I kind of assumed you would be around there. Wait, am I higher level than you?”

He quickly identified her.

[Human – lvl 136]

Jake shook his head as he hid his smile under his mask while answering. "Nah, you still got ways to go."

"How many?"

"Oh, plenty."

Sylphie looked at them confused as she flapped her wings and made screeches and odd gestures as she formed constructs of mana. Jake quickly tried to tell her to not blow his cover, but it was too late as Carmen had understood what Sylphie tried to communicate. On that note, who the hell had taught his bird to summon green mana constructs, much less the numerical system!?

"You're fucking one level above me, aren't you?" she said, glaring daggers at him.

Jake just looked at Sylphie, who was rapidly switching between being confused and meek as she flapped her wings to make all her mana in the air disappear. "Little traitor. I'm gonna tell your mom and dad when we get home."

"Hoh," the Sword Saint laughed as he joined in with a jovial mood. "Since we are sharing, then I appear to be lowest among us at 135. Seems like I cannot keep up with you youngsters at all."

They kept chatting for a while as they all regenerated and exchanged pointers. As time passed, Reika and Caleb also joined them, with even Maria joining in later on. She was especially interested in asking Jake questions about Haven and his city.

"If I may ask," Caleb said as he turned to Maria. "Why did you choose to join the Holy Church despite being associated with a god that isn't?"

"Because I met them first, and it made sense at the time. Finding a competent party was also difficult, and Sanctdomo had the best there was to offer, not just when it came to party members, but also in providing materials for my profession and facilities to work," she answered, adding. "There is very much an "ask, and you shall receive" kind of culture if you are one of the stronger ones there."

"And what do they demand in return?" the Sword Saint asked pointedly.

"Protection, order, and to some extent, obedience. I am in a way better position than pretty much anyone else as I am associated with another powerful god and thus far harder to control. I haven't experienced any serious issues besides the atmosphere being a bit unsettling," Maria answered truthfully.

"In what way?" Jake asked curiously.

"People are almost too kind... it's hard to explain. It feels like no one ever says no, and you are handed whatever you want, but the same is also expected of you. If anyone in charge comes and asks you to do anything, you are expected to do it without question or even an explanation for why you have to do what they tell you to. Again, I am more or less excluded from this, but that this mentality is so prevalent does make it hard to make any friends, even with my party members. In my eyes, we are just colleagues, and I doubt I will ever be able to view any of them as true friends. Much less that they will view me as one," she said, continuing to be open.

"Why not just go solo?" Carmen chimed in. "Way easier to just be your own boss and do whatever."

“Contrary to someone else,” she said, nodding towards Jake, “we archers don’t tend to do that well alone. Sure, while we can hunt alone, being with a party is just so much more effective. It’s like how a guardian or a healer isn’t meant to hunt alone, but put a guardian, an archer, and a healer together, and you have a powerful combo far more effective than the sum of their parts.”

“I guess,” Carmen recognized. “By the way, you keep mentioning being blessed by some other god?”

“Gwyndyr,” Caleb answered, with Maria nodding in confirmation.

“That name sounds familiar,” Jake said, trying to remember where he had heard it before.

“It damn well should,” Maria said, glaring at him. “He invited you to his divine realm after your tutorial, and you rejected him.”

“Oh yeah, that was a thing,” Jake recalled. “Should have tossed in a bottle of vodka if he wanted me to come that badly.”

Everyone just stared at him as Jake elaborated. “Oh, it was this inside joke between the Viper and me where he promised me a bottle of vodka, and apparently it was also an excuse to toss me into a vat of poison that helped get me some skill upgrades, even if it usually kills people, and-”

Caleb put a hand on Jake’s shoulder as he laughed. “Sounds like quite the time, eh?”

Getting the hint to shut the fuck up, Jake just agreed. "Yeah, sure was."

"Good for you, I guess," Maria said. "Gwyndyr did ask me to not antagonize you and instead treat you as an ally considering your position as Chosen of a Primordial. So yeah, I guess he wants me to suck up to you."

"Quite open about it," Jake commented.

"Sure, it isn't like the gods can peek into the Treasure Hunt, so may as well be frank. On that note, you have met the Viper in person... isn't it kind of unsettling? From what I heard, he is a monster with no regard for mortal life, a complete psychopath who likes torturing and has an Order that-"

"No, I'm good," Jake answered, frowning. "And I don't have a habit of shit-talking my friends behind their back either. I think a better question is why some god is trying to invite someone who already has a Patron god to his realm when he isn't even associated with the tutorial?"

Maria looked a bit taken aback at Jake's shifting attitude but quickly recovered. "Sorry? And I think he invited you specifically because of that. He was curious who could get a Primordial out of hiding and even get a blessing. Much less become his Chosen right off the bat."

"How did he even know about me?" Jake asked, still more than a little miffed.

"With so much attention on your tutorial from other Primordials and powerful gods, he also spared it some attention. He didn't take notice of you till he found out he couldn't take notice of you. He

discovered that you had been hidden by the Viper, and that truly piqued his interest,” Maria kept explaining. “There was nothing negative about it; he just thought that getting positive relations with the Viper’s Chosen would be a good move. I also can’t rule out that he wanted to get a feel for the Viper’s power through you.”

“I am not sure why any of this is relevant?” Caleb butted in.

“What I am trying to say is that I don’t really care about the Holy Church, and I don’t want my current status as working with them to mean I am against anyone else. I am not some spy or anything either. My true allegiances lie somewhere else,” she said, defending herself.

“Why stay?” the Sword Saint asked curtly. “Many other organizations exist, and from what I know, Reika is looking for worthwhile team members, are you not?”

Reika, who had just been sitting silently, quickly nodded. “I am indeed, Patriarch. Of course, we always need more powerful members, and naturally do not impose any restrictions upon them.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I have an agreement in place for now. Not with the Church itself, but the Augur and Bertram. And no, I can’t share details. Once more, not because I am not allowed to, but out of respect for them. We can always revisit it when those obligations are fulfilled,” Maria answered, swiftly shooting it down while still keeping the door slightly open for future collaboration.

After that, their conversation went to other less serious topics, with the occasional important subject brought up here and there. More than anything, this entire situation created a foundation for the future. The Noboru Clan, Court of Shadows, Valhal, at least partly, and Haven cemented their diplomatic relationships.

Carmen didn't really speak for Valhal the same way Jake didn't really speak for Haven. She didn't have Sven, and he didn't have Miranda, so while they could make promises, it wasn't like they would enact anything. That did mean that they really didn't want to swear up and down and make formal pacts and all that.

Hours passed by as soon others began returning towards the center. Throughout this time, they also found that leaving the Hunt didn't actually spawn an Insignia, indicating that one would keep their loot. To be honest, that did make a lot of sense to Jake, considering the Treasure Hunt was more or less over, and all of this was just bonus time.

Also, the reason why everyone was returning was apparent. From the center of the Mistless Plains, Jake could see the world collapse far off in the distance, and it was closing in. Yalsten didn't have much time left, and they all knew it.

Jake brought up the window with the timer and saw the countdown had passed to under one and a half hours.

Treasure Hunt will end in: 1:24:57

He looked at the Sword Saint, and the man made a big smile and nodded. He understood. The two of them stood up at the same time, drawing all attention to the two men. One a young masked hunter, and the other an old man in a deep blue robe.

Caleb threw Jake a glance, and Sylphie made a loud shriek of encouragement. At the same time, Reika and those remaining from the Noboru clan gave the Sword Saint an encouraging bow or salute. Carmen, Eron, and many others were neutral, but that didn't mean they didn't pay close attention. They all knew this would be a battle to once and for all decide who was the strongest human on Earth.

The two of them entered the center of the Mistless Plains, not far from where the Monarch had been buried. The ground was bare, and destruction from the long battle was present everywhere, but neither was bothered as they looked at each other.

“A year ago, I was bedridden, my one leg having given out due to my age. I was deemed too old for a hip replacement, and I understood. Even when my grandson insisted to the doctor, I asked him to stop. I was ready for death, for I had lived long enough,” the Sword Saint said. “I would never have thought a second chance would come like this. A second chance to stand tall and lead my clan towards greatness.”

“Don’t you mean a second chance to wield a blade and challenge yourself?” Jake asked teasingly.

“That is merely secondary. The method in which I uplift my clan. My own power is the power of my clan. If I was not there today, the Holy Church would not respect us, and would the name of my clan even be known to you?” he countered with a light smile, not offended at all.

“I don’t disagree,” Jake said as he rolled his shoulders and summoned his scimitar. “But don’t delude yourself into thinking you’re standing where you are right now for your clan.”

“You’re saying a proof of strength and growth from a duel such as this will not help my clan?” the old man chuckled. “I believe we are merely talking in circles at this point.

He also drew his blade as he shifted his stance.

“Still not what I’m saying,” Jake said. “I am saying you’re here right now because you want to. Not for your clan or whatever. You want to fight, nothing more, nothing less.”

“You sound like the Monarch and his insistence that the pursuit of power and power alone is the only true way forward,” the Sword Saint shook his head.

“No, because I don’t believe that myself either. Maybe he was right, and that is a good path, but I don’t think everything is so black and white. Power is all fine and good, but you need to use it for something, or it is just there. For a long time, I also thought I just wanted power for power’s sake... but I really don’t,” Jake said as he flashed a smile.

“I like power because it allows me to see more of the world and gives me the freedom to do whatever the hell I want. And what I want is to experience all there is to experience. Fight everything there is to fight. I am just a selfish asshole who likes fighting way too much.”

He got into position as energy revolved around him. Jake pointed his blade at the Sword Saint, smiling as he charged the old man.

“And so are you.”

Chapter 342: Treasure Hunt: Passion

Jake didn’t give the man any time to object as he charged forward. He only had a single scimitar and chose to use it here in the opening clash. Both of them had fully restored resources and ensured no potion cooldown or skills were unavailable. Besides Jake not having his second weapon, both of them were at peak condition, and him not having it frankly didn’t matter much.

His first attack was a simple swipe, and the old man easily blocked him... or, more accurately, made him miss. He hit the side of the katana wielded by the Sword Saint and saw his own scimitar be led away as Jake charged past, still making sure to not give the man time to counterattack.

Turning around, he attacked again, this time swinging from a direction where the swordsman couldn't simply redirect it. Or so Jake thought. His own sword ended up tearing up the ground as he was once more thwarted, and he had to quickly dodge back to avoid getting himself slashed.

"Enjoyment of battle does not give one an excuse to shirk responsibilities," the Sword Saint said as he took the offensive.

Droplets of water began condensing around Jake, and he responded by creating a blast of mana around his body to quickly dispel them while also swaying to avoid the sword trying to cut him in two. More water began condensing, and Jake finally began to realize why the vampire constantly kept his aura active... it was to deal with the old man's water magic. However, the water magic was so weak that Jake easily made it useless just with a bit of mana here and there.

Jake jumped back as the old man cut upwards, sending forth a screen of water that tore up the space between the two of them. Sadly for the Saint, Jake had already seen the movements of mana and easily dodged to the side to avoid it.

Screens of water began appearing all around Jake as the old man sent out crescent waves with his sword, but not directly towards him. They entered the screens, and to Jake's surprise, were reflected and redirected. He dodged the first few and saw them begin bouncing between the water screens. The old man was trying to set up a killing trap or something.

“Neat trick,” Jake recognized. Ultimately, not very effective, though. He reckoned that combination was more a relic of past skills, as it really didn’t work well against foes with his mobility. Jake simply ran forward as he dove under a sword wave before jumping over another one to get free of the trap.

Running straight for the old man, he attacked again as he swung his blade. The swordsman blocked and redirected his blows again and again. It was at this point one thing became utterly clear...

Jake was completely and utterly outmatched in skill. He was stronger and faster, yet he felt like a child swinging a stick in front of a swordmaster... because, in many ways, he was.

Yet, at the same time, he wouldn’t lose. Because while Jake was utterly unable to even get close to landing a wound, the same was true for the old man. Because while Jake sucked at using a sword compared to the Sword Saint, he sure as hell didn’t suck at not getting hit by one.

He knew when dangerous blows approached, and he reacted to those while he blocked weaker blows to not leave an opening. He could do this as he was ultimately still superior in stats and likely also overall skill rarity and methods. Superior in every way but pure skill. Not that any of them had really shown anything else yet.

“You have not wielded cold weapons for long, have you?” the Sword Saint asked.

“Not since the system came unless you count kitchen knives during cooking. And even then, I was a shitty chef,” Jake answered, snickering.

With a deadpan expression, the old man answered. “It shows.”

Ouch, Jake thought as he struck back, this time going a bit harder. Arcane energy revolved around his blade as he upped the power of his blows. This forced the Sword Saint to be even more defensive, and when Jake didn't let up but kept pressuring him, he was finally forced to go a bit harder in turn.

Jake felt the spike of power from his opponent as his boosting skill was used. Probably at a low volume... but it was used. A faint teal mist came out of the old man's skin, and he pressed forward as now suddenly Jake was on the backfoot.

He dodged a few blows as the Sword Saint let loose, his blade now faster and stronger. He pushed Jake away as the Sword Saint pointed the tip of his blade towards him.

"Thousand Droplets."

His Danger Sense exploded as he felt like hundreds of needles prickled his body. For the first time, Jake was forced to use One Step Mile, as the area he had just been was suddenly cut through by what he could only guess was a thousand tiny stabs.

Okay, that is dangerous, Jake recognized. He would, at a minimum, have to use Scales of the Malefic Viper to handle that one, as while each blow was far from a normal stab... well, there was value in quantity.

Jake decided that if the old man got serious... well, then he would also kick it up a notch. Arcane mana began condensing around him as several bolts appeared, and in his hand, concentrated arcane energy gathered as he dodged another sword blow with One Step Mile.

Yet just before he could release his arcane bolts, the old man summoned a plane of water in front of himself, reflecting Jake and his bolts. For a moment, Jake felt like his bolts existed two places at once, and just as he felt that, the old man cut across the water plane. Jake's arcane bolts completely collapsed as the mana structures fell apart at that same moment, leaving only the arcane energy he had gathered in his hand.

"That is a cool skill," Jake said as he dodged yet another blow as his One Step Mile took him closer.

"Quite the durable mana constructs," the old man recognized in an impressed voice as he blocked Jake's scimitar.

"Yep," Jake answered as he spun his body and pointed his palm at the old man, releasing a massive blast of arcane energy that sent both of them flying back. In a swift reaction, the Sword Saint had managed to summon a protective layer of water, but Jake still felt like he came out on top.

They charged each other again as they exchanged blow after blow, sending rock and soil flying everywhere as they tore up the area even more. None of them landed any blows worth mentioning on the other as the minutes passed by, yet one thing was clear... this stalemate wouldn't continue.

Because while the old man pulled out more and more cards, Jake only had to use half as many. A new tipping point came when Jake decided to give his new Limit Shatter a test drive.

Energy revolved inside his body as it condensed and sped up. He felt full of power as it spiked to 15%, and instantly the situation changed. Jake summoned more mana bolts as he bombarded the old man who couldn't cut them down fast enough, not even with the water plane. Instead of summoning five simultaneously, Jake quickly made them appear one by one with his hand and more or less threw them in between his sword blows.

In response, the old man began also using more of his own magic. Large orbs of water that fired out pressurized blasts tried to block Jake's blows, and several planes of water appeared to somewhat successfully block Jake's magic. He even used reflecting planes to make his pressurized water beams come from different directions. That was just one of his many types of water magic, with large water explosions, more needle-like droplet attacks, and whatnot also mixed in.

However, none of it worked much. Sure, the water beam could cut well, but compared to the sword, it was nothing. Jake ended up still summoning his Scales to take a few blasts of water, allowing him to close in and push the old man back, finally landing a good blow for the first time in the fight.

Seeing the writing on the wall, the Sword Saint got some distance between them as he spoke. "I must admit... seeing you fight and facing you is very different. It is like being hounded by a beast that turns into a specter just when you think it has overextended."

"Thanks for the compliment," Jake answered. "Meanwhile, you feel like facing a master swordsman who also decided to try and become a water mage at some point. Honestly, you got way more tricks than I expected."

The old man frowned a bit. "Swordsmanship can only take one so far, and it would be foolish to abandon other types of magic when other means can be used to enhance oneself."

"I wasn't insulting you," Jake said, shaking his head. "But between facing your sword and your water magic... they aren't the same. The latter feels hollow."

“It is no lie I am not truly a mage and have not invested as much in my mental stats as I perhaps should,” the Sword Saint acknowledged. “We all have places to improve, like your swordsmanship and my magic.”

“No... no, that ain’t it,” Jake shook his head again. “It just feels forced and boring. There is nothing in it. As I said... it’s just hollow. Completely without passion.”

The old man frowned. “As said, I am not a mage. Magic is merely secondary and a requirement to-“

“Those shitty water balloons are doing nothing for you,” Jake sighed. “It feels like someone with a gun deciding to toss bullets for some goddamn reason. If you don’t actually care for using water magic like this... just stop and don’t insult me by using it pretending to be serious. Stick to what you actually care about.”

Jake didn’t give him time to respond as he moved to attack again. The old man seemed to have taken his word to heart, though, as he didn’t use any of his water magic but instead only blocked with his sword. Sure, there were still some water-affinity things... but he wasn’t acting like a low-tier mage. Jake was fine with using things you were still practicing on... but that wasn’t what the old man did.

He had just made some simple magic spells and gone with those. It was all low-tier stuff, not tied to what the Sword Saint was all about: his swordsmanship. Jake didn’t feel the slightest tinge of danger from those water orbs, but he didn’t care to take a single blow from the sword.

Now, magic that supported his swordsmanship was another thing. The reflection of spells to dispel them with a sword cut, or him making his sword waves jump between planes of water? That shit was cool and inventive and overall supplemented the swordsmanship.

The Sword Saint wasn't like Jake, that much he was sure about. It felt like he only used that water magic out of obligation, not desire. Was it wrong to learn how to use spells like that? No... not really, but if you didn't really care about magic spells, why waste your time on it? Okay, maybe if it was to practice some concept and was a middle-step, but then you shouldn't use it in combat. Same as how Jake didn't try to summon weapons out of arcane mana. Maybe he would do it one day... but not yet. Also... ultimately... If it wasn't fun to use magic while fighting for the old man, why bother? If there is no passion, why have it be part of your path and style?

Jake pressed his attack, showing that contrary to the Sword Saint, he actually cared about his magic. Arcane bolts supported him as he battled, arcane explosions made space where possible, and the arcane energy revolved around his blade as they clashed.

The old man got a bit faster as he pushed his boosting skill higher, allowing him to keep up and go even. However... Jake felt that his opponent couldn't go much higher. That didn't mean it was easy for Jake, but it did mean that it would be very difficult for the Saint to get anywhere.

Because while Jake forced the other party to show his cards one by one... Jake had yet to.

"You may be right," the old man said, as he appeared far calmer than Jake expected. His blade sped up and pushed Jake away as the Sword Saint changed his stance. He placed both of his hands on the handle of this sword as he pointed it straight at Jake as the atmosphere shifted.

"But do not think for a moment my blade and the power of the rain are not connected. This skill was the first legendary one I got... please share your insights," the Saint said as he breathed out and spoke in a low voice.

"Rainblade."

Jake moved just before it arrived as the tip of a blade appeared where his chest had just been, the old man having moved even faster than ever before, making Jake remember his movement skill. He was still holding back.

Somehow, the Sword Saint's feet slid across the ground like he was a water strider on a lake. It was not teleportation but swift movement in mostly straight lines. Contrary to Jake's One Step Mile, the old man could use it to build up momentum as he struck, at the cost of a bit of speed and still the risk of taking damage as he still physically moved compared to straight-up teleportation.

But that wasn't what Jake had to truly look out for... for if the sword was dangerous before, now it was on an entirely new level.

Visually not much had changed besides a faint layer of water now covering the blade of the katana. It looked to be in constant movement as it streamed up and down the edge, but Jake knew there were some serious concepts at work... for with his Sense of the Malefic Viper, he felt a massive amount of mana from the weapon. Way more than he could pack into an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter by a large margin. More surprisingly... it didn't look like it required much upkeep, as it was a stable flow.

As for what this Rainblade did...

Jake dodged as he summoned a bolt of arcane mana but instantly found it cut in two. He teleported back, and the Sword Saint swung in his direction as a few tiny droplets were sent after him. Without hesitating, he teleported again as the droplets hit a small hill in the distance and penetrated into it – each as powerful as the stab of a sword.

To make it worse, when the old man stabbed for real, Jake found himself forced to roll on the ground as the blade extended over ten meters, the extended part made of only a faint outline of water. Yet, he knew it wasn't something he should try to tank.

I knew he had something more. Now, this is some proper fucking water magic.

The water level had been shit. Maybe rainwater was just superior to ocean water?

A moment of inattentiveness made Jake not teleport away fast enough, as the old man managed to get within striking distance. Jake dodged the first four swipes but was forced to block the last one. He raised his scimitar and clashed with the Sword Saint, feeling like he had just blocked another normal sword blow... yet when he did, it was like a part of the blade just kept cutting, ignoring that the physical part of it had stopped.

Using One step mile, Jake appeared off to the side, a wet cut across his chest with the scales torn open and blood seeping out, mixing with the rainwater.

It was his first time taking an injury... and it wasn't a light one. Jake made a toothy grin as he yelled at the old man.

"I guess it's only fair I also do what I'm best at."

With that, he waved his hand as his bow appeared, dodging again as he nocked an arrow.

With that, the second part of the duel between the swordmaster and the hunter began.

Chapter 343: Treasure Hunt: Misconception

The Sword Saint was proud. He always had been, and perhaps the years had only made it worse. It was indeed interesting what the thought of imminent death did to a man. When he lay there dying, many thoughts went through his head. Regrets. Unfulfilled wishes. But oddly enough, also a substantial amount of pride. Pride for the things he had accomplished throughout his life. Pride for the clan he had built. It had always been powerful, but the Noboru clan had skyrocketed to entirely new heights under his leadership.

For fifty years, barely anyone had dared criticize him. Since the system arrived, none had. In any crowd of humans, he had been the strongest. This meant everyone respected him to an almost unhealthy level, and Miyamoto would lie to himself if he said he didn't enjoy it somewhat.

However, that didn't mean the Sword Saint believed he deserved respect. In his view, respect was earned, not merely given. He had seen where pride and arrogance could take you and even observed his own family fall into the pitfall of demanding "respect" from others, not understanding what it means. Sometimes, one defines "respect" as "treating someone like a equal," and sometimes, one uses "respect" to mean "treating someone like an authority."

When some people get too used to being treated like an authority, they begin saying: "if you don't respect me, I won't respect you," and what they actually mean is "if you don't treat me like an authority, I won't treat you like a person."

It becomes their new worldview. A toxic mentality that would corrode any organization from within. Miyamoto had already seen it seep in and gotten worse since after the system. Power-hungry members of the clan working under the radar, gaining power through favors, seeming like good and respectful people until the moment they actually grasped influence, turning them into tyrants.

For close to a century, it had been his job to guide his clan to do the right thing. Even when he should have been retired, he kept working. Even when he had to use a cane, he refused to back down. It was only when his body fully gave up he stopped - the day willpower lost out to the merciless march of time.

So, he had a responsibility to lead them when the system came, and he got a second chance. He had to be the figurehead. He had to be the most powerful, the wisest, the most respected. Gods surrounded his planet and his land, seeking to claim it as their own. Many welcomed this, but Miyamoto was not one of them... for he had yet to see why they deserved his respect.

For them, respect was not a question of being viewed as a person but being viewed as an absolute authority. Either you did or were a blasphemer that believers would gladly put to death as a heretic. Miyamoto was intimately familiar with this... for he had experienced it himself.

Back during the tutorial, he was blessed by a god, like so many others. In the beginning, he had agreed simply to gain the blessing and the power given by it. The god in question had even been open and welcoming, not demanding anything, and treated him with respect – or in better terms – like a person. Perhaps not an equal, but good enough.

That all changed when he did exceptionally well in the tutorial. The god spoke to him more, encouraged him. Miyamoto did not need it but appreciated it as he moved forward and established his clan. All was well until one fateful day where the god did something he had done not before. He told Miyamoto what to do. It was not a request but an order.

The order? To go seek out the Holy Church and swear allegiance to them and make him and his clan subordinate to the Church. It was a matter-of-fact order, leaving no room for negotiation. At least that became clear when Miyamoto had given a stern no in response.

To truly see what a person is like, you need to have a conflict with them. A disagreement. Miyamoto and the god had been on the same page all this time, but the moment the slightest divide emerged, all hell broke loose.

What struck him more was the obvious confusion the god displayed that Miyamoto even DARED to say no. The god had clearly made plans and deals behind the scenes and saw Miyamoto as a great way to connect with the Church. To him, the entire Noboru clan had just been another chess piece for him to further his own goals without any care or regard for them as living beings viewing them as merely objects - entities unworthy of respect.

In the end, Miyamoto had renounced his blessing and not accepted any invitations from other gods since then. In some ways, he had been greatly offended at the god... yet in other ways, he understood how a being consistently treated as above everyone else for so long could begin feeling like it truly was so. He did not reject that gods were powerful and deserved some respect for that... but that did not give them the right to treat him as less than a person. His pride did not allow it.

Miyamoto wanted to avoid falling into the same trap as that god and the many people who let power get to their heads in his own clan. But it was hard, as he saw this happened everywhere.

He had few people he respected on Earth, most of whom he had spent most of the day with. They did not treat him as an authority but as a person, and hence he treated them the same. It was refreshing... yet something gnawed at him. A feeling he hadn't felt for a long time.

Focusing on the battle between himself and the Hunter of Haven, he used his most powerful boosting skill and pushed his Revolution of the Northern Stream as hard as he could, increasing all his physical stats by over 50% with his Rainblade active. All other tools were also out of the kit... yet he still failed. He was still weaker.

Lord Thayne, no, Jake, teleported as he fired his bow, every arrow a harbinger of death, every single move seeming to be calculated, yet spontaneous and erratic. Unpredictable. Miyamoto even had his movements restricted as he felt like he stood before a beast outside of his understanding, leading to injuries he would have otherwise dodged or blocked. However, what he truly felt was not fear or reverence...

Envy.

Yes, that was it. That was the feeling Miyamoto hadn't felt for so long... genuine envy. Not because of Jake's power or methods. He didn't desire his magic or his equipment or even his relationship to a powerful god. Instead, he desired that genuine smile on his face and his unburdened attitude. The fact that he seemed to burn with passion at every moment during their fight.

He wanted the freedom his opponent had. The carelessness in which he carried himself and his utter disregard for anything but himself. He was completely selfish. Miyamoto did not think that as an insult, just his honest observation. Sure, Jake clearly cared for people like his family, but it didn't detract from his freedom.

Without any regard for his own life, he would seek out powerful opponents and challenge himself. Meanwhile, Miyamoto could not do that. The implications his own death would bring were something he couldn't bear. If he died, the clan would be severely weakened, if not outright collapse. Without the power to stand up to the more powerful factions, they would be in deep trouble.

Yet, he wanted that freedom. He yearned for it, more than he would ever admit to himself. He had been on the cusp of death. He had accepted it. Miyamoto was fine with dying, just not the consequences his death would now bring.

This is why Jake's words struck so profoundly. The young man didn't care and simply spoke his mind. He smiled and enjoyed himself to his life's content. Every battle was an event to enjoy. A challenge to overcome with a smirk.

To put it bluntly... Jake Thayne just had fun with life, damned be the consequences.

And for one day, the Sword Saint decided he would do the same, as a genuine smile appeared on his lips, and he pushed his boosting skill further than ever before as he attacked with all he had. For just one day, he would be free and enjoy himself.

Perhaps this wasn't a fight he could win, but it was one he could genuinely enjoy.

No clan. No consequences.

Just two humans fighting.

Jake bombarded the old man that slid across the ground, sending droplets in return. Jake dodged away, returning fire as the two of them danced in circles around each other, the Sword Saint slowly closing in.

Once more, the old man had sped up as his power spiked. The teal energy seemed to flow far faster both within and around him, giving him more and more power.

The Sword Saint closed in as he cut across the terrain, sending dust and soil flying into massive pillars as the ground exploded, creating a fissure between them. Jake fled back, summoning a barrier of arcane mana to buy him time to nock another arrow.

He fired it through the dust, and just before it arrived, he made it split into six arrows. The old man was ready as he dodged in between them – a decision he quickly tried to correct as he noticed something was wrong, but it was too late.

BOOM!

All of them exploded as the Sword Saint was sent tumbling back, his robes torn in many places and quite a few wounds on both his arms from the blast. Jake nocked yet another arrow, and this time the old man slid to the side, always staying in motion. That is when Jake noticed something annoying... he had begun finding ways around Jake's Gaze.

As he slid across the ground constantly, Jake tried to freeze him but found that his opponent could still control his speed somewhat without physically moving his body. Because while Gaze impacted physical movement, it did nothing for movements of mana or even stamina, allowing the Sword Saint to pour in some more energy to slide faster or less to go slower, throwing Jake's aim off.

No worries, there are workarounds, Jake thought as he used One Step Mile to avoid a few more droplets, getting even more distance. He spun in the air as he aimed his bow and nocked the arrow as arcane mana whirled around him.

The Sword Saint saw what he was doing and charged straight for Jake at full speed. Jake channeled as long as he could before he released the Arcane Powershot, aimed straight for the Sword Saint's chest. He tried to use Gaze but suddenly lost vision of the old man as his form shimmered for a second – enough to allow the Saint to counter the arrow.

Sword and arrow clashed as another explosion rocked the area. Jake's eyes opened wide as he summoned an arcane barrier in front of him just in time to get hit by a thin blade of water. It stabbed through his shoulder and out the other side, as it was ripped downwards, tearing through flesh and bone as Jake backed away to dislodge the weapon.

He got out, but not before getting a wound that ripped all the way through his body from his right shoulder to just above his navel, the blade having torn through everything in between. He would be dead if this had been pre-system, but now it was just a severe wound.

Yet Jake wasn't discouraged as the dust cleared and he saw the Sword Saint. He stood with his two feet steadfastly planted on the ground, his right arm extended with the katana pointed forward. His left arm hung limply at his side as his entire shoulder was disfigured, and a large wound extended from it and towards his neck and chest.

The two of them stared at each other for a moment before they both just snickered and moved again. The old man ignored his wounds and drank a potion as he dodged another arrow – a potion Jake himself had made – and bought some time as his body healed.

Jake didn't need to regenerate himself yet as he pressed his advantage. If he couldn't hit the Sword Saint, he would at least make him spend a lot of stamina and mana to avoid his blows. With the potion cooldown now in effect, there was no way to regenerate those easily, after all.

Their fight continued as soon the old man was healed enough to use his left arm again, and thus he began attacking more, trying to corner Jake and get close enough to strike him. Jake wanted to avoid melee at this point, as he didn't see himself able to land a single blow in the old man without his bow, while the Saint wanted to be close to avoid Jake's arrows and, of course, land his own attacks.

Yet... some gaps were not meant to be overcome, and some distances were too vast to be easily passed. Jake's advantage only grew as time passed. They clashed many times, Jake taking wounds repeatedly, but for every cut that Jake was sliced with, the Sword Saint was damaged even more.

For the fourth time during their fight, Jake blasted the Sword Saint back with an Arcane Powershot, sending him tumbling through the air, a large hole in his thigh. The old man could still stand, but his stance was weaker, and the final nail came when the old man's blade stopped giving off the same power as before.

He was unable to keep Rainblade active.

The Sword Saint still stood in a combat-ready stance as Jake stopped ten or so meters away. The old man looked down at his own body as he sighed.

His robes were torn, revealing his bare upper body. Jake saw more muscles than he thought such an old man could possibly have, all of them lean and powerful. This was especially impressive, seeing as not a single part of that body wasn't covered in wounds from Jake's constant arcane explosions and arrows.

"I lost..." the Sword Saint said, sighing again, as he took a more relaxed stance and stabbed his sword into the ground and leaned on it as he looked towards the sky.

"Seems like it," Jake agreed with a nod. He didn't feel any particular happiness from the win, but he had thoroughly enjoyed the duel.

“Tell me... what am I lacking?” the Sword Saint said as he looked at Jake. It was a genuine question, not one veiled with sarcasm or ill-intent. Just a genuine desire to improve.

“Eh... it’s more that you have too much?” Jake tried to answer, attempting to articulate his thoughts.

“The first part of the fight felt like I was fighting a weird mix between a second-grade mage and a damn good swordsman, while the second half was far more consistent. I don’t get why you are so insistent in using magic like that... or at all.”

The old man shook his head. “Magic seems like a necessity for progress... if not now, then later on my path. I cannot be an old man swinging a sword forever, stuck in the past as I dream of my younger years and memories of my prime. The world has changed, and so should I.”

Jake just looked a bit confused as he asked: “... Why do you think that?”

“Pardon?” the Sword Saint asked, confused as he shifted his injured leg. Likely from the pain.

“What’s wrong with just swinging your sword? Not gonna lie, you swinging your sword is pretty damn fucking scary already,” Jake answered honestly.

“For now, maybe. But I did not walk into this changing world blind. I sought advice from those more familiar with systems from our old world similar to this new reality. The path of magic is always the most powerful, and if I want to keep up, I need to also learn to wield it. Do you not liberally wield magic yourself?” the Sword Saint explained and countered, shaking his head.

“I do... but it isn’t like you need to? I am pretty sure you can do just fine only with a sword. Maybe keep the whole water-affinity and the concept of rain thing going? Those seem to be working well for you in

just making you better at swinging your sword, but why try to be a mage? Why not just seek the absolute pinnacle of swordsmanship?" Jake asked him, genuinely even more confused. Had the old man been told about old videogames or what where magic was overpowered?

"If I can just add," Carmen yelled over from the sidelines, having heard their conversation. "You don't need to get good at everything. I just want to get good at punching things, and I am doing okay. Also... Valdemar, the leader of Valhal, became one of the twelve Primordials and is one of the most powerful gods in existence. And according to his wife, he is a meathead who only knows how to swing an axe..."

"I am certain he has gone through severe magical-"

"He doesn't have any mana because he couldn't figure out how it worked. Ever. So he just got rid of it to get more stamina to swing his axe more," Carmen answered.

"But a limit must be-"

"If there is a limit to just swinging a weapon, he hasn't reached it yet. Gudrun told me that when once asked if he thought one could become powerful enough to shatter an entire universe, he claimed that if he just swung hard enough, then why not?" Carmen cut in.

"Yeah, what Carmen said," Jake agreed. "There aren't some set rules on how to be strong from what I know. Just do whatever the hell you want. Shit, there is a god who became like that just by being a mega fanboy and another who just always did alchemy and never bothered with anything else."

The old man frowned as he looked at the two of them, Jake continuing.

“I guess what I’m saying is that you shouldn’t conform to the system to gain power. Instead, do what you want to and make the system conform to your own will, and reward that path. Simplicity does not make some worse... just simpler. It’s all about forging your own path, defining your own limits, and setting your own rules while refusing to stop moving forward.”

Jake had enjoyed their duel, and he actually liked the old man quite a bit. He felt they were very similar but the Sword Saint was limited by outside factors as far as he could see. Perhaps it was bad information, an assumption gained by seeing so many explore magic to get stronger, or maybe even some powerful entity being full of shit.

Either way, it didn’t matter. Jake was just doing as he always did and spoke about his interpretation like it was fact... because it may as well be in his head. Hey, his entire interpretation was about just being stubborn enough to make the system go “fair enough, I guess that works,” so why wouldn’t he think the system worked exactly as he thought it did?

The Sword Saint stared up towards the sky as he looked to be deep in thought. A few seconds passed before he looked down at Jake. The look in his eyes had changed, as he asked. “Tell me... what is your fondest memory?”

Chapter 344: Springtime Advent

“My fondest memory?” Jake asked, a bit confused at the sudden question. He didn’t know why the Sword Saint asked him, much less why he had such a sincere look in his eyes. Like the answer to his question genuinely mattered.

Thus Jake considered it seriously. When he thought about fond memories, he was surprised as he quickly noticed something... none of them were from before the system. He tried to remember some positive memories from before and did find plenty. That time they went to the theme park, and Jake had just gotten tall enough to ride all the “wild” attractions. Or when he won his first big archery competition.

But... comparing them to the post-system ones, they seemed so much less. The first time he got a notification from a kill, the times he defeated any of the Beast Lords... his victory over the King of the Forest... the D-grade Storm Elemental he bombarded from long range... the damn blue mushroom... Altmar Golem... so many memories appeared over those traditionally happy childhood memories.

Yet, one memory emerged before any of the others. One that had been the beginning of Jake's true journey into this new world.

"It was the first day of the tutorial... I was with my colleagues, and we made a camp to wait out the night. I was on watch alone. Ah, I need to add that we didn't do jack-shit for the first many hours but just walked around and sometimes fought weak foes. Everything except killing a big boar was a waste of time. During this night, we were ambushed... three men came for me. All of them were several levels above me - all of them stronger and faster.

"By all accounts, I should have been fucked, but instead, I felt like I awakened after sleeping for a long time. Suddenly the world was more vivid than ever before, and I fought the three ambushers. No, I didn't just fight them. I dominated and killed all three of them while barely taking a scratch. That was my first true fight to the death and the first time I ever killed another human. The euphoria I felt when I stared out into the night as I stood victorious... is something I will never forget," Jake finished as he shared. It truly was his most precious memory. It was the day he stopped being Jake the office worker and became Jake the Primal Hunter.

Across from him, the Sword Saint nodded along to his words. He smiled as he looked at Jake. "In some ways, we truly are similar. My fondest memory is not one I have ever shared... one I have been embarrassed to regard as my fondest."

He leaned on his sword as he sat down, making it clear this would not be a short story.

"When I lay dying, expecting my life to end at any moment, I recalled so many memories of my life. My marriage, the birth of my children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren. The day my wife passed, and the day I buried my firstborn son. I remembered all of it oh-so vividly, happy and sad times both," the Sword Saint said as he sat there.

His body was covered in wounds. They both knew a winner was clear, and Jake merely stood there and listened. "Yet out of everything... I remembered one thing. One event that shaped me more than anything else. My fondest memory and my fondest moment as I looked back upon my life."

The Sword Saint spoke as his eyes lit up, and he remembered ages past. Jake did not choose to interrupt him but simply listened as he heard the man speak with genuine passion and emotion. Even more so than anything before.

"It was during a war... a terrible time. Young men and women died, believing there was honor in such an honorless time. Oh, were we foolish. We thought ourselves heroes, and we wanted to stand out and bring praise upon our names and families," the Sword Saint began as he stared up towards the sky, reminiscing what happened so long ago. Yet, there was a small spark of something else in the air Jake couldn't quite recognize.

"We achieved nothing but to prove our own foolhardiness as we unwisely tried and go above and beyond our call of duty. You see, we were not the defenders at this time but the attackers. In a foreign land, unknown to us besides a sparse few hours around a table and a small booklet that only one of us had read. This is all the knowledge we wandered in with. We had no personal animosity towards the enemy but solely went to war due to our national pride demanding it and our honor not allowing us to say no.

"There, we fought and battled faceless enemies as we got further and further from home. Deeper and deeper into the unknown, we fared, but all we found on our way was desolation and desertion. The

villages ransacked and destroyed as our foes retreated," he said, as his look turned sour, yet that spark remained.

"My squad and I tried to be clever. To get ahead and make ourselves stand out - so we went where we were not supposed to. A single vehicle and not enough rations were all we had. How could we have known our journey would end as it did? Perhaps we should have... but we were young and dumb.

"Our only means of transportation broke down in the middle of nowhere, and as we tried to fix it... it came," he said, as his voice slightly cracked and his hand still holding the sword shook.

Jake stood there, silently listening. He felt that the old man truly looked and sounded like he was back in the past... that whatever happened back then was so thoroughly etched in his mind that he didn't need any wisdom or magical stats to remember every detail perfectly, even if it happened nearly a century ago.

"The snow fell. The biting wind from the north descended on us like a merciless beast as winter arrived. Ill-equipped and lost, we tried to return home, but we were too far away from anyone else. We had to seek refuge in a small abandoned village, with only a few drafty houses left standing.

"From there... the longest winter in my life began. A squad of four, we tried to keep ourselves warm and our spirits high. They were my brothers and felt as close to me as my family at the time. I trusted every one of them with my life, and they trusted me with theirs. Which is why what came next was so hard," he said as tears fell from his eyes. His hand gripping the sword handle hard enough to make blood fall to the ground below from his wounds.

"Our rations were... limited. We all knew it from the first day. The small book told of the brutal winters of the land. A winter we would never survive... so the hard choice was made. The hardest choice... made. We knew not all could survive... so we chose.

"The rations would last enough for only one of us. Haruto was the first... he simply asked for the one who remained to tell his family he died with honor and to take care of his wife and child before he ended himself. Ibuki followed him soon after, leaving only his brother and sister in the care of the survivor. The final two were Aoto and me."

The old man spoke with so much pain it was almost tangible. Jake felt the intense pain in every word.

"I had a clan... and so did Aoto. We were both the only heirs remaining and had no children. We were the last of our bloodlines, so if we died, our lines would end. There was no good choice... so... we flipped a coin. I won, and with tears in his eyes, he nodded in recognition and brought the gun to his head."

Jake felt the words almost echo as he saw the tears flow down the Sword Saint's cheeks as he stared up towards the sky. Jake felt like he saw clouds far above but couldn't quite make them out. He looked back at the old man and saw that glint in his eyes had never disappeared, and Jake now recognized it.... enlightenment.

Something was changing as he felt like the atmospheric mana was affected somehow. Not just the mana... everything seemed to be influenced.

"That winter was so long... so lonely. Every day was a struggle to simply stay alive, every second torture. Cold, alone, forgotten and abandoned. After the first month, my family would have no doubt received news of my death. After the second, they would have come to believe it. The third and fourth? My funeral had been long held by then.

"I cannot even begin to explain how it felt. I have experienced torture more than once in my life, but those months... were more than torture. There was not a day I didn't consider joining my fallen comrades... but I had made a promise to them. One I would keep. I was also simply not willing to accept death. Not a single fiber of my being believed that winter was supposed to be my end before seeing at least one more spring," Miyamoto said as Jake noticed something more.

It was faint... but he felt like he saw tiny snowflakes falling. He saw them even in his sphere... and he couldn't detect any mana or energy... they're real. Not constructs, but real snow. He looked over at the onlookers, and they saw it too, as slowly a faint white blanket of pristine snow fell upon Yalsten.

"But the body can only last so long; willpower only take one so far. We had underestimated the relentlessness and mercilessness of winter. It was rougher than even those that came before it, more adamant than anything my squadmates could have expected.

"Yet I lived. Day after day, I weakened, but I remained. Until finally a day... I heard a tap."

The old man suddenly livened up, seemingly unbothered by his wounded body, as he smiled and stood up.

"One tap, and then another. I had been half-asleep, dehydrated, and starved. Yet, I recognized it right away. I managed to lift myself off the ground and pushed myself to the door. I will never forget opening it that day and seeing the rainfall upon the snow as it melted.

"It was... magic. For the first time in months, I felt hope; I felt a desire to truly live and believed that I would make it. I laughed out loud and yelled far louder than I thought a man in my state should ever be capable of. Then, however... a moment of pure relief and happiness swiftly changed as I heard another sound, barely not muffled by the rain."

The Sword Saint turned far more serious as he continued his narration - Jake not even sure if the old man knew if anyone was still listening.

“As mentioned, the winter had been long... far longer than usual. It had disrupted not just me but the natural balance. Spring had come later, and the animals suffered for it... especially those who usually hibernated through it. For before me stood a bear, far larger than I had ever seen, thin and starved as it stared at my willow form.

“We met each other’s eyes.. and we both knew at that moment. One of us would become the sustenance to allow the survival of the other. Or... perhaps only I thought that, for clearly, the bear did not view my small and weak form as a threat. Which under usual circumstances, it really shouldn’t have been.”

He raised his sword slowly from the ground as he held it towards the sky as if to show it off.

“I had no guns or bullets left; all of them used to try and hunt for food during this time. I had no way to fight except for one thing. When I left home, I had taken with me an heirloom. Something many families and clans did back then. I had chosen the sword that had been passed down to me. This very sword I hold in my hand.

“The bear stared me down as I felt its intent... and I drew. My body hurt. My bones protruded from my skin as I had not eaten for weeks and barely had some melted snow to keep me alive for the past few weeks. Yet, as I stood there, sword in hand, the rain falling upon me, I felt none of this. All I felt was the rain upon my skin and hope for survival.”

His eyes lit up as he showed his teeth. Jake felt the mirages of snow around him turn to water as he felt the atmosphere shift. He was not the only one who closely observed the odd happenings either. Caleb,

Carmen, and many others looked with a mix of confusion and astonishment as they silently watched, listening to the story.

“Two starved beasts we clashed, sword against claw. Needless to say, I was no match in strength, barely a match in agility, and utterly outmatched in durability. It was a battle I was not meant to win, but one I at the same time couldn’t afford to lose. Couldn’t see myself losing.

“Time after time, we clashed, blood was spilled, and my blade, dulled by the weather and lack of maintenance, was barely able to penetrate the skin of the beast. The beast seemed unaffected and kept pushing me back. My body was fraught with pain. Yet at the same time, I felt my body overflowing with more power than ever.”

Jake looked on silently as he felt the subtle gathering of energy, the Sword Saint at the center. It felt like the world itself was feeding him power as he stood there, seemingly unaware of all that was happening.

“The battle was long and painful, the physical difference larger than I could have imagined. Neither of us was willing to die or surrender, and neither willing to give up. At one moment, I slipped on the wet snow below my feet, which made me unable to dodge as the bear hit me in the side. I felt my arm break, my ribs bent, and the air was knocked out of my lungs. I rolled and fell to the ground, my body bloody and broken. Yet I stood once more, my left arm useless - my blade still in the other.

“A final time, the beast came. It charged me, seeing my weak form. I stood there, staring at the beast with my blade raised as the rain hit the tip of the blade. I saw it slide down the edge, and at that very moment, a miracle happened. The rain-filled clouds above parted as faint rays of sunlight fell upon my blade, reflecting the rainwater as it blinded the bear.

“I did not think. I simply felt at that very moment that the world had chosen to assist me. I was one with it, as I was one with my sword, and I merely swung a single time. My blade moved through the air as it

parted the raindrops, and when it met the neck of the bear, it did not stop. An impossible strike cut the head off without any resistance. I never even felt the impact in my arm as I stood there victorious, the beast dead beneath me. All I felt was warmth despite standing in tattered clothes in the melting snow, a single ray of sunlight bathing me.”

The old man finally looked at Jake, the glint in his eye more evident than ever. More energy than before gathered towards the Sword Saint as Jake stared back into his eyes as he felt something.

Deep within, he felt an emotion he hadn’t felt for a long time..

“After that, I used the bear’s body to provide food, clothing, and other necessities till I was rescued by happenstance nearly a month later when all the snow was gone. I returned to my home, became the leader of my clan, paid my dues, and never spoke of those months ever again. Yet that day in the rain never left me. The feeling of shame that came from the thought that the deaths of my comrades and those months of torture had all been worth it - for that one fight - never left me. My desire to experience such a thing once more... never left me. I merely forgot it.”

Jake felt the world change at that moment as sunlight penetrated down from a sunless sky and rain fell upon Yalsten, visible for all to see.

“I believed that my second chance was another opportunity to help my clan. I believed my job was to bring upon a season of growth and push my clan into an eternal summer... at the cost of confining myself to my own personal winter as I abandoned selfishness for the good of others. Now I realize... my second chance was not for that...

“So as the snow melts and I usher the season of change.”

Jake suddenly knew what that feeling he felt was. It was the same feeling he felt the first day he stood before the three humans that night.

“As winter ends and the rain falls.”

A feeling of competitiveness that could not be born from fighting beasts and monsters of the multiverse.

No, it was one that could only be realized through fighting those of his own species to stand at the apex. Jake did not comprehend what was happening and quite frankly didn't care to know. He just wanted to see the result.

“So let it come.”

Jake grinned as rays of sunlight bathed Yalsten, and the rain fell upon his skin. He felt the atmospheric mana of the entire area skyrocket to entirely new levels as if the system itself fed more into Yalsten out of nowhere. He felt an aura wash upon him that made him aware that whatever monster stood before him was on another level than anything he had ever faced before.

“My...

He felt his own heartbeat and bloodline revel as he drew his scimitar and pushed Limit Shatter to 30% without any hesitation.

“Springtime Advent.”

Chapter 345: Peak of Humanity

Jake stood with his eyes open wide in shock as he was blinded for a moment. Not only were his eyes blind, but so was his sphere. He saw nothing but pure energy as it washed over him, but only for a moment before a figure appeared before him.

Long black hair flowed through the air from the power exhibited from the man’s body, a bare chest of muscles with not a single wrinkle or sign of weakness in sight. If not for the all-too-familiar wounds Jake knew he had caused himself, he wouldn’t recognize the person before him.

For who now stood there was a man no older than himself, a sword in hand as he pointed it skywards. He looked up towards the sky that was now filled with clouds that had occasional holes to let sunlight through.

The Sword Saint looked down, and what met Jake was not the same sunken eyes he had stared into so many times before, but two deep blue eyes that were in no way natural. Jake narrowed his gaze as he bent his knees, ready for what was to come.

“I have been blind for too long,” the Sword Saint said as he smiled at Jake. “Thank you. Now... this is presumptuous of me to ask... but-“

“Come.”

Jake didn't need to say more as the swordsman grinned with a childlike smile that fit his younger appearance far more. Then, just as Jake thought it was kind of funny, his danger sense suddenly exploded as he raised his blade on instinct and blocked.

Just in time, too, as he felt an impact upon his blade stronger than even the blows from the Monarch of Blood. He purposefully lifted himself off the ground and allowed himself to be blasted back, giving him a chance to stabilize as he felt a faint pulse of mana behind him as the figure of the Saint appeared.

Teleportation?

Jake could see no other way to move that fast. He himself spun in the air and landed while facing the Sword Saint, instead teleporting himself backward the moment his feet touched the ground. The swordsman didn't teleport again but merely stepped on the ground too as the soil was ripped up, and he flew towards Jake as his blade cut upwards.

Stronger. Faster. What did he do?

He naturally didn't get an answer as he was forced to dodge the swing of the sword. Jake barely managed to slip by it, but it turned in the air at an impossible angle. Once more, he avoided it by a hair's breadth only due to his near-precognitive intuition and danger sense.

How and why the man had transformed, Jake didn't fully comprehend. Did he suddenly gain a skill upgrade that allowed him to change? He had already ruled out the Saint awakening a Bloodline as he didn't feel anything... so what else was there?

Jake blocked with his scimitar as he was blasted back again. Without even being sure how it had happened, he got a slash on his arm, and he gritted his teeth as he landed, kicking up the soil.

It doesn't matter now...

He wouldn't figure it out just by asking himself. Instead, he would just have to ask the old man after their duel. The Sword Saint had changed, but the situation hadn't... they were still just two humans fighting, one of them suddenly getting an unexpected powerup.

Mana condensed all around Jake as he stopped holding anything back. Pride of the Malefic Viper activated as he took dominion of the area around him, and his wings appeared and began pumping out poison mist. He also didn't hesitate to begin using poison on his weapons.

Surprisingly enough, the Sword Saint stopped when he saw Jake apply his poison, patiently waiting for him to be done. They exchanged looks, and Jake saw the absolute confidence in the face of the man. Jake felt his own heart beat faster as his excitement grew.

He pointed towards the Sword Saint as his arcane bolts appeared, and the formerly old man reacted by disappearing. Jake felt the movement of mana on his right as he fired his bolts that way, and just in time to hit the appearing form of the swordsman. However, he failed to do anything as the bolts were all simply cut in two and failed to explode.

Jake used Gaze of the Apex Hunter to avoid getting hit as he teleported back, drawing his bow as he fired off a Splitting Arrow. Once more, the sword simply swept to the side, and as all the arrows exploded, not a single trace of the explosion managed to reach his opponent.

Not that Jake was in any way discouraged as he teleported again just in time to avoid the Sword Saint appearing. Twisting in the air, he drew the bowstring and felt time slow down as arcane energy revolved around him.

Arcane Powershot was released, and he didn't wait to see it hit before he nocked another arrow and prepared to repeat the attack. He saw the Sword Saint appear, and, to Jake's surprise, he didn't even try to dodge the arrow. Instead, he simply pointed his blade forward, and in a move that left Jake completely dumbstruck, met it directly with the tip of his blade. The Sword Saint barely made the two weapons touch, and with a slight movement of the wrist, redirected the arrow and made it whistle straight past him to hit a hill far in the background.

Once more, they made eye contact as Jake fired a second Arcane Powershot while also giving a look of pure respect. Blocking his arrow that way wasn't something he had seen coming at all, and it quite frankly looked cool as fuck. Of course, Jake would have to make sure the Saint couldn't repeat the same trick for the next one.

The Arcane Powershot tore through the terrain, and Jake used Gaze without any hesitation or restraint as he didn't break eye contact. The old man froze completely as the arrow approached. Yet at that very moment, the world responded as rain condensed to revolve around his outstretched blade, making it move even if the man's body couldn't.

It was another neat unexpected trick... but Jake's Arcane Powershot was not weak either. The Sword Saint only partly blocked it as the arrow exploded upon impact with his blade, sending the swordsman flying back from the blast.

He elegantly floated through the air and landed on the ground, clear marks present on his arms and chest from the explosion – a bit of poison also mixed into the wounds.

Stronger... faster... but not that much more durable, Jake concluded.

Jake also began theorizing the Sword Saint's skills were somehow limited as he had yet to see many used so far besides the teleportation and a few tricks with his sword. No shitty water magic like before, that was for sure.

Both of them moved again as Jake teleported to avoid another swipe of the blade as the Sword Saint appeared right in front of him. He felt as his own body was filled with power from Limit Shatter, and he was stronger than before for sure... about as strong as he was versus the Monarch of Blood, perhaps. The difference was that Jake didn't get any benefits from Big Game Arcane Hunter at all, and of course, one other tiny detail.

The current Sword Saint was stronger than the vampire. The only aspect he wasn't superior in was durability and means of attack. Jake only had to repeatedly dodge the blade of his opponent and look for openings as he believed that the Sword Saint couldn't use all his ski-

"Thousand Droplets."

Jake's eyes opened wide as he quickly summoned a barrier of arcane energy and readied himself with his scales as he dodged backward, unable to teleport as the attack had already arrived. He barely managed to raise an arm to cover his face as he felt like hundreds of tiny stabs hit him and sent him flying back, leaving dozens of trails of blood in his wake.

He had miscalculated... perhaps been baited in as Jake recognized his fuck-up. His entire body hurt, but now was no time to wallow as he made a platform of mana below his feet to teleport away just in time to avoid the Sword Saint appearing behind him.

Another teleport later, and he had gotten some distance as he condensed bolts of mana along with orbs that he sent flying all around him to make them explode. He didn't expect to hit, just buy enough time to consume a health potion as he felt his damaged body heal. Coupled with the damage he took before the Saint transformed, it was needed.

It was also only now that he really noticed he was actually losing a bit of health from Limit Shatter. It was subtle and not much, but it was there. Compared to the Sword Saint, his boosting skill was clearly far worse. The formerly old man hadn't used any boosting skills as far as Jake could tell... or, well, he probably had; Jake just couldn't detect it because the man was overflowing with power. Or was the transformation a boosting skill? If it was, that would be wild.

Stopping his wastage of mana by trying to hit the teleporting Sword Saint, Jake began firing arrows again, alternating between explosive and stable ones, while also tossing in the occasional Splitting Arrow to try and hit his foe.

Jake decided to try and mix things up as he attempted to use his Pride of the Malefic Viper to exploit a weakness. He tried to attack the man's feeling of responsibility towards his family and how he was gambling a divine item on their duel in an attempt to get an opening. It was a trick that would likely have worked before, but now...

The moment he attacked with Pride, an illusory sword flashed in his mind as he felt backlash and was forced to stop right away, still feeling a slight headache. He was lucky that he didn't dodge attacked based on conscious thought because if he did need to think, then his failed attempt would have cost him an arm.

Continuing to dodge back, Jake felt himself pressured as he found fewer and fewer chances to counter. He tried different things, but the only real method he had to make openings was Gaze, preferably

coupled with large explosions. His poison mist even proved ineffective as the god damn rain suppressed it.

Yet, despite it all, Jake felt a rush he hadn't felt since that first night. It spoke to a particular part of him to battle a human on his own 'level' in ways battling a beast or monster simply couldn't. He reveled in that feeling, and he felt the heartbeat that only came when Jake – and thus his Bloodline – was truly excited.

He pushed himself with everything he had as they exchanged blows, but no matter his excitement, one thing was clear – the Sword Saint was coming out on top. Their positions had reversed completely, with Jake now trying to adapt and find a way to fight back.

"Control the flow," Jake suddenly heard the Sword Saint say as he made a casual swipe to send Jake away. "You still underutilize your abilities. You already know your path of magic; make it so your body does too."

Jake frowned as the Sword Saint didn't attack again but looked back with scrutiny.

"If you do not overcome your limits, then this round is mine," the Sword Saint empathized.

Lose?

The sentiment was not one he would even dare entertain. Jake felt his heartbeat speed up as he sped up his energy in tandem with it, and he didn't wait for it to work but attacked, feeling every movement of his body.

With his scimitar, he engaged the Sword Saint in melee, the other party only parrying. “You also need to work on your swordsmanship,” the Saint cheekily said as he purposefully deflected Jake’s blade and kicked him in the stomach to send him back.

Jake got up right away and charged again. Arcane energy began revolving around him, making it momentarily look like he was casting Arcane Powershot. It wasn’t entirely wrong, as the sentiment and mechanics were very much the same.

He felt his entire body as the energy ran through it. Stability within destruction. He needed destructive power while at the same time keeping it stable enough to not damage him. The energy began flowing faster and more directed, yet at the same time it seemed almost chaotic. Jake began taking damage as his body failed to endure his own energy, even more so than before. That is when a faint purple spark entered his inner energy.

The Sword Saint smiled as he looked at Jake. “Now embrace it.”

Like a spark had been lit, his invisible expulsion of stamina suddenly changed color as an explosion of pure arcane energy pushed back the Sword Saint, and Jake felt his entire body enter a new equilibrium. He stopped taking damage as the arcane energy revolved within, boosting him up while keeping him entirely stable.

Skill Upgraded: [Limit Shatter (Epic)] -->[Arcane Limit Shatter (Ancient)]

Jake felt himself be stronger in every way as he rushed forward with his scimitar, arcane energy, and dark mana revolving around it as he used Descending Dark Arcane Fang with his full power, making space vibrate in his surroundings as the weapon shot down like a-

Cling!

A casual swipe of his opponent's sword sent all of the momentum of his attack barreling into the ground as he poked a hole dozens of meters deep into the soil while not even touching a hair on the Sword Saint's body.

"Good!" the Sword Saint yelled as he swiped his blade up, making Jake scramble to block as he was sent tumbling back with a long gash up his arm. He spun around in the air as he rapidly fired two arrows at the Sword Saint, the first of which got blocked and the second one exploding.

A barrier of water summoned by his blade blocked it, but it gave Jake time to land and channel arcane energy as it condensed even faster than before. With arcane energy infused into his Limit Shatter, his connection to the affinity had grown even more as the magic became both stronger and faster to summon.

More than a dozen orbs of arcane energy appeared all around him as Jake took a single step forward – bringing all of them with him as the Sword Saint now found himself surrounded by the bombs. For a brief moment, their eyes met as an explosion rocked the area, with Jake already soaring into the air as he fired arrows down one by one, all of them exploding.

The onlookers were pushed back as arcane explosions stretched for hundreds of meters in all directions, Jake still feeling the Sword Saint in the middle of it. As a final attack, he aimed the bow down and began charging Arcane Powershot as all of the arcane mana in the bow was pulled out and formed an arrow. He took aim and fired it straight down as he prepared to Scorch the Plains in pure arcane energy.

With great speed, it descended and smashed into the ground.

Neil was looking at the fight, completely immersed and dumbstruck. Two humans who had both been introduced to the system for as long as he had were battling it out like two absolute monsters. Their exchanges were faster than he could see, and he and his party members became utterly aware of how far they had to go. All five of them wouldn't even last a dozen seconds against either of them. What they were witnessing was the peak of humanity - Earth's humanity, at least.

He saw Lord Thayne use space magic and teleport forward as he brought the bombs tied to him along, as the entire area exploded. Neil was forced to summon barriers, assisted by Silas and others around him.

The more powerful people summoned their own shields or found ways to block it, but they were not gathered all together like before. Neil believed they could handle the fallout from Lord Thayne's attack until suddenly, another arrow fell with incredible speed. He heard it explode as suddenly a wave of pure destruction headed towards him and everyone else.

Neil's eyes opened wide as he heard the sound of people teleporting out in panic with their Hunter Insignias. Neil naively thought for a moment he could block it, but that thought was dispelled instantly when the blast got closer, and he activated his own Insignia to leave the Hunt.

Yet just before he disappeared, he heard a single word echo out from the epicenter of the explosion.

"Rainblade."

Chapter 346: Summer Rain

Jake felt the arcane energy wash over him from the explosion, even if he was a kilometer up in the air as it completely destroyed the Mistless Plains beneath him. It had to have done a lot of damage, and Jake was already preparing a follow-up as he heard the voice of the Sword Saint.

“Rainblade.”

A feeling of dread spread up his back as he suddenly felt the arcane energy move. It began spinning around itself as it gathered contrary to Jake’s will. His eye opened wide as he finally saw the Sword Saint stand there, his body covered in even more wounds. But, he had the same stable and confident stance as before while he spun his blade in his hand, making the arcane energy spin along with it as he saw millions of raindrops guide and control it.

He pointed the spinning blade up towards Jake, and he saw all of the arcane energy be gathered in the middle of what looked like a whirlpool of water. He stared into the eye of the storm that was his own destructive energy as his danger sense reacted.

BOOM!

A massive blast of arcane energy and rainwater was blasted up towards Jake as if fired from a canon. Jake reacted by teleporting away, narrowly dodging the projectile of pure energy fired after him. Then, with shock, he looked at it fly into the air as it blew up several kilometers above him, sending a wave of force down that destabilized him in the air for a moment.

Turning his head, he looked down at the confidently smiling Sword Saint as Jake became utterly aware.

He didn't need to do that... he just wanted to see if he could.

Smiling, Jake nearly failed to hold back a laugh as he dove straight into continuing his attack. He shot down a Splitting Arrow as the Sword Saint also responded by swinging his blade. Jake believed he was doing it to block Jake's arrows... he was wrong.

A crescent wave of water was fired up towards him, and contrary to what he would expect, it only grew in power as it flew through the air and absorbed any and all rainwater it encountered. By the time it reached Jake, it was more than fifty meters in length while still as thin as a string of hair.

Jake avoided it but felt like he was being subtly pulled towards the attack as the rainwater impacted his body and softly pushed him. That is when Jake noticed something else. His Scales of the Malefic Viper had been active from the start, but now after the Sword Saint had used Rainblade, he felt his scales slowly begin to absorb mana.

What did this mean? It meant that even the damn rain had become a passive effect that slowly began dealing damage or some other adverse effect. It was ridiculous but far less ridiculous than what the Sword Saint did next.

The old man pointed his sword upwards, aiming at him. Jake expected him to maybe extend it or something like that, but his danger sense activated from all around him. In a swift move, Jake spread out his arms as he formed an arcane barrier around himself and poured in as much power as he could before the attack arrived.

"Torrential Droplets."

Every single raindrop with dozens of kilometers reacted as they all began glowing with mana and moved according to the swordsman's will. Millions of drops headed towards Jake faster than the speed of sound, and he knew his current defenses would in no way be enough.

Jake screamed as he fueled his mana and will into Pride of the Malefic Viper as he poured more mana into it than ever before. A domain was established as a purple glow emanated from his body. Barrier after barrier appeared around him, creating a ball of nearly pure arcane energy more than twenty meters across as the raindrops arrived.

A battle between the rain and his arcane energy began as Jake was attacked from all sides, his arcane energy slowly being whittled away from the millions of small attacks. The sphere of arcane energy slowly shrank as it was consumed from twenty to fifteen to ten meters. It kept shrinking by a meter every second as Jake held on until it was only a mere four meters across, still obscuring Jake's body.

Then suddenly, the attack stopped. Jake momentarily felt a moment of relief before his danger sense reacted again, making him twist his body. A blade of rainwater cut through his sphere as it swept upwards, Jake groaning in pain as his thigh was stabbed into and cut through.

It hurt, but it wasn't serious enough to impact him. The only bad thing was his mana expenditure which was not insignificant. But at the same time, he had a feeling that the Sword Saint wouldn't be able to keep up his current power forever.

Because when he stared down and looked at the Sword Saint below him. His body was more damaged than before, but he also noticed something else. A few faint signs of wrinkles had appeared on his face, and a couple of strands of gray hair had appeared. It was subtle, but it looked like he had aged at least a few years since their battle had begun. That meant he was on a timer, and whatever he had done was temporary. Then again, they were kind of both on a timer.

Treasure Hunt will end in: 31:01

Around them, space was slowly compressing and breaking apart more and more, and soon it would encroach upon the Mistless Plains. Their battlefield would slowly begin to shrink as time went by, but at least for now, they still had plenty of space to fight.

Jake stared down at the Sword Saint as he yelled, his curiosity failing to be held back:

“What exactly did you do?”

The Sword Saint simply smirked as he answered: “I do not believe the answer to that question is pertinent right now. What is more important is how long it will last. Spring is but one of four seasons, and as summer approaches, so must fall before we enter winter once more. It is a cycle that forever repeats... so please, as springtime remains, let us fight till the end of summer to our heart’s content.”

Jake shook his head at the non-answer. Good enough, I guess?

He moved as the Sword Saint also reacted, teleporting once more. Jake had finally figured out how the teleportation worked too, and it was honestly bullshit. The Sword Saint didn’t just randomly teleport somewhere. Instead, he switched places... with a fucking raindrop.

And when there was a god damn rainstorm, it made no practical difference if it was just pure teleportation or not. The only real difference was perhaps the forewarning as the Sword Saint infused the drop with mana and then changed places. It was brief but enough for Jake’s keen senses to detect it and react every time.

Jake dodged the sword as he flew backward, flapping his wings as the Sword Saint chased him as they flew through the rain. He wanted to avoid melee more than anything, as he was at a huge disadvantage in every aspect but avoidability.

It wasn't merely a question of power either. Every exchange they had didn't result in Jake being injured because he was significantly slower or weaker. No, it was that every single sword swing moved in near-unpredictable ways, and he felt like his scimitar was magnetically pulled to his opponent's sword whenever he tried to counter, or that it was somehow pushed away whenever he tried to block.

The battle continued as Jake fled back and tried to kite the Sword Saint, but every once in a while, the man still found an opening and landed a blow as Jake's body got more and more bloody. However, Jake did begin to find ways of fighting back.

Dodging back, Jake summoned four small bottles as arcane mana condensed around them, breaking and destroying the glass entirely, leaving only the liquid within. It was an expensive way to fight but necessary. Jake manipulated the four bolts manually as he also fired his bow, looking for an opening. More bolts soon joined the original four, these ones without any bottles within. His head hurt from controlling them while also fighting semi-normally, but the domain from Pride allowed him to keep up the control.

The Sword Saint cut his bolts down as Jake also fired his arrows while trying to avoid taking damage himself. The occasional explosion made some space as Jake consumed his resources at high speed. His opponent seemed to not be in a rush either as the occasional raindrop was fired from his blade and hit Jake, or the blade extended to land a cut.

Jake smiled under his mask as he found an opening. He had bought time to channel an Arcane Powershot as Gaze activated, and the bolts closed in on the Sword Saint. Naturally, the Sword Saint

focused on the Powershot as he only swiftly moved his blade as an omnidirectional cut came out from his body, making all of the bolts break.

Preparing to block the Arcane Powershot, he noticed the liquid coming out of some of the bolts too late. For the first time since his transformation, Jake saw the man open his eyes display a hint of fear as his body was splashed with four bottles' worth of uncommon Necrotic Poison.

He reacted fast as he channeled his abilities to get the liquid off as rainwater gathered and revolved around his body to wash it off while also blocking the Powershot. Jake pressed his advantage as he fired more exploding arcane arrows.

As a final thing, he activated something he had been waiting to use. Throughout their entire fight, arcane energy had been building up within his Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter. Even before his transformation, it had been building up – and the transformation hadn't made the charge disappear either.

Jake activated it as the area flashed with arcane energy for a brief moment, further amplified by his Arcane Powershot exploding as Jake felt himself be pushed back. He felt the damage done to his opponent and prepared to keep attacking as a crescent wave made him abandon the idea.

A circular explosion of water pushed away all of the arcane energy as the Sword Saint's form was revealed. His chest and shoulders were covered with signs of necrosis and wounds leaking blood, with faint arcane energy covered every inch of his skin. He was breathing heavily as he stood there, his blade raised. The only part nearly untouched was his face that still had the same confident look.

Signs of aging were also far more evident now as he looked almost middle-aged. The black hair had clear signs of graying, and many wrinkles covered his body and face. Jake felt like he was beginning to get an advantage, but the moment that thought appeared, it was crushed.

“As spring comes to an end, we enter the longest days. May we embrace the blessing of the sun, but never shun the gifts of the sky as we welcome the great treasure:-”

Jake felt the temperature faintly increase around him as the mana intensity did too. The rays of sunlight became brighter as the clouds changed color and became darker than before as the rainfall increased.

“Summer Rain.”

Warm droplets fell upon him as Jake felt the mana density around him only grow. He did not fully understand what the Sword Saint had just done as he looked up and saw the now middle-aged man simply stare at the sky as sunlight and rain hit him. That is when Jake noticed something... the rain was rejuvenating him.

Meanwhile, Jake noticed his body begin to feel worn down and he felt heavier as the rain continued to fall on him. It felt tiring to stand there in the warm rain, even if it was also soothing.

Shaking his head, Jake nearly smacked himself as he exited his stupor. No, now was not the time to relax as the Sword Saint was slowly healed. He pushed his arcane energy within his body further to make himself properly wake up as he drew his bow again.

Every moment he felt slightly slower than before, and even his mana and stamina didn't move as fast as before. Gritting his teeth, he still fired a Splitting Arrow of exploding arrows towards the Sword Saint, finally forcing the man to no longer just bask in the sunlight and rain.

The swordsman teleported and appeared to Jake's side just like before. Jake tried to also react like before, but his body just didn't move as he wanted it to. He was off by a few centimeters as he took a cut in his side, and when he tried to block, he was also slightly too slow as he was cut on his arm.

This is...

Jake used One Step Mile to try and get away but found himself only traveling roughly half the distance he had wanted to. It didn't take long for the swordsman to catch up and force Jake even further back in a desperate struggle to not have his limbs cut off.

...Like being underwater.

He got flashbacks to being submerged deep underwater in the Vault as he tried to fight off the effects of the rain. Arcane mana whirled around him as Arcane Limit Shatter was pushed as far as he could take it. He managed to shrug off a bit of the suppression from the rain but still found himself pushed back by the Sword Saint, who relentlessly attacked.

I just need to buy time, he told himself as he narrowly dodged the blade, only to see himself caught by a follow-up attack. Each wound was small and barely did any damage, but they accumulated as he lost more and more ground.

He tried to summon some more arcane magic but found it far more difficult as the rain seemed to corrode the arcane energy. One massive difference between the Vault and here was that in the Vault, the water was just there. It was a natural part of the environment and was entirely neutral. But the rainwater? The rainwater was so full of intent and will that Jake found it suffocating.

With him being slowed down, Jake failed again and again to get enough distance between them. He tried to use more magic, threw bottles, and whatever else he could quickly think of, but every move was thwarted.

Jake was slowly absolutely clear on one thing... I'm losing.

Losing to someone two levels below himself.

Losing to someone who should at most be his equal.

Losing to another human.

THUMP!

Jake was cut again as the blade managed to swipe down his arm and through his thigh, leaving a long gash.

THUMP!

He was stabbed in the shoulder, and upper arm as his eyes slowly began shining more than before. Jake failed to hold back a massive grin beneath his mask. He refused to lose.

The Sword Saint tried to follow up as he saw a huge opening purposefully made, allowing Jake to lean in as he headbutted the Sword Saint in the chest.

More power.

Jake closed in as he forfeited his blade and instead punched the Sword Saint with his arcane-infused gloves, making the man block with his own hand. Not letting up, Jake kicked him as he bent his body in an impossible shape to avoid a counter as he moved with bestial intent.

More.

Arcane energy began whirling around Jake as he pushed all of his energy even further beyond as slowly pink-purple fissures formed on his skin and scales, and the remnant arcane energy flowed out of him. He had pushed Arcane Limit Break to above what it should be capable of as he was overflowing with power at the cost of his own health.

More!

Jake felt his own body inside and out as he superimposed Pride of the Malefic Viper to contain the energy within his body as he controlled it. He refused to see his own arcane energy run rampant when it was his damn energy. If it was going to destroy him, it would damn well be with his own consent.

MORE!

The effect of the rain was pushed away as a faint layer of pure arcane energy covered the dark green scales and whatever skin was visible. Jake's entire body exploded with energy and sent the Sword Saint flying back, blocking with his blade as the now middle-aged man looked up with surprise. The Sword Saint had barely stabilized himself in the air when an arrow hit him in the shoulder, sending him spinning through the air.

Jake stood there, looking down as his entire body burned. The bow and arrow he was nocking glowing with arcane energy as remnants of it left his body and fused with his weapon. The fissures of arcane energy emanated arcane-infused stamina as it was contained close to his skin instead of simply flowing away. The rain hit the shield and slid down it without having the slightest effect.

Because while the Sword Saint could transform and reveal far more power and tricks than expected... Jake also had a bloodline with a pertinacity to refuse to lose and push him further beyond what should be possible.

Both men stared down at each other as the third round began, Jake barely taking notice of the notification.

Skill Upgraded: [Arcane Limit Shatter (Ancient)]--> [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

Chapter 347: A (Potentially) Momentous Duel

Caleb stared up into the air as he felt the pressure upon him from the rain as well as the auras of the two men fighting. He still stood tall, more for show than anything else, as he really wanted to just sit down and take a breather, but as the Judge of the Court of Shadows, he had to keep up appearances.

Carmen was sitting on the ground unbothered. There weren't that many more around as pretty much everyone else had left, leaving only himself, Carmen, Sylphie, Eron, Reika, Maria, and one or two more who had managed to resist the wave of arcane energy earlier. Even people like Sultan had played it safe and left.

Up there, far above, flashes pulsed through the air every time their attacks clashed, a glowing figure of pink-purple energy flying and teleporting around at incredible speeds. On his trail, following him closely, was a swordsman only really visible due to the huge shockwaves of power every swing of his sword sent out. If this duel truly had any meaning besides a bet, Caleb truly didn't know. Perhaps it would be a momentous battle that defined Earth's destiny to come, or maybe it was just two people having a blast, with no real meaning besides their own personal ones.

As he stood there, Caleb had a theory about what the old man had done but no way to confirm it. If his theory proved correct or not didn't really matter in the grand scheme of things because today had made one thing absolutely clear to every single faction of Earth who knew anything about the multiverse outside of their own isolated planet.

These weren't just the two strongest people on Earth. Caleb had access to information spanning much of the multiverse. He knew the standards of geniuses, and he did not have a shadow of doubt in his mind that both his brother and the Sword Saint were monstrous geniuses on a multiversal scale.

He looked at Eron, who stood and paid attention to the fight in odd ways as he seemed to stare at things no one else could see. Caleb shook his head.

First two ridiculous Bloodlines... and now we may even have a Transcendent.

Jake spun in the air as he blocked the blow of the Sword Saint with his scimitar, launching himself back as he rapidly swapped to his bow and fired an arrow.

Still spinning, his foot touched down on a constructed platform as he teleported away, as he fired a near-instantly channeled Arcane Powershot towards the Sword Saint. The swordsman reacted as expected by deflecting the first arrow and dodging the second as he chased Jake closely.

Clashing once more, Jake shot his palms towards the Sword Saint as both exploded with arcane energy, and as both flew away from each other, he raised his hand and rapidly constructed a long spear-like mana bolt which he naturally threw.

Sadly, it did nothing as it was cut in two, both sides flying around the Sword Saint, and even when they exploded, they only hit the constructed barriers of rainwater already covering the Saint's sides.

Jake took the opportunity to swiftly check his notifications as curiosity got the better of him.

Skill Upgraded: [Arcane Limit Shatter (Ancient)]--> [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

[Arcane Awakening (Legendary)] – Arcane energy runs through your veins and body as you embrace the duality of stability and destruction. Revolve, empower, and infuse your stamina with your arcane affinity, making it far more potent while significantly increasing stamina expenditure. Arcane Awakening has four forms. Balanced Form increases all stats by 30% and deals no damage or results in any period of weakness afterward. Destruction Form increases Strength, Agility, Intelligence, Perception, and Willpower by 50%. Stable Form increases Vitality, Toughness, Endurance, Perception, and Willpower by 50%. During a stable Arcane Awakening, your body is covered by a faint barrier of arcane energy at all times, while all your attacks are infused with a slight amount of arcane energy while embracing destruction. Fully awaken your arcane energy to enter Arcane Awakening Form for a boost of 60% in all stats at the cost of severe loss of health every second and a period of weakness after use. During this time, you benefit from both the traits of embracing destruction and stability.

That entire description made a lot of sense to Jake as that was precisely how he felt it work. Needless to say, he was currently in what it called Arcane Awakening Mode. The fissures on his body were leaking pure arcane energy and dealing damage to him, and every single blow he made was infused with even more arcane energy.

His stamina was draining fast along with his health, but even so... it was stable. He did not lose more health the longer time passed, and the health loss was within an acceptable range. Jake had to admit he had surprised himself with the sudden upgrade, but he also knew why he had gotten it.

From the beginning, his arcane affinity had always been linked closely to his Bloodline and his instinctive control of mana. So to impose his affinity upon stamina was only a logical next step, and when he found himself pressed by another human, his Bloodline truly got unruly as Jake's excitement and competitiveness grew to new levels.

Not a single part of him wanted to lose. Not because he would lose out on an item or prestige or anything else stupid like that. He just wanted to win because he was a selfish and arrogant asshole who really didn't like the thought of losing to another human around his own level.

"Got any more tricks?" Jake asked, not even a second having passed since their last clash.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," the Sword Saint said with a smile. "And I do believe it would be more reasonable for me to ask that question."

"I guess we'll just have to find out!"

Jake nocked an arrow as he stepped down at the same time, dodging the expected slash just in time as the Sword Saint teleported up to him. Turning in the air, Jake prepared to fire the arrow as he saw the Sword Saint point his sword straight at him, having predicted Jake's move one step ahead.

What he couldn't expect was Jake's method of blocking.

He raised his foot as the blade extended and slammed into the sole of his boot, sending him flying back as Jake grimaced in pain – yet not a single drop of blood was spilled. Not even the Sword Saint could cut the mighty boots. It still hurt like hell, and Jake was pretty sure he now had internal bleeding in his foot, which wasn't that big of an issue as that was where blood was supposed to be anyway... right?

Getting more space between them, Jake fired another Arcane Powershot at the surprised Sword Saint. It was understandable; comprehending the comfy boots was not a simple matter after all. Not that Saint failed to respond as he did the redirection-block again. By now, the Sword Saint could easily tell the difference between explosive and stable arrows, making it harder for Jake to bait him into blocking over dodging.

Jake kept shooting as they flew around a while longer. The shield from his Arcane Awakening suppressed the Summer Rain effect allowing Jake to be slightly faster than his opponent, but it was a close race, and firing arrows while moving did naturally slow him down.

Yet Jake still thought he had a great advantage as he managed to land the occasional glancing arrow, leaving minor cuts. Minor cuts that became not that minor when factoring in the poison. Even though Jake had to admit his poison did not prove as effective as he hoped as the constant current of water running across the Sword Saint's body washed it away instantly, and the rain slowly healed him as they fought. The man was still slowly and surely losing health, but not as fast as Jake would have liked.

Ah, but Jake had his own healing too. He activated his oft-forgotten leg enchantment as he dodged another crescent wave of water, feeling the warm glow pulse through him, granting him a good portion of vital energy. It wasn't that much, but it helped to keep him going and offset the health-draining effects of Arcane Awakening.

They engaged each other again, as the game of cat and mouse continued, Jake happily kiting and avoiding the swordsman, while his opponent did all he could to try and lock Jake down and land duel-winning blows.

Dodging a blow, Jake tried to follow up with a potshot as the old man used another skill as the rain around him moved.

"Thousand Droplets."

Knowing what was coming, Jake swiftly teleported to the side and appeared to see the Sword Saint had teleported to the exact same place as Jake was read flawlessly once more. His scimitar appeared as he blocked two blows, but Jake was taken by surprise when the third came. The Sword Saint's blade moved in a circular motion, and Jake felt like his wrist was nearly twisted off, and at the same time, the Saint moved in and jabbed his wrist as the scimitar shot out of his hand and down towards the ground.

Without a weapon, perhaps the Sword Saint had expected Jake to be distraught. What he probably hadn't expected was Jake gripping his sword-bearing wrist as Jake placed his palm on the Sword Saint's chest.

Touch of the Malefic Viper

A pulse of pure toxic energy was emitted as Jake's perhaps most potent offensive skill was activated. The passive current of water covering the Sword Saint's body offered no resistance as he made contact, sending the energy into his opponent.

The swordsman reacted fast as he used his free hand to grab Jake's clothes and moved his feet as suddenly Jake found himself upside down with a foot smashing into his stomach, sending him flying downwards. That was some jiu-jitsu shit right there, Jake grinned as he stabilized, teleporting away to dodge a follow-up attack from the Sword Saint, who now had a dark green glowing handprint on his chest.

Jake came out of that one on top as he began infusing his gloves with mana while drawing his bow once more. A few Splitting Arrows later and plenty of explosions, Jake found a new issue creeping up on him.

Faint pulses of space mana reached them as the arena was shrinking. The destruction of Yalsten had encroached upon the Mistless Plains as if they were within a shrinking sphere. It grew smaller and smaller every second, as faint cracks of space began reaching them while up in the air, it beginning truly evident when a large crack suddenly appeared between them before quickly mending itself again.

Both of them stopped, no doubt both checking the countdown.

Treasure Hunt will end in: 10:47

None of them had expected their duel to take this long, and neither had any intentions of stopping even if the world was literally falling apart around them. Instead, they merely acknowledged it as another battle factor and moved on as their clash continued, space shrinking evermore around them.

It did mean that Jake had less and less space to dodge with. Unfortunately, this meant it didn't take long before he once more found himself in melee. The Sword Saint cut towards him, forcing him to sway and weave as he avoided the strikes until finally, one came he couldn't simply dodge.

Jake moved his hand as it glowed with pure arcane energy as he chopped towards the edge of the blade. An arcane explosion shot them apart as Jake's hand was faintly bleeding as a bone or two had broken in it, but the glove was still intact courtesy of the enchantment, making it incredibly durable when infused with arcane energy.

He chose to go against expectations once more as Jake teleported and appeared right in front of the swordsman, who now truly was beginning to look like the same old man. Jake punched forwards, making the man block with his blade, as Jake kicked him in the side.

Chasing him down, the old man countered as he swiped his blade forward. Jake met it face-first – literally – as he blocked with his mask, sending himself spinning as he used the momentum to kick the Sword Saint on the chin, sending him flying upwards and Jake downwards.

Jake accelerated his descent as he pushed blood out of his now broken nose as he reached the ground. Then, a string of arcane mana manifested and pulled the scimitar embedded in the ground towards him.

A crescent wave of rainwater severed the string before the weapon reached him, making it still be mid-air as the Sword Saint's form barreled down towards him. Jake quickly recalled a similar situation he had once found himself in as he grinned and summoned the Pillar of Encumbrance.

With full power, he increased the weight and infused it with arcane mana as he swung it straight at the charging man in a strike that would no doubt leave him with more broken bones than not. It was like when Jake had descended towards the Altmar Census Golem, but the situations reversed, him now in the striking position.

His entire body moved as he swung the long staff as a tons-heavy pillar met blade.

Jake expected to feel a heavy impact when the two met, but instead, he felt like he hadn't hit anything. Yet with his eyes, he saw the sword hit the Pillar, but somehow the old man merely moved his blade as the Pillar followed along with it, making it fly straight past him as Jake's swing continued, sending him completely off balance.

What?

To make it worse, the old man was still headed towards him with full speed. Jake tried to teleport in that final moment but found himself completely restricted as suddenly the rainfall intensified more than ever more, pressing down on him even through the Arcane Awakening shield.

He saw the deep blue eyes of the Sword Saint as the blade was swung again, headed straight towards his chest.

Halfway through the swing, it suddenly slowed down. The raindrops around him seemed to almost stop in mid-air as they slowly descended, with even the movements of mana and space appearing to cease as Jake claimed the moment as his own.

Moment of the Primal Hunter

It was the first activation in a long time, and Jake planned on taking full advantage. The scimitar in mid-air was pulled faster towards him than before as he moved to attack. Yet at that moment, he felt faint movements of mana as the Sword Saint's teleportation seemed to be automatically triggered.

Oh no, you fucking don't!

Jake caught the blade as he swept it towards the body of the old man, the edge burning with pure arcane energy. It was as if the world itself then reacted as the slow rainwater between his blade and the body of the Saint became filled with mana as they impeded his swing. It was undoubtedly a defensive skill like Jake's own Moment, but it was clear that the skill forcefully upgraded by his Bloodline came out on top. Everything was done to stop Jake's attack as he finished his swing just as the Sword Saint was whisked away by his magic.

The old man appeared a few hundred meters away as time resumed, and he fell to his knees, grasping his side as he heaved in painful breaths of air – quite a bit lighter than before the teleportation.

Back at where Jake was, he stood with a bloody scimitar as a severed arm hit the ground with a thunk.

The Sword Saint had his entire left arm severed, and the scimitar had gone halfway through his chest, nearly bisecting him entirely before his own defensive skill had activated to save him with the teleport. A part of Jake was happy that the old man had shown him the respect of activating his Moment of the Primal Hunter, which was proof that he was taking the battle seriously and not holding back. Hence why he retaliated in kind, not holding back from performing potentially lethal blows. Also... Eron would probably help heal them if they really got close to dying. Probably.

Both of them met each other's eyes as they knew the fight was entering the absolutely final phase as space continued to collapse all around them.

Treasure Hunt will end in: 4:47

The Sword Saint stood up as he lifted his blade while Jake summoned and nocked an arrow as the duel moved onto its final phase.

Chapter 348: To the End

The rain fell upon Yalsten, not even affected by the fact that the clouds were no longer visible due to space having broken apart. As long as the effects of the Sword Saint's Springtime Advent remained, so would the rain continue to fall. Their existence contradicted all logic and rules, but such was only to be expected based on what had been used to summon them.

Down on the wet soil, two figures fought as they clashed, again and again, sending explosions and soil flying everywhere. More blood than should have belonged to merely two people soaked the ground, mixing with the rain as neither party gave up.

Caleb stared at the rain as he felt space close in on him from behind. Carmen and Sylphie now both stood up as they also stared, concerned at the collapsing world behind them.

"I believe we should leave," Caleb said. He really wanted to stay and observe, but he also knew he could not get closer to avoid the collapsing space. All of them wanted to see how this duel would end, but sadly reality did not make that possible.

Even Eron agreed as the man who was said to be immortal clearly didn't want to wrestle with what lay beyond the broken world of Yalsten. Understandable, as such a place was the domain of the gods and not somewhere a mortal should ever find themselves.

With resignation, their figures disappeared one by one, with Sylphie and Carmen being the third and second-to-last to leave, with only Caleb remaining.

Good luck, Jake, he thought as he disappeared, unsure of who would win till the very end.

Treasure Hunt will end in: 4:00

Jake and the Sword Saint sent each other flying away from each other as the water and arcane energy mixed, their blades both soaked in their respective energies. The old man had lost an arm, but his movements were still sharp and powerful, but it did allow Jake to keep up in melee a bit more easily.

Both of them were low on resources, and time was running out in every sense of the word. The only place they were decently okay was in health points and the reason for that? The potion cooldown. The Sword Saint had used one after he lost his arm, and Jake had also used it at the same time as he had the opportunity and had a strong feeling he would need it. The potion did not allow the Saint to regrow his arm or anything like that, and neither did it even come close to healing the more than a hundred cuts and stabs on Jake's body. What it did allow them to do was keep fighting.

The old man was now truly old, and all his hair was gray with wrinkles everywhere on his body and face. For every second that passed, he got closer and closer to his original appearance, and Jake felt like he had weakened, but far less than Jake would have expected. But even if he had weakened, it wasn't like Jake himself was in top form.

Jake felt the toll on his body primarily caused by Arcane Awakening as more and more of his skin flayed and broke – him having already deactivated Scales of the Malefic Viper to save on mana as they didn't help much anymore.

The Sword Saint didn't use his skills anymore, except for the occasional crescent wave, raindrop attack, and barrier of rain, but even those had stopped now. Jake was also certain the old man would not be able to keep going anymore if not for the effects of the Summer Rain skill constantly rejuvenating him. Without it, the poison should have left him incapacitated by now.

A crack of space suddenly separated them once more, not only creating space but also making Jake's arrow disappear as it was turned to nothing. For every moment passing, those cracks appeared more and more frequently, forcing the two of them to wrestle with them while battling.

The intensity of Jake's Arcane Awakening was slowly lessening as the rainfall also wasn't as heavy anymore, the Sword Saint barely manipulating it as they fought, likely out of resources to do so. Jake tried to take advantage as the old man didn't want to teleport anymore, as he fired a Splitting Arrow with the sparse resources he had remaining.

At the same time, he tried to use Gaze but felt it only activate for an incredibly brief moment as his head hurt, and both of his eyes began dripping with blood from overuse. However, it was worth it as the Sword Saint was struck by two arrows, one in his arm and another in his stomach, making him groan in pain. The only negative thing was that the Saint had still managed to deflect the arrow with poison on it.

Jake tried to use the opening but found the Sword Saint already attacking him, forcing him to draw his own scimitar to block. Jake stepped down as he used One Step Mile, but the moment he did, his danger sense flared as Jake only teleported five or so meters before a tear of space appeared where he had just disappeared from and all the way to where he was, forcing him to jump back to avoid it.

One Step Mile is out of the question, Jake told himself as both he and the Sword Saint saw the tear in space, the old man clearly also deciding to stay far away from anything even close to teleportation for good.

During the fight with the Monarch and the first part of this fight, the less stable space was more helpful than anything to Jake. It made using One Step Mile easier as if he had less to fight against to teleport, but now it was like he simply tore a hole whenever he used the skill, creating a dangerous situation. The brief thought of using it offensively appeared, but he seriously doubted he could make it work and was fully aware that he had just gotten lucky to not get caught in it himself. Additionally... he couldn't really afford spending the stamina on it.

Hunt will end in: 3:00

Jake struck first as he fired an arrow, forcing the Sword Saint to deflect it, as another one swiftly followed, which exploded, making the old man get sent back slightly. Arcane Arrow was simply the most cost-effective skill he had, which is why he kept using it, with the exploding ones costing a good deal more than the stable version.

Needless to say, Jake wanted to avoid running out of stamina as if Arcane Awakening ended before the duel ended would be what in the fighting business was called a very bad time.

They kept up the exchange of arrows shot and the old man blocking as the Saint slowly came closer, one step at a time. Jake could no longer retreat due to the world shrinking and was forced to seek downwards as soon they found themselves on solid ground back on the Mistless Plains, Jake instantly dispelling his wings to avoid the upkeep.

If Yalsten was a sphere, then the center of the Mistless Plains at ground level was the absolute middle, making that the last place to collapse, forcing them closer and closer to it. Jake kept shooting arrows as long as he could before space finally shrank to be only a few hundred meters across, and with the Sword Saint getting closer, he didn't have time to nock and release another arrow.

He switched to his scimitar just in time as their blades met, both of them weaker and slower than before. Three arrows stuck out of the Saint's body, reduced from four as the old man had ripped the one poisoned arrow out already.

Jake fought the Sword Saint as they exchanged several blows, him losing out as he was simply outmatched in skill. He had it going for him that he managed to dodge most counters, but it was simply impossible to dodge them all.

Will end in: 2:00

Taking advantage of having more than one hand, Jake used the other one as he tried to grab the Sword Saint, him using a bit of mana to infuse it into his gloves. Probably afraid of Touch of the Malefic Viper, the old man avoided his hand as he kept Jake at a distance favorable to him.

Gritting his teeth, Jake kept pressing the issue as he felt himself now overpower the Sword Saint in strength. He wasn't sure if it was because of his Arcane Awakening or the old man getting weaker, and he didn't have time to think about it either as he tried to push his advantage.

Dozens of blows were exchanged as the blade of rain met the arcane-infused blade, sending droplets and arcane energy flying. Jake finally spotted an opening as he prepared to attack but thought twice as he identified it as a feint. Instead, he just did a more straightforward blow, ignoring the opening to take the Saint by surprise. He swung down as his blade hit the old man in the left shoulder, Jake cleaving into flesh as he momentarily celebrated.

A celebration that soon turned to shock as he noticed he hadn't been feinted... he had been double-feinted as the old man smiled and allowed Jake's blade to sink in deeper as he swept his blade down and upwards in a fluid moment.

Jake tried to avoid and succeeded partially as he only felt pain in one of his legs. However, he suddenly felt himself lose his footing as there was no foot to step down with. Jake tumbled back as he tore out his scimitar from the Saint's body while desperately trying to roll as he blocked another swing from the Saint.

His wrist hurt as he blocked two impacts, with the first one failing to be blocked as Jake got a long cut down his chest mid-roll, making the damage even worse. Using a bit of his last mana, Jake fired a blast of arcane energy out of his hand, sending the old man back as he was forced to block, falling over as he lost his footing just as another crack of space appeared where he was retreating to.

This gave Jake the opportunity to stand up again and even deposit his severed lower leg into this inventory, primarily to make sure he didn't lose the boot. He stood there with his blade drawn on only one leg as the Sword Saint got to his feet again and attacked. Jake, refusing to give up, dove forward as he blocked another blow, making him lose his balance – or at least make the Sword Saint think he did.

With his one hand, the Pillar appeared once more, Jake using it as leverage as he stopped his fall and raised his entire body as he smashed his leg into the Sword Saint's side, sending him stumbling back as Jake made the Pillar lighter and swung it as he was still mid-air. To get full power and be able to lift the Pillar, he used both hands as he let his own scimitar fall to the ground. This time he got the intended effect as the Sword Saint tried to block by instinct, not using the redirection skill in time.

The sword was knocked directly out of his hand as the Saint chose between getting a broken wrist or his weapon. Yet at that moment, he also had the awareness to wave his hand as a small collection of raindrops sent Jake's dropped scimitar flying away, making them both disarmed.

Well, Jake had the Pillar, but he didn't get the chance to use it much as the old man closed in on him, and before Jake had the chance to swing the massive weapon, but he was forced to deposit it as a staff really wasn't good in such close combat.

End in: 1:00

The old man stuck forward, Jake avoiding his one arm by swaying as he moved to counter, but found his balance too bad as he was kicked in the stomach. Before he could recover, he received an uppercut, but just as the Sword Saint tried to elbow him in the chest, Jake grasped his arm as he smirked.

Jake punched the Sword Saint in his face with the other, following up with a headbutt just as he received a low-kick himself, making him fall over. Jake still had hold of the old man's arm and dragged him down to the ground with him as Jake got on top and began punching him repeatedly.

He managed to land a dozen hits before he was jabbed in the throat as a leg swept up and pulled Jake backward, smashing him into the ground, with the Saint rolling away to get standing again. Jake couldn't stand up properly for good reasons, but he stilled pulled himself to a better position as their brawl continued.

They exchanged punches and kicks as blood soiled the ground, neither willing to back down. Both their armors were utterly broken at this point, Jake more or less only wearing a single boot and his mask along with some tattered pants, with the Sword Saint only clothed on his lower body.

00:30

Jake tried to use Fangs of the Malefic Viper but found himself missing as he instead was high-kneed in the face, still sending him back in pain despite the mask. Several bones in his face were broken as he learned that his trying to bite made the mask phase-through not just for himself to bite but also when receiving attacks.

For a few moments, Jake was on the back foot as his vision was blurry, but with his sphere, he managed to dodge a blow as he countered.

He yelled as he landed a right hook on the old man's face, sending two teeth flying out as he was chopped right into one of his deep sword wounds, making him wince in pain as the wound widened. Jake growled as his other hand palmed one of the arrows in the Sword Saint's body, making it penetrate even deeper, sending the old man stumbling back as he painfully wheezed.

They were separated as they breathed heavily before engaging again.

00:15

A few more tired blows were exchanged before Jake's danger sense reacted as space suddenly tore open just before they hit each other, blasting them both back in opposite directions, rolling on the ground.

00:10

Jake pushed himself up and noticed his bow in his sphere, only seven or eight meters away. He ran on three legs over to it as quickly as he could as he also saw the Saint had been blasted in the direction of his own sword, the old man also rushing to pick it up.

00:07

Managing to pick up the bow, Jake knew he only had one real opportunity left as the Sword Saint had also picked up his sword and gotten to his feet – him having the clear advantage in movement with two legs and all.

00:05

Jake stood on one leg as he summoned an arrow and willed as much energy to appear as he could, his Arcane Awakening almost flickering as he nearly couldn't keep it going. Yet he pulled out just enough as he pulled the string fully back.

00:03

Arcane Powershot channeled as the Sword Saint charged towards him, his blade burning with far more power than Jake thought he should possibly be able to summon at this stage.

00:02

The two made eye contact as Jake saw that the old man was fully back to his old appearance from before his transformation. Both of them were on their last legs and pulled out all they had for the final clash.

00:01

Jake and the Sword Saint yelled simultaneously as Jake released the string just as the blade ascended with space collapsing upon them, the Treasure Hunt coming to an end.

00:00

Chapter 349: After the Hunt

Jake stood on the edge of the pond at this cabin, staring out onto the water. His body was fully healed, but the same couldn't be said about his equipment as it was still in tatters, and he stood with only a single boot on his feet.

He heard sounds behind him as Miranda entered the valley, him not even reacting as he was lost in thought.

"I came here as soon as possible. What happened towards the end? I heard some from Neil, but--"

She stopped as she spotted something lying to his side. Jake also followed her gaze as he looked to the side as he saw the two pieces of wood lying next to him with only a loose string connecting them – a clean cut severing it apart.

Jake raised his hand as he touched his neck, where a small scar was still visible as the feeling of the blade digging into it was still there.

"... I think I lost?"

The Noboru clan's Patriarch's courtyard was silent as Reika rushed towards it hurriedly, ignoring all the clamoring from the other clan members on the way. With worry, she didn't even knock as she entered it swiftly.

Inside, she saw a single chair in front of a few paintings with the Patriarch sitting there, his back turned. He didn't acknowledge her right away, as she took in his weak form. His skin was bare, and he looked weaker than usual.

"Great-grandfather?" she asked, more worried than before, only calmed down a little as he finally spoke.

"Could you help me stand?" he said weakly, turning his head as he smiled.

Reika was confused as she hurried over to him, lending him her arm as he stood. She failed to hold back her curiosity as she asked:

"What happened?"

Her great-grandfather smiled as he touched a small scar on the side of his skull. "I wonder?"

She was only more confused, especially as she felt him lean on her, his steps unsteady. She frowned as she asked once more. "Are... are you okay?"

He gave her a comforting smile as he looked up at the sky, a few sparse clouds hanging above. "After the growth of spring and the life of summer, fall follows where everything wanes before we settle into a restful winter. So to ask if I am okay... right now, no, but eventually, I will be."

"How long?" Reika asked, having understood somewhat.

The Patriarch shook his head. "You cannot hurry a season to pass like that. Once winter comes, I will return to normal and will have to rebuild myself to prepare for spring once more."

"Rebuild?" she followed up.

He chuckled a bit, shaking his head again. "According to my level, I am only at 112, with a 135 in parenthesis... I believe I will have to regain those levels before I can call upon another Springtime Advent."

"That is... what did you do?" Reika asked with distraught. She knew he had powered up beyond what should be possible, but she hadn't expected the cost to be that high.

"That is something I am still uncertain of even now... but the system calls it a transcendence."

He didn't elaborate but simply asked for her to help him into his bed-chamber as he felt tired. For a D-grade, to truly feel tired was something Reika had very rarely seen, and it made her worried as she felt how he was barely stronger than a regular old man before the system. Nevertheless, she helped him as he got into the bed, not even bothering to remove any of his tattered clothes.

The moment he lay down, he thanked her quietly as he closed his eyes and went to sleep, Reika staying at his side till he woke up again, which wouldn't be before more than twenty hours later.

Jake had taken a seat on one of his porch chairs, having asked Miranda to leave as he needed a few moments to himself to gather his thoughts. He had even told Villy to wait, his godly pal understanding and waiting for him to reach out to talk. He sounded curious to know what had happened, but countless years of being alive had clearly honed his patience.

He looked at the broken bow he had placed on the table beside him, the wood cleanly cut through. He remembered the final moment where he released the string, but the sword came up a fraction of a moment faster than he had expected. The final thing he remembered was seeing his arrow only hit the side of the Sword Saint's head as he felt the swordman's blade dig into his own neck.

I lost...

The thought dominated his mind as he sat there. It wasn't his first time losing a fight. He had lost to the damn blue mushroom more than once, technically lost to a bunch of random Cloud Elementals when he couldn't beat them alone, and some could also argue he lost to the King of the Forest back then.

But this was different. Jake hadn't lost to some powerful being tens of levels or a grade above him. He hadn't lost to someone it was expected of him to lose to. Instead, he had lost to another human who had been in the system as long as he had.

Okay, maybe one could argue it was a tie because even if Jake had died, so would the Sword Saint. The old man still had poison flowing through his body at the end, and with his power-up ending, he would

for sure have died – likely even without factoring in the poison. So both of them had been saved by the system at the end with the system event ending. There were no two ways about it.

There was also no doubt in his mind that they had both lost their heads towards the end – him nearly losing it in a literal sense. It had truly become a fight to the death as they both refused to give up. But he didn't blame the Sword Saint at all, and he had a feeling the old man didn't blame him either. Both had willingly put their lives on the line.

He still wanted to figure out what the old man had done to get so powerful, but he would later ask Villy for some insight. For now, he chose to focus on something else entirely to make himself feel a little better:

Rewards.

Jake had seen the system messages right as he returned and finally opened them as he read.

The Treasure Hunt has ended!

As the Treasure Hunt ends, the winners become clear as the truly talented Treasure Hunters are separated from the others. Due to your performance against the Cursed Monarch and subsequent triggering and victory over the Monarch of Blood coupled with all treasures collected, you have proven yourself a Premier Treasure Hunter. Know that you stand at the apex, achieving the highest reward possible.

You have earned the title: [Premier Treasure Hunter]

Note: All treasures within the Hunter Insignia must be retrieved within the next 24 hours before the Insignia disappears. Any items not received will be dumped in your immediate surroundings.

It was short and sweet in many ways. It didn't contain much superfluous information and more or less just told him that he was a good boy who had found a lot of treasures and beaten the Monarch of Blood. Maybe he had even gotten first place in the entire Treasure Hunt? It was possible, and it did help him feel better to know that he had at least maybe won that one over the Sword Saint as it seemed to put a lot of emphasis on the Monarch of Blood fight.

Also, he did find it a bit funny how it mentioned just dumping everything if he didn't take it out. That would honestly be funny to just see someone walk in the street a day from now just to see the entire area filled with stuff.

Shaking his head, trying to cheer himself up with happy thoughts, he moved on. Next up, he naturally checked out the title, going in with pretty low expectations but finding himself pleasantly surprised.

[Premier Treasure Hunter] – You are at the apex of Treasure Hunters, not only a true talent when it comes to retrieving what was once lost, but also in defeating any who dare stand between you and your rightful bounty. +10% Perception, + 10% Agility, +5% Wisdom.

That is a lot more than expected, Jake thought. He had expected it to be more like the title from a dungeon or something like that, not a percentage amplifier. He also noted that it was in his three highest stats, making him assume that was no coincidence. That did help him feel a bit more vindicated with drinking a lot of agility-enhancing elixirs, as he now had the percentage amplifier for that increase.

He quickly got to the thing the note mentioned as he summoned items from his Hunter Insignia, seeing it still work. Out of curiosity, he tried to redeposit something but found he couldn't. So, only taking things out

.

Jake spent the next few minutes just taking all of the stuff out of the Insignia and into his storage necklace. At least he tried to, until he got to a few massive gates of black metal that just fell to the ground making the earth shake as he failed to deposit those into his necklace.

Staring at them a bit, he asked himself why he was so adamant about getting those again but swiftly just moved on cleaning up the Insignia. To his surprise, he even found his own scimitar in there, the system having been nice enough to give it back after the collapsing world of Yalsten swallowed it up.

When all of that was done, he sat down once more, looking at the crater in the ground formed by the metal gates with a small snicker. He got an idea of what to do with them, but that could wait for later.

Jake stretched on the chair as he opened his status menu to get a feel for his progress over the last ten days or so.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 137]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 143]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 131]

Health Points (HP): 30620/30620

Mana Points (MP): 48025/48025

Stamina: 27640/27640

Stats

Strength: 2243

Agility: 4202

Endurance: 2764

Vitality: 3062

Toughness: 2302

Wisdom: 3842

Intelligence: 3083

Perception: 8546

Willpower: 3012

Free points: 0

Titles: [Forerunner of the New World],[Bloodline Patriarch], [Holder of a Primordial's True Blessing], [Dungeoneer VI], [Dungeon Pioneer VI], [Legendary Prodigy],[Prodigious Slayer of the Mighty], [Kingslayer], [Nobility: Earl], [Progenitor of the 93rd Universe], [Prodigious Arcanist], [Perfect Evolution (D-grade)], [Premier Treasure Hunter]

Class Skills: [Basic One-Handed Weapons (Inferior)], [Basic Twin Fang Style (Uncommon)], [Basic Shadow Vault of Umbra (Uncommon)], [Hunter's Tracking (Uncommon)], [Expert Stealth (Uncommon)], [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)], [Enhanced Splitting Arrow (Rare)] [Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Powershot (Epic)], [Big Game Arcane Hunter (Epic)], [Arcane Hunter's Arrows (Epic)], [Descending Dark Arcane Fang (Epic)], [One Step Mile (Ancient)], [Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter]

(Ancient)), [Moment of the Primal Hunter (Legendary)], [Gaze of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Steady Focus of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)], [Arcane Awakening (Legendary)]

Profession Skills: [Path of the Heretic-Chosen (Unique)], [Herbology (Common)], [Brew Potion (Common)], [Alchemist's Purification (Common)], [Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)], [Craft Elixir (Uncommon)], [Toxicology (Uncommon)], [Cultivate Toxin (Uncommon)], [Concoct Poison (Uncommon)], [Malefic Viper's Poison (Epic)], [Blood of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Wings of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Fangs of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Sense of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Touch of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)], [Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist (Legendary)], [Palate of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Pride of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)], [Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)]

Blessing: [True Blessing of the Malefic Viper (Blessing - True)]

Race Skills: [Endless Tongues of the Myriad Races (Unique)], [Legacy of Man (Unique)], [Identify (Common)], [Thoughtful Meditation (Uncommon)], [Shroud of the Primordial (Divine)]

Bloodline: [Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)]

Growth across the board, especially in Perception as Jake had continued his path of putting all free points in it, but also good growth in Agility and even Toughness, primarily due to his Scales of the Malefic Viper upgrading to legendary during the Hunt.

Speaking of skill upgrades, he had also gotten a few of those. Naturally, there was Scales, but also Alchemical Flames in the early day of the event, and during the last fight and the lead-up to it, where he got three whole rarity upgrades to his Limit Break, making it into Arcane Awakening.

He had undoubtedly gained a lot from the Treasure Hunt... but...

Jake sighed as he stared up into the sky. He heard another noise behind him as someone entered the valley. He had told Miranda to leave him be for now, but there was someone who really sucked at heeding orders.

Sylphie flew over to him and landed on the table next to him. She stared at the broken bow and back to him as she screeched. Jake shook his head as he nuzzled her, and she happily wriggled her head as he scratched her.

Smiling, he lifted her up as she didn't resist while he sat with her like she was a cat, just petting her as she enjoyed every moment.

After a while, Jake finally spoke. "I'll win next time. And not in a way that will leave anything up to ambiguity."

To which Sylphie gave an encouraging screech in approval, clearly not having a single trace of doubt in her mind.

As the Treasure Hunt ended, humanity and the Risen were all returned to Earth once more, swiftly finding out that even if they had been gone for nearly ten days, not even ten hours had passed outside of the Hunt.

A few settlements had experienced minor attacks by beasts during this time, but most had made preparations to be gone longer, meaning none of the major settlements had any real issues. There were even signs that beasts had been less inclined to attack during the nearly half a day of absence of nearly all D-grade humans and Risen. This led to theories that perhaps they had their own event to participate in or opportunities, but nothing was proveable.

An hour or so after everyone had returned, another message appeared before all of the recently returned people, reminding them and informing them of what was next to come.

System Announcement.

With the end of the Treasure Hunt, the Auction will begin a week from now. Further information will follow a day before the Auction begins. Note that any participant of the Treasure Hunt can also attend the Auction.

Many instantly began scrambling to prepare, while others took it more calmly. One such place was Haven, where nothing much happened for the first many hours after the Treasure Hunt ended. Miranda planned a meeting where they went things over, the city owner suspiciously absent, yet none dared to go and check his valley without permission.

With so many items gathered from Yalsten, everyone knew the coming period would be even busier as the entirety of Earth, and all of the factions had just received a big influx of valuable items to help them in the future, with the upcoming Auction a huge opportunity to get rid of items you did not need yourself and receive items useful to you.

But for now... for now, Jake just wanted to enjoy a few quiet hours with Sylphie and have a nice chat with Villy.

Chapter 350: Reflecting On A Loss and the Question of What the Hell A Transcendence Is

There were many things one could do after suffering a setback. One could wallow and feel sorry for themselves, blame someone else and act like it wasn't their fault, ignore it entirely and move on like nothing, or a slew of other things. Jake ended up going with a far more productive approach as he reflected on it all.

First of all, he had undoubtedly gained a lot from the fight. Skill upgrades and all that, but also some realizations that could only come with losing. Sure, one could argue if Jake truly lost, but in his mind, he had. Even if he had killed his opponent, too, he wouldn't exactly call it a win if he also had to die himself.

The first thing he realized was that he actually cared more about losing than the prospect of death. It was odd... his survival instincts were through the roof, and he naturally had no desire or intentions to die, and yet the thought of it didn't really bring up any innate fear. Just a feeling that death was a natural consequence if you fucked up too bad, and that was okay. Jake killed people, and he fully understood that death was always around the corner when fighting powerful foes.

It did take some mental gymnastics to both be fine with death but not fine with dying or getting killed. Or perhaps it was just a natural adaption he had made, potentially due to his Bloodline? If he walked around with fear, it would impede him and make failures far more likely. Or maybe Jake was just weird and had an odd mindset.

Either way, he moved on as he continued reflecting on what had happened towards the end of the Treasure Hunt and the Hunt as a whole.

When you succeed, all you really learn is what works, even if the victory is achieved through struggle. It is often said that failure is far more valuable to long-term success as you find out what doesn't work and what is lacking to succeed. Additionally, Jake hadn't magically forgotten his many years of formal education on business strategy and operations. There, failures were often viewed merely as learning experiences, and as long as the losses were not too significant, they could even be a good thing.

Hence, Jake tried to go with a logical approach as he analyzed the battle to figure out where he fucked up the most and how to improve. He knew he had fought a challenging opponent, and even if he made mistakes, it didn't take anything away from the Sword Saint. So he thought long and hard about both the fight with the Monarch of Blood and the Sword Saint as a conclusion appeared swiftly.

"I kinda suck at fighting?" he asked himself half-rhetorically.

No, that isn't entirely right. In his own opinion, Jake wasn't bad with his bow, though he surely had room to improve. But melee combat? He had to admit... he didn't really know what he was doing.

The only reason Jake was managing was due to his instincts allowing him to dodge most blows and instinctively strike back. However, these counters weren't really thought about. Instead, he just reacted and attacked with straightforward slashes and stabs while coating his weapon in arcane energy and poison.

This was one of the reasons why Jake preferred duel-wielding; because his arms kind of just moved, and two weapons were just superior in his mind. At least a part of him thought that. Jake had always been ambidextrous and good with both hands, and that had naturally only improved after the system arrived. He had a strong feeling everyone could be considered ambidextrous now, which raised the question: why did someone like the Sword Saint only use one sword?

Because one thing was absolutely clear and had been from their first clash. The Sword Saint was far better at using his weapon than Jake, and so had the Monarch been. This was one of the reasons he could only dodge, while the Sword Saint managed to not only block but also counter and land attacks despite his far lower stats than Jake during the boss fight.

Jake realized he had in many ways been ignorant and naïve as he had begun to believe that he didn't really need to learn how to use a sword or melee fighting in general. If he could predict the other party's moves and instinctively counter, why would he need to learn how to actually fight like some martial artist?

Perhaps that would be partly right if the field of martial arts also clearly didn't develop. He had seen himself hit by blows he did not understand properly, seen the Sword Saint block blows far too powerful for his feeble blade and low stats to resist.

He shook his head as he sighed. Sylphie had been silent throughout it all, just sitting on his lap and resting, not giving any input besides just cuddling up to him. Jake scratched her as he considered her, and one of the reasons he had not really learned how to use weapons.

Why would knowing how to fight wielding a sword be effective versus a beast? Swordsmanship was inherently rooted in learning how to battle other human beings – blocks, techniques, attacks, methods, et cetera - all focused around beating your fellow man. Knowledge of lethal attacks also naturally all centered around hitting vitals in the human body.

Swords had historically primarily been used against other humans, and it was not seen as a hunting weapon. Jake could far more easily see how a bow and learning how to use that made better sense against beasts. Same for even things like spears or axes. Yet clearly, the Sword Saint did not struggle with non-humanoids.

He finally decided to stop only thinking about it himself as he opened up the line of communication and spoke to his Patron god: "Hey Villy... do I kinda suck at fighting?"

It took only a moment for the connection to fully form as the Viper answered: "Fighting? No. Knowing how to fight? Eh, a bit, I guess."

Jake didn't need to ask as the Viper elaborated.

"A battle is very multifaceted, and there are many elements, some of which you excel in and others less so. I think you have a very disconnected style that certainly does need working on, but everyone has room to improve. Anyhow, what brought this on? Heard you muttering about losing earlier."

"Yeah..." Jake said, nodding after listening to the Viper more or less say what he already knew himself. He began explaining what had happened during the final parts of the Treasure Hunt, having to backtrack a bit to tell him general stuff about the Treasure Hunt meanwhile. It quickly became clear Jake had a lot of questions, but for now, they focused on the topic at hand.

After his explanation, the Viper was silent for a while and seemed almost a bit distant. A few moments later, he returned his attention to Jake. "Well, I'll be damned. I didn't expect a random Transcendent to appear like that; you losing suddenly makes a lot more sense."

Jake heard the genuine surprise in his voice as he only had one question: "What the hell is a Transcendent?"

"Remember when I told you that only two kinds of things exist outside of the system and can break its rules? One of them is Bloodline-holders, as you know, and the other is known as Transcendents. If someone with a Bloodline is a born cheater, then Transcendents are self-made cheaters," Villy explained.

"Still haven't told me what the hell it is," Jake commented impatiently.

“Getting to it. I think the easiest thing to compare it to is a mix between your arcane affinity and your Bloodline. A Transcendence is essentially a self-created skill that breaks some fundamental rules and does stuff otherwise not allowed within the system’s current parameters and limitations. Transcendence is not something you can aim for but something you just gain, and like Bloodlines, it is hard to say if Transcendence is even a good or a bad thing for the recipient in many cases,” the Viper kept explaining.

“Seemed like a pretty damn good thing for the Sword Saint. Also, how many of them are out there? Just on Earth?” Jake asked.

“First question first... well, yeah, based on your description, his does seem beneficial, but with all things, there is cost. Breaking the basic rules of the system does not mean you break all the rules of reality. This power does not come for free, the same as any kind of boosting skill that makes you stronger temporarily. You still need to consume something to make things possible, and what he consumed was a resource he should otherwise not be able to use if my guess is correct. And I think I am because I can already tell you now that his Transcendent skill has some serious drawbacks.

“As for the second question of how many there are... well, Transcendants are very rare. As in, you can find more gods than Transcendants by a good deal, and far from all gods have a Transcendent skill. And how I can know this? Well, same as how those with Bloodlines can feel others with Bloodlines, then one Transcendant can recognize another. Also, while a Transcendant is essentially just someone with an extra skill made, it does have wider implications and does bring some benefits outside of the skill itself, courtesy of a title. And no, I will not share the details of what that is,” the Viper finished.

“Do you have a Transcendent skill?” Jake asked curiously. “If yes, how many?”

“I told you already they are rare, mate. I have one myself, and of the twelve Primordials, there is only one with more than one Transcendent skill and even some who don’t have any at all. I need to make one thing clear, that while having a Transcendent skill is good, it doesn’t mean using it is or that having

one is in any way required to be powerful. Again... they all have cost outside of merely using a bit of stamina, mana, or even rare catalysts. Cost anyone with one would prefer not to use.

“Some examples would probably help. Well, the most known Transcendent skill in the multiverse is the Holyland of the Holy Mother. It is a place anyone who is blessed by the Holy Mother goes after death, no exceptions. It directly messes with the Truesoul of those affected, transforming them into new beings known as Holy Spirits and making them reside in her realm. This entire skill is the basis of the Holy Church and why it is so damn popular as it allows all members to live out the maximum lifespans of their souls in what some would argue is a paradise.

“The second example I will give you is the one possessed by our dear Eversmile. Eversmile’s is a purely offensive one that allows him to completely annihilate someone through karma, severing all connections they have to the world and even erasing their Records, making them cease to exist, and all information related to them disappear. Their names erased from books, memories gone from relatives. This only works on people far weaker than himself, but he can also use it on the dead to remove them from the annals of history. There are some limitations, like the inability to make people at his own level forget, but it is a damn powerful skill.

“But as I said, both of these have cost. The Holyland is intrinsically linked to the Holy Mother’s divine realm, and the cost is constant consumption of faith to keep it active, and the activation cost was originally not pretty either. There is more, but I made a promise not to share such details a long time ago, and while I am a snake, I do keep my promises. Oh, but fuck Eversmile, the cost for him is that he has to sacrifice positive Records and memories himself every time he uses the skill. As someone who views himself as a researcher and scholar, to sacrifice knowledge is something he seriously despises, he really hates using it.”

The Viper finished his explanation with Jake just slowly nodding. There was a lot in there, and he did feel like he had a far better understanding of what those skills were about. But, one burning question was in his mind:

“Any advice on getting one?”

It was natural. Jake saw something great and wanted in on the action as he saw what it had done for the Saint. To have something like that as a trump card...

"Nope, and factions of the multiverse have tried to find a way or methods to get one or at least increase the likelihood of getting one since the very first era, and none have figured anything worthwhile out. If it happens, it happens; if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. But do know that having a Bloodline makes it harder as the two seem to counteract one another. What this means is through whatever process you ever achieve a Transcendent skill, your Bloodline cannot have any impact, which is borderline impossible as one is so interlinked with their Bloodlines. So, while it is not impossible for you to get one, it is just way, way harder. Also... you don't need one. You already got your Bloodline to be the little rule-breaker you are," Jake's resident god answered, making Jake slump down a bit.

"Ah, but this entire thing does bring up one interesting topic," the Malefic Viper began. "Transformation skills, especially ones that just make you straight-up more powerful or – in this extreme case – a Transcendent transformation just making someone stronger is the apex of temporary power boosts. Emphasis on temporary."

"You mean I should just buy time or run?" Jake quickly caught on.

"Tactically disengaging would be a better term. If someone is boosting themselves up significantly, they are also burning themselves out and will suffer the consequences for it – be it through a Transcendent skill or not. Sometimes the best thing is just to dodge or retreat as they tire themselves out. It's just the smart thing to do, and there is no harm in it. Fighting them is like running up and hugging someone who has set themselves on fire to try and hurt you," Villy said.

"Yeah, but if I use a boosting skill too, we are both on a timer, right?" Jake countered as he asked. While he did recognize that he could probably have just run away from the Saint if they fought outside of a

collapsing world, he still wasn't sure if the Springtime Advent would outlast him. He had noticed how him damaging the Saint sped up his aging, so he really had no way to tell.

"Well, if they boost way more than you? Additionally, there is a classification of fighters you have not met, I believe... the truly suicidal ones. Those who burn up their entire being and souls as they practically kill themselves to try and take down their opponent without any hesitation. People who use a special item or participate in sacrificial rituals to summon far more powerful effects than otherwise possible. Rituals and items are far more normal as often all you need is others to willingly sacrifice themselves, as naturally there aren't that many good skills making you into a suicide-soldier."

"I... I think I saw the Holy Church do stuff like that. Also, if there are many rituals and items, why not skills?"

"Yeah... that is part of the Holy Church MO. Plays really well with the Holyland being a thing, making them far more willing to give their own lives for "the greater good" or whatever bullshit they spew. As for why there are not that many powerful suicide skills... think a bit about it. Upgrading a suicide skill is quite hard, as one would imagine, as you can't exactly practice it, and with skill choices based on Records, it means that to get a good suicide skill at skill selection, you need to be truly suicidal and dedicated to killing yourself. And people really committed to stop living tend to not live that long for some super weird reason. Besides, such people are weak cowards who take the easy way out if they can't handle things or are brainwashed morons. Either, or, they tend to not be the most talented."

Feeling a bit dumb, Jake shook his head and directed the conversation away from the not-too-pleasant topic.

"Anyway, now I know what a Transcendant is, and that running away is fine if someone suddenly transforms and becomes way stronger out of nowhere. Now, where were we... oh yeah, something about me not knowing how to fight."

Jake heard the Viper chuckle and had a feeling their talk wasn't going to be a short one.