

Hunter 351

Chapter 351: Combat Styles

The Viper was silent for a moment but quickly seemed to agree to the change of subject:

"I think I have made it clear in the past that I am not a big fan of giving direct advice on things to improve as it often does more harm than good in my experience, but fine. For once, I shall act like a proper Patron god and give some actual advice and direction.

"There are limitless ways to fight in the multiverse, and to call one method superior to others is fallacious and stupid. However, no matter the method, understanding yourself and the path you walk is essential. Someone such as a highly experienced warrior – a swordmaster, spearmaster, et cetera – is one such valid path. To them, their weapons become extensions of their bodies, and they live and breathe through their weapon, every part of them poured into it. A mere movement of their weapon can impose their will upon the world as they become one... but I must emphasize this is but one path," Villy began.

"A mage mastering magic and comprehending all there is of their given element, a spirit that is one with their environment or a snake mastering its toxins and embracing that part of itself is also a valid path. I myself have never learned to truly wield a weapon, but I did learn to use my claws, tail, fangs, and generally just my body as a living weapon. And Jake, if I am honest... so should you. At least partly."

Jake frowned at the last part.

"Are you telling me to stop using weapons?" he asked, a bit confused.

"I am not telling you to do anything, just giving my perspective. But no, that is not what I am saying. I am saying where to center yourself. So let me first ask you something very simple... do you feel the edge of your blade as you hold your sword?" the Viper asked.

Without waiting, Jake gently lifted Sylphie off him and placed her on the table with only a few minor protests from her as he walked down from his porch and took out his scimitar. He stood there with it in hand, not sure exactly what Villy was asking about.

"I'm not sure I get it? Jake asked.

"Do you feel the wind on your skin right now?"

"Well yeah, of course?"

"Do you also feel it on the scimitar? No, not the slight nudging on it... do you feel the wind slightly cool it down, the sensation as a small gust embraces and wraps around it, and yourself holding the handle not only in your hand but like you are grasping your other arm or hand?" Villy kept asking.

Shaking his head, Jake just asked. "What the hell you on about?"

"That you never embraced any weapon, at least not a melee weapon. You swing them like sticks, not extensions of yourself. You use them as tools, a sentiment any master would feel offended by. I would say you have decent skills when using weapons, but you do not have any knowledge of weapons, nor have I ever felt any desire from you to truly embrace and understand one," Villy elaborated.

"I thought that whole extension of your body thing was just some joke or over-exaggeration... but you're serious?"

"Dead serious. I am certain that the old swordsman you fought views his sword as fondly as you view your arm. Many weapon masters in the multiverse spend obscene resources on upgrading old weapons or repairing them without sparing any expense when they could get better by buying new ones. I have seen one mourn his broken axe by annihilating an entire race of poisonous frog-like creatures, leading to their extinction after one corroded his axe into nothingness with their special toxin.

"Getting a new weapon for them is like adopting a child. There is a long time where they are uncomfortable with their new weapon, and have to slowly adapt and get used to it before forming a bond. Meanwhile, you just pick up any new shiny weapon you got and use it right away if it seems better than your old stuff," Villy finished.

Jake took the words in, and he couldn't really disagree. His Nanoblade had broken, and while he sure did like the weapon, he liked it for its usefulness, and he disliked it being broken mainly because he would have to find a replacement or spend time and money getting it repaired. Not because he felt like an old friend had died or something like that.

He then looked over at the porch table with Sylphie and the broken bow both sitting on it, Sylphie having fun with inspecting the ruined weapon. Jake didn't really feel anything special there either. Again, he liked the bow, but it was in the end just a tool in his mind.

"How do I learn to really embrace a weapon then?" Jake asked.

"I think your takeaway is wrong here. No one says that is the only option. I think an example of how it isn't needed is that girl from Valhal also on your planet who only uses her fists. Her entire body is her weapon, and she has embraced that."

"So, we back to me not using weapons?" Jake once more asked.

"Not necessarily. There are other options, but I would consider going away from tools not fitting you as much. Your body moves like a weapon as you fight, and you have embraced it far more than I see many seasoned warriors. Your instincts for self-preservation and avoiding blows is simply too powerful, and in many ways, I can see a large tool get in the way of that. So, maybe consider going smaller? Something where your weapon is only a small extension of your own body, and then if you need a longer weapon, you can use a method you have embraced: your arcane magic," Villy suggested.

Jake furrowed his brows a bit as he considered. "Daggers or knives?"

"Fangs in hands," Villy joked back as Jake imagined him snickered.

"I do have the Twin-Fang style skill," Jake remembered. It was a skill he didn't really use much, but he did recall what it did. It was an actual martial art of sorts, all focused on stabbing and leaving narrow cuts with small weapons.

"Yeah, I know. It was a style developed all the way back in the first era by someone following a powerful mammal-like creature with highly venomous teeth, and the man managed to acquire two of its fangs with some of its venom still on it after the beast had battled a powerful foe, and he began using them as weapons and developed a style with them. The guy kept hunting down venomous creatures and getting their fangs as he honed his style, in the end becoming far more skilled at using fangs than the creatures they originally came from. After his death, others picked up his style from the Legacy he had left behind.

They honed it to entirely new levels, and it just spread from there and is a very well-known fighting method for those using poisoned weapons now,” Villy explained, giving a brief history lesson.

Jake snickered as he made a guess: “I am sure the guy would have loved some Malefic Viper fangs... I guess he bit off more than he could chew?”

“No, it was actually mainly me biting him,” Villy answered, Jake certain both of them had silly smiles on their faces.

“Anyway, back on topic,” Jake said after the brief intermission. “I guess daggers do work well. I did like using them, but the range was just limiting.”

“That is where magic comes in. Extending the blade with mana is something you already do. Plenty of methods to get around it, and honestly, even just scratching the skin is enough to deliver a good dose of poison most of the time,” Villy answered. “But again, it’s all up to you. Just something to consider for the future. Daggers or short weapons are far closer to your body and are in many ways closer to using claws than actual weapons.”

“Certainly food for thought,” Jake said, nodding, as he moved to one thing nagging him. “But... where does the bow come in?”

It was something he had been holding off on asking about because he did have a bad feeling about what the Viper would say.

“We were talking about melee combat here. Jake, you are already a jack of all trades, using both magic, archery, and melee fighting during bouts, which is far more than most bother with at your grade. I

would say that the type of combat you are best at is honestly magic due to your level of energy control and skill in manipulating it and imposing your will upon the external world, and your arcane affinity is potent when used to attack and defend both,” Villy answered.

“As for the bow... well, now we’re back to me telling you to do whatever you want. You certainly have more skill with your bow than your melee weapons, but I wouldn’t classify you as some archery genius. You’re decent enough, but my honest take is that giving up on the bow and focusing more on magic would be beneficial to you and also work more synergistically with your profession.”

Jake nodded with a serious expression before answering. “Well, that is dutifully noted and promptly ignored. Besides, it isn’t a waste; archery is a damn good way to deliver my poisons, and-“

“You can deliver it more effectively by just coating magic attacks or creating new spells integrating it directly,” the Viper swiftly countered.

“Now, considering I have stacked points in Perception, it would be a waste not to-“

“Perception is a primary stat of magic users too, and you can easily specialize your magic to make better use of the stat, and besides, you are still only barely mid-tier D-grade; you got plenty of room to adjust.”

“You miss that many of the class skills currently require a bow to use, so abandoning it would be-“

“Would be a choice that can still easily be made as you have only been in the system for less than a year, and we are back to you having plenty of time to adjust,” the Viper kept shutting him down.

“But if I merge archery and magic, I will be able to make use of the best of both worlds-“

“I didn’t know you had infinite skill choices, levels, mental energy, and time,” Villy said teasingly.

“I like archery,” Jake finally just said.

“And there we have it and the first thing you should have said. If you like it, do it. Your path will take you further than the engineered path of perfection created by someone else. Perhaps not in the short term, but most certainly in the long run. Bla bla, the path to godhood is a marathon and all that, and remember it is YOUR marathon. Not mine. So while I will gladly share my opinion, do know that what you feel is best will likely be a better choice for you. Even if no one else sees it.”

“Good, we agree archery is great,” Jake promptly declared his victory. “But really, magic? I am not that good at it in my opinion. I just make big explosions and piercing bolts and the occasional barrier here and there, with a platform sprinkled in to step on for good measure.”

“All of which are powerful in their own right, and I can see the potential for growth. Also, your magic is linked with your archery, and I will advise you to continue pursuing those methods. Make the bow a harbinger of your power, a way to focus your magic like one would use a staff. You already kind of do that right now, but I think that could be interesting and allow you to make better use of all your talents,” Villy said.

“Sounds fine... I just think I’ll keep doing what I already do when it comes to archery while maybe focusing a bit more on improving some basic archery stuff. But I definitely need to learn some more about melee combat and find a proper method for that. Anyway... Villy, while I do have more questions, I feel like those can wait. Thanks as always, we can chat later. Unless you got something on your mind?” Jake finished, throwing the ball to Villy.

“Hm, not much besides the question of why you are wearing a living Unique Lifeform on your face without commenting on it or mentioning it as something important quite yet,” Villy shot back, slightly teasing but with plenty of genuine confusion mixed in.

“Oh. Yeah. That.”

Jake had totally not forgotten it with everything else going on. Definitely not.

He took off his mask as he stared down at it. “Hey... so... got time now?”

Honestly, he was not sure where to start. First of all, how was the King still alive, second of all, why was he in the mask, and third of all, what should Jake do about having him in his mask? The entire situation was also just super awkward as Jake had naturally been the one to put him there. So, starting the conversation was just weird.

He looked down at the mask as he waited for something to happen. Seconds ticked by with nothing happening. Jake even went as far as to poke the mask with his finger and knock on it a bit to no avail. He used Identify on it, with the description not having changed.

Is he ignoring me?

That was certainly one possibility.

"I am not getting any response," Jake said with a shrug to Villy. "Odd, he did talk earlier; at least I am ninety-nine percent sure he did. Either way... how is this even possible? I killed the King of the Forest and got the experience and all that. How the hell did he survive?"

"Oh, he didn't; the King of the Forest is dead," Villy just answered nonchalantly. "But the death of the King of the Forest seems to have given birth to a new Unique Lifeform that now dwells within the mask. It probably still shares all of the memories and is the same individual, but it won't be entirely the same. As for how? No fucking idea man, Unique Lifeforms are weird. It could be some survival skill, some way of binding a part of his Truesoul to later regenerate, or a slew of other possibilities. It is rare one gets experience for such kills, but it does happen. I know of a few creatures with the ability to self-resurrect even after true death, and their methods are never simple or straightforward."

"So, I shouldn't expect to be absorbed into my bow and magically resurrect if I died?" Jake joked back.

"I get the joke, but I think you are kind of misunderstanding something. The mask isn't some equipment off the King of the Forest; it was his true body," Villy answered.

"Wait... are you telling me I have been wearing a corpse on my face for months now?" Jake asked as he stared weirdly down at the mask.

"Of course, we could also reframe it as you only wearing the severed head of a slain foe on your face for months, as it is only the most important part. Again, Unique Lifeform physiology is weird."

"In the end, all roads lead to me wearing a corpse," Jake shook his head as he smiled. "Though that is pretty normal, right? Heck, leather and fur are made of pieces of dead things too."

“Don’t forget how even a lot of rare metals and natural resources are, in fact, just old decaying corpses of elementals, and a lot of rare plants are children of sentient plants, but still only infants yet to awaken,” Villy piled on.

“Slightly disturbing if very informative,” Jake laughed.

They kept chatting a bit more as he tried to get the mask to react a bit more but still got nothing. Maybe the King was sleeping again or just being a little shy.

“What are your plans now?” Villy asked him as Jake finally gave up on the mask and just put it on like before.

“For now, go meet Miranda and figure out if I have anything to do, as well as get the general directions to the city that houses the Court of Shadows. The auction begins in a week, and during this time, it should be possible to travel there and spend some time,” Jake answered, having already considered it.

“Hm... oh yeah, your relatives are here. I guess you can spare a week to visit them, just don’t make it an excuse to do nothing for too long,” the Viper warned.

“Relax, man, I don’t plan on entering early retirement, just visiting family for a bit. Anyway, as always, been good chatting with ya, and cya around,” Jake said goodbye for real. Then, with a smile, he waved towards Sylphie, who happily flew over and landed on his head. A bit wasted as Jake went over to take the pieces of his bow anyway.

“Sure, and we may just meet sooner than you expect,” Villy said, making it sound like a veiled threat. Totally on purpose for sure.

Chuckling to himself, Jake exited the valley as he headed onwards.

He had lost one battle, and while he certainly didn’t like it, he wasn’t going to let it stop him. What he would do was take a brief intermission to recharge before it was back on the grind.

Chapter 352: Travel Preparations

Miranda sorted through some lists Sultan had handed to her, as well as the formal contract he had written up mere moments after their return from the Treasure Hunt. She skimmed the contract over, already aware of what it was about, primarily looking for any word traps or phrasing she didn’t quite agree with.

The contract was for him to act as a broker and sell items for Haven and Jake during the Auction a week later. The lists he had handed her included items he already possessed as well as people he had already made agreements with during the Hunt.

Reading over the contract, it became clear the man was giving extremely favorable terms to them, seeking to only take a flat fee for high-value items and a small percentage on lower-priced goods, though he did emphasize his belief that nothing below epic-rarity would be sold at the Auction simply due to the volume of items gained from the Treasure Hunt.

As for why Sultan was so interested in a deal... well, besides him being a businessman, that is, was that apparently, the Auction held some special implications and opportunities for merchants. If the World Congress was the arena of the politically minded and social classes, the Treasure Hunt the arena of the fighters, then the Auction was the event with the most opportunities for merchants.

Sultan had received a quest that was more or less just about selling a lot of things, and he would be competing against others. Miranda did not believe they could beat out the larger factions simply due to the sheer quantity of items to sell a city like Sanctdomo had, but if Jake agreed to use Sultan for some of his higher-rarity items, she did believe Sultan could do well. Of course, she would have to get some more benefits from the man if they helped him succeed in a quest, but Miranda suspected he already knew that.

“Lillian, is the report in from those who wish to sell through Haven?” Miranda asked the other woman in the room. While it was clear primarily items from the Treasure Hunt would be sold, some held valuables not from there. Even from some who did not participate in the Hunt at all, Phillip being one such example.

“Most of them,” Lillian answered as she brought over another stack of papers. “Neil and his party will sell through Haven, and a lot of the unaffiliated D-grades have also chosen to do so. Additionally, we have received thirteen requests to gain permanent residence from participants in the Hunt... which is all of those who returned but two.”

“Hm, thoughts?”

“I do not believe there are many downsides to additional D-grades within the city, and if we wish to increase the average power level of Haven, it would be highly beneficial. The more we have, the more will also come by as there will be more skilled crafters and more opportunities to find hunting parties and ways to sell and procure materials for everyone,” Lillian answered.

“You’re right,” Miranda agreed. “Just have some basic tests done; maybe ask Silas to help.”

Miranda didn't really have much more to do right away as she had spent the last few days before the Hunt hectically planning for her own absence. They were told the Treasure Hunt would last ten days, and while many had suspected there would be some kind of time-dilation going on due to the length of it and the constant threat of beasts, no one had known. Hence she had been on the safe side.

"Additionally, the sculp-"

Lillian was interrupted by a knock on the door. Miranda was surprised as they hadn't planned on anyone coming but equally as much that they heard it at all due to the enchantments meant to obscure sound.

She sighed as she waved her hand, and the door opened as Jake stood there, being the only one she would suspect of for some reason sneaking into the main office of Haven. Well, that or an assassin, but it would be an odd strategy to knock first if it was an assassin.

"Hey Miranda, Lillian, anything interesting happened I need to be aware of, or can I leave for a while?" he promptly asked.

"Only some minor things related to the Auction," Miranda answered just as promptly, knowing not to mince words or ask unnecessary questions.

She gave him a quick rundown, and Jake agreed without much hesitation to allow Sultan to sell some stuff for him. He didn't specify what, but Miranda was sure she would find out in due time. There were also a few additional minor points, and she asked him his opinion on giving what was effectively citizenship to the D-grades who had applied.

"Sure, why not?" he just said with a shrug. "Just kick them out if they get annoying."

"Duly noted," Miranda said with a smile. "Where are you heading off to anyway?"

"Where the Court of Shadows is located. Sky-something. Ah, for that, I wanted to ask if you had any idea where it is, and also... would you happen to have a spare bow lying around?" Jake asked.

"I think asking Neil about directions would be a good idea as he has been working on the long-range teleportation circles, and as for a bow, maybe check in with Sultan as he no doubt possesses some," Miranda answered, internally wondering why he would need a new bow.

"Thanks. If there is nothing else, I'll be off. I reckon we'll meet next in the Auction," Jake said as he prepared to leave.

"Are you going to Skyggen to visit family?" Miranda asked, failing to hold her curiosity back.

"Yeah, Caleb more or less ordered me to go, and it is about time to visit, so it makes no sense delaying," Jake confirmed.

"Alright, have a nice trip. I still have the communication skill to contact you if anything comes up, so I will make sure to keep you updated on major events," Miranda said, getting a nod of approval from Jake.

They said their goodbyes as Jake left the room, his presence disappearing as soon as he left the office.

“Didn’t you say he seemed down when you visited him just a few hours ago?” Lillian asked, confused.

“He was, and he still is,” Miranda shook her head. It was just what her gut told her, and she felt like she had interacted enough with Jake to detect it. But he was better now than before for sure.

“Either way, can you fetch Hank about the plans for expansion?” Miranda asked Lillian.

“I believe he is busy with that young man who visited the temple with Lord Thayne a while back,” Lillian answered. “They seem to be working on some kind of odd monument, and I am truthfully not certain what it is about, but according to the young man named Chris, it should be related to the Malefic One, Lord Thayne’s Patron god.”

Miranda nodded as she already felt a slight headache come on from whatever they were doing. She seriously doubted it could be anything that wouldn’t give her massive annoyances and the cause of many issues...

Jake had quickly located Sultan courtesy of the large floating ship, which also acted as his store. The merchant had quickly sold him a rare bow for level 120 and above, which was far worse than his old bow, but it was made solely with resilience in mind without any fancy effects. He did also have an epic bow for level 100 and above, but Jake preferred the rare one. It wasn’t the best, but it was all he had for now.

He did ask him if he had any idea on fixing his broken bow, but Sultan said that anyone else but the original craftswoman would find it difficult if not impossible after his own transmutation of it. He wasn’t even sure that the woman named Maria who had made it could fix the bow. Sultan instead

recommended Jake dismantle it and reuse some of the materials, such as the two gems. It was a bit disappointing, but Jake took his words to heart and saved the broken pieces for later use. Now, he would just hope that a good bow would be sold at the Auction.

Before he had gone to meet Miranda, Jake had also had a good chat with Sylphie. To his surprise, she had wanted to split up as she wanted to go hunt and grow stronger. He felt a strong sense of inferiority from her, and she had seemed a bit sad at how little she had been able to help against the Monarch of Blood. There really wasn't any need for her to feel like that as she was already up there with the strongest on Earth, but she clearly still wasn't satisfied.

Needless to say, Jake wasn't going to get in her way. Her parents were also not in Haven – likely out hunting too – so that probably only added to her sense of competitiveness. So, before Jake had even made it to Miranda's office, she had taken off towards the forest like the zooming little hawk she was.

He would lie if he said he hadn't hoped to take her with him, but he wasn't going to tell her what to do. Well, at least he could now look forward to hearing about her progress during the Auction. Ah, who was he kidding, they still had their connection that allowed some communication, and he had barely managed to exit Miranda's office before she gave him the absolutely essential update on a funny-looking tree she had found and couldn't break with her whooshy wind.

Next up, he headed for the Fort where Neil was. The guy was still working on teleportation gates and had gone far enough to have one connect Haven and the Fort, which meant it only took a few seconds on a teleportation circle and some mana to travel the distance. Not that it would have taken him long without, but there was still like a hundred and fifty kilometers or something.

Finding Neil in the Fort wasn't hard either, as he was working on an even larger circle in his own house of sorts, which was more like a large warehouse or gymnasium. Jake had to respect his grit as the space mage had only been out of the Treasure Hunt for a few hours and was already straight back to work. In fact, he seemed even more filled with fervor than before when Jake saw him in his sphere.

Jake knocked on the door, and a second person in the house opened it. Jake hadn't seen a young lad before, and the guy seemed terrified upon seeing Jake stand there as he just froze. He stood there for a solid second before collecting himself, invited Jake inside, and directed him towards Neil. Probably an assistant or something.

Walking into his practice room, Jake saw a lot of half-made magic circles and small devices he didn't recognize.

Neil looked up as he detected Jake and promptly greeted him. "Ah, hey there!"

"Hi," Jake said, giving a half-hearted wave as he was too busy inspecting the room.

"I have to know, who won?" Neil asked as he stopped doing whatever he was doing.

"Not me," Jake just answered. Even if the Sword Saint couldn't be said to have won either, Jake had sure as hell not come out victorious.

"Oh," Neil said, turning the situation far more awkward.

"Anyway," Jake said, changing the topic. "Looking for some way to know the direction of Skyggen as I am going there, and Miranda said you might have something."

“Ah, sure!” Neil exclaimed, happily changing the topic as he waved his hand and took out a small metal disc that looked like a compass.”

“This is a copy of the Spatial Compass tied to the receiver circle I gave to Skyggen during the World Congress. Just infuse a bit of mana, and it will display an arrow,” Neil said, as he also took out a small metal cube. “Also, if you are going, can you bring this with you? It is a small storage cube containing some research and improved coordinates and directions to syncing our teleportation circles. With hope, we can soon have a permanent teleportation circle connecting our two settlements.”

“Why not,” Jake agreed as he got both of the items. He instantly used the compass and saw it did indeed display an arrow just like a regular compass.

“One more thing,” Neil said. “Want a boost on the way? I can send you a few thousand kilometers the right way without any problems. Ah, but it will be a bit random, and I can’t tell for sure where you will appear.”

Jake shrugged. “Sure thing, would be nice getting there faster.”

“Great!” Neil smiled, muttering as he led Jake into another room with a circle already prepared. “I have been hoping to test the cost and challenges associated with teleporting someone substantially more powerful than myself...”

Less than a minute later, Jake found himself standing on a magic circle as Neil made some small alterations to get the direction right. He placed a number of items to act as catalysts as Jake made a mental note to compensate him. When everything was ready, Jake gave the go-ahead as Neil activated it, and Jake felt space around him distort. He could easily resist the effect if he wanted, but he allowed it to take effect as he disappeared.

Jake felt himself travel through space for a second or two as his sphere acted up a bit, but nothing he couldn't reign in. Finally, when he regained vision, he found himself standing on a large flat stone surrounded by small mountains and hills.

He barely had time to take in surroundings before he detected movement as the rocks around him began moving on their own, and Jake turned his gaze and saw an almost humanoid-looking stack of stone assemble.

[Summoned Stone Elemental – lvl 102]

Jake raised his eyebrows as he looked a bit further and saw the head of a small figure atop a hill not far away. Soon many more elementals appeared as Jake detected more than fifty figures surrounding the small vale he found himself in. Squinting, he finally got a good look at one of the small figures above as it peeked up to look at him.

[Mountain Goat Rockshaper – lvl 114]

A fucking army of goats?

Shaking his head, Jake just raised his hand as arcane mana revolved around it, and a dozen or so arcane bolts appeared. With a flick of his wrist, all of them fired out and hit the stone elementals, making them blow up into dust instantly.

Only half had been blown up as the rest also just crumbled, and when he looked up again, he saw all of the goats gone. Jumping, Jake took flight as he stared at the many goats fleeing in all directions beneath him. Jake couldn't help but chuckle at the cowardly beasts as he naturally didn't bother pursuing.

Killing such low-level beasts didn't give him any experience, and he didn't really blame the goats for attacking him either. He had kind of just appeared in the middle of what he assumed was their territory, giving off an aura he had been told several times wasn't the most friendly. So them running away upon seeing he wasn't someone they could deal with was just smart.

Goodbye, little goats, Jake thought as they all went into hiding, and he looked out over the vast landscape in front of him with rolling hills, mountains, vales, and valleys. When he closed his eyes, he even felt the auras of some beasts that would perhaps be worth challenging hidden within their own territories ahead of him.

Jake found himself around three thousand kilometers away from Haven, which was quite impressively done by Neil. It was a nice headstart for sure.

He took out the compass and, without further ado, began his trip across the land, perhaps only missing checking out a single important detail before taking off:

How far there was.

Chapter 353 - Road Trip Entertainment: Vampire Lore

Jake had never been the type to enjoy road trips much, most likely because it always included being cramped in a car with too many other people, and there were always at least a few he didn't know that well. He had still gone on a few, and the times he went with his family was fine, but extended periods of nothing did weigh you down.

Traveling across the landscape as you bent space to your will and teleported one step at a time did seem different, but it turns out it really wasn't, besides it being a one-man road trip. The first few hours had been just fine. Heck, the first day had been just fine, as there were many interesting sights and new creatures to see. Still, it did begin to get a bit samey, especially when he reached a long stretch of empty plains with pretty much no creatures around besides the occasional hole leading into a vast underground area filled with insects.

None of them bothered him, and Jake didn't head underground to bother them either. Perhaps there would be foes worth fighting deep underground – in fact, he was certain there were – but he was just as certain that a foray down there wouldn't be a brief one.

The only thing keeping him kind of sane was Sylphie still poking him mentally once in a while to update him on her victories or when she came across something interesting. Jake learned a lot about the diversity of "super-weird" trees in the forest.

He did try to find things to do, like improving his One Step Mile or his flying skills, but it was a slow grind without much progress if any at all. On a side note, it also quickly became clear that using any sort of boosting skill during travel was a waste of time as it would just wear him down faster overall.

This meant Jake just ran with One Step Mile and sometimes flew while consuming a potion once in a while. He really, really tried to keep himself engaged, but it was just so damn monotonous seeing the same open plains over and over again.

After the second day, he got too bored of the same repeating landscape for thousands of kilometers in a row as he finally decided to ask Villy something he had been holding off on:

"Hey Villy... I have been meaning to ask, with the Treasure Hunt and all, if you can, like, give me a brief history of vampires? Are they still around and stuff? I feel like that place Yalsten was isolated a long-ass time ago."

It didn't take long before the amused voice of the Viper descended on his mind. "So, my little Chosen is bored after only a few days without proper stimulation and comes crawling to his gracious and benevolent Patron god for comfort and entertainment."

"Not my fault I don't have any audiobooks after the system. Man, that reminds me, I never found out what happened towards the end of-"

"And you never will, the author died," Villy said with evil cackling. "Forever shall you live in ignorance and have it become a mental demon that will haunt you and make you unable to progress."

"Pretty sure the book was already finished," Jake commented.

"It probably was; I honestly have no idea what you are talking about. Either way, vampires... I guess we should start from the beginning with those, but can you give me an overview of what you know?" the Viper finally said, going back to the original topic.

"Sure. It may have come from an unreliable narrator, but according to the vampires of Yalsen..." Jake began as he explained what he had learned during the Treasure Hunt. Jake didn't cheap out on giving details either as he narrated everything he knew, primarily out of pure boredom. It ended up taking him over an hour to convey it all, including information on all the vampires he met, the Vault with the token related to the Malefic Order, and even the fight with the Monarch of Blood. After he was done, he just waited a brief while with no response as he suddenly remembered to ask something he probably should have from the beginning.

"Wait, do you even have time to talk? If you're busy, it's fine," Jake quickly said, hoping he had not just been talking Villy's ear off for an hour without any reason.

"Yeah, I have time. Do you honestly think it requires much mental energy to talk to people? Splitting your mind is basic shit, so it isn't like I am just sitting in a room solely focused on listening to your every word? Well, most often, I have an avatar do it, but those are also a dime a dozen," Villy answered.

"Also, the vampire history you got is pretty accurate. Vampires weren't an original race of the multiverse nor a natural one. Instead, they were created, much like the Risen. Their creator was called Sanguine, and he was a nice chap, in my opinion. I guess it would be easy to start with a bit about him.

"Sanguine was from the fifth era, and I met him when he was still only in S-grade. He came to the Malefic Order as an alchemist seeking training and mentorship, and while I wasn't that keen about him in the beginning, I must admit he was the most talented alchemist I ever met since Duskleaf. So I took him in and taught him for a good while, during which he ascended to godhood and began realizing his true dream of creating a new race.

"You see, Sanguine was a human who was obsessed with creating a superior version of humans. So he researched far and wide and even spent many years researching the Risen, elves, and other three-path races. Ah, three-path races are those who with a class, profession and race. Anyway, he finally came to realize that all of these races were ultimately balanced... but he still wanted to try. And oh boy did he try."

Jake heard the Viper laugh as he reminisced about how things were back then.

"In the end, he succeeded and created the vampiric race, an absolute marvel of alchemy that I must admit I admire even to this day. The sheer diversity of races and paths he created and the thought he

put into it rivaled that of Inmortau and any other who created a new race, if not surpassing them. Vampires ended up being more than merely another version of enlightened species but ended up being far closer to monsters than something like humans in many ways. It was the kind of race that only allowed one to have either a race or a profession, which may sound like a drawback, but for many, this was preferable. However, this race did also have issues.

"His goal of creating a more powerful race was never lost on him, even if he could not do it as originally intended. He did want it to be superior, but with superior races, classes or professions come drawbacks, as you know. All vampiric races, even the weakest ones, were considered high-tier, with the most powerful naturally at the pinnacle. The drawback? Their resources. Vampires, no matter what, only have Blood Energy, and Blood Energy cannot regenerate on its own, forcing vampires to either consume it from other vitality-based lifeforms or using potions or other items."

Frowning, Jake asked. "But the vampires talked about that only becoming a thing later on after the Bloodless Night."

"I'm getting there," Villy said. "Sanguine was never happy with this drawback and wanted to find a solution. Which he did. He was gone for over a hundred thousand years, but when he returned, he had found one, possessing two incredible new tools. The first of which was a Transcendent skill, with only one effect... making all vampires bound to him through their Records and karma. It allowed him to essentially bless all vampires in existence with his power, giving them all one boon: the ability to regenerate blood energy. It also gave him a certain level of control and more or less made all of them his thralls... so yeah, not a fan of that part. Anyway, the second thing he returned with was a way to create even more vampires using an artifact he named the Blood Moon. What it would do was make anyone under its light get the possibility to change. Now, I understand if you don't see the issues with this, so let me explain some things about one of the largest secret wars of the multiverse: the war of faith.

"Many gods desire or even require faith, and the best way to get faith is naturally loyal followers. A great way to get loyal followers is to have them be bound to you in other ways than simply a blessing that can be revoked. Make the faith part of their community, their empire, and entire social circle, or the highest level: their very race and existence. The greatest example of the community-driven faith is the Holy Church, with the race-driven faith the Risen. The Risen are transformed enlightened beings, and the ones from the Holy Church blessed enlightened beings. But... a Risen cannot be blessed by the Holy Mother or any in her Pantheon, while anyone blessed by the Holy Mother cannot become a Risen.

"Due to the Transcendent skill of the Holy Mother, it requires soul alteration at the time of death, but if the soul has already been altered by unnatural means – such as becoming a Risen - it doesn't work. The same is true if someone blessed by the Holy Mother or her Pantheon tries to become a Risen. There is simply a conflict of how their skills and abilities interact. This is ultimately also the reason why their two factions are in perennial conflict."

Jake quickly frowned as he caught on to what Villy was saying. "And Sanguine created a third such path that also interfered with theirs."

"Bingo. When it was just another minor race, the two Primordials didn't care much about Sanguine, but the issue was that Sanguine was too talented in their eyes. Because he didn't only make a viable and powerful race, he even built into the vampiric race methods of giving the race to others through both rituals, alchemic creations, and items, much like the Risen. As a result, the vampiric race began spreading far more than before, its power evident to all who received it. And as vampires could neither be blessed by the Holy Mother nor become Risen due to their altered souls..."

"They went to war against him," Jake said as he kept using One Step Mile across the empty plains of dust and soil.

"I think war is a wrong phrase. Instead, they went on a crusade against the entire vampiric race to wipe them out from existence. As long as a single vampire lived, they could spread from there and help transform others. Especially the disciples of Sanguine – vampiric gods - were big on this, offering their blessings to entire empires and trying to get pantheons on board. But the moment the Holy Church and the Blightfather both went on the offensive and declared their intents... yeah.

"Don't get me wrong, Sanguine was powerful, but so are Primordials. He fought valiantly and killed dozens of gods from the Holy Church and Empire of Blight, but in the end, he was cornered as his former allies began betraying him. He was slain in a battle against the Holy Mother, Blightfather, and a hired

Umbra, along with many other gods who had joined the crusade. This was the only time the Empire of Blight and Holy Church had worked together on a single goal so openly in the history in the multiverse, showing how dangerous they viewed his presence to be.

"With the death of Sanguine, the effects of his Transcendent skill disappeared, leading to what they call the Bloodless Night. Constant hunger cursed the vampires once more, and they tried to find solutions but were hunted down by the enemy factions, a standing bounty up on any vampire killed. Yalsten was but one of millions of hidden worlds long forgotten. And that is pretty much the story of the rise and fall of Sanguine."

Frowning, Jake considered a bit. "I thought you and Sanguine were allies of some kind? I got the same feeling from the vampires of Yalsten. Even the Monarch of Blood was amazed that I would fight him as a Chosen until I explained the circumstances.

"I just taught him for a while, and I did help him somewhat, but allies? No. It was his battle to fight, and I wasn't going to get myself involved unnecessarily. In the end, he was just too weak. Sanguine willingly challenged the established forces, he knew what he was doing, but it was a gamble he lost. It would have ended with him either being one of the most influential gods of the multiverse or death. If he had been stronger, it would not have mattered. Why do you think the Holy Mother and the Blightfather can't reach a resolution? Because neither can actually defeat the other, even if they get other gods to join them. Also, most of the gods who could join such a battle refuse to take a side, me included. Ah, and they both seem to be just fine with the status quo. In summary, Sanguine just failed to establish a new status quo – to force them into a new status quo."

"Does that mean the vampires were wiped out?" Jake finally asked. He had promised the Monarch he would check, and if they weren't dead, put in a good word. Same for that Nalkar woman from the first Vault he had explored, who had asked him to check for her race's survival.

"No, not even close. In fact, there are more vampires now than back then simply due to the population of the multiverse expanding. This was all the way back in the fifth era, and we have eighty-eight more universes since then. Well, eighty-seven as I doubt your world has many vampires quite yet. The big

difference is that they are no longer unified as one race. Many larger factions have vampires among them, and quite a few vampiric gods have risen too," Villy explained.

Jake felt a bit relieved at knowing they weren't all gone. Well, considering the divine item from the Treasure Hunt, they really couldn't be as they had just been given a tool to create more of them.

"How about the Order?" he also asked.

"As I said, I did help out the vampiric race a bit; one of those ways was to allow them to join the Order even during the time they were hunted. Quite a few larger clans joined and sought refuge, and it did help make it clear to the Holy Church and Empire of Blight that complete extermination was impossible, as I fucking dared them to come and try to act out their crusade on my home turf. Oh, some did try, but nothing we didn't easily handle. This does mean that the Order of the Malefic Viper has some of the oldest vampire clans in the multiverse, and it wouldn't be weird if some descendants of even vampires of Yalsten are here. Though I doubt anyone knows or remembers."

"Oh, that's nice, I guess. Any idea about the state of the Nalkar clan?" Jake asked. It was the mental magic vampires and the ones who had made that first Vault he cleared. Heck, he had a legendary rarity heart from one of them.

"They are one of the five biggest clans within the Order and have an S-grade leader who is also a branch leader," Villy answered.

"Good, that woman in the Vault was nice enough, and I did kind of promise to put in a good word for the clan," Jake said with a nod as he was forced to summon his wings as he came across a lake.

Funny fact, running on lakes was a very bad idea. Even flying close to the surface was a bad time, so he tended to try and stay far up as he didn't want to deal with stupid fish trying to eat him.

"You can do that yourself when you come by," Villy said.

"Sure thing. By the way, you said five clans. Exactly how many vampires are in the Order?" Jake wondered. He assumed there had to be a pretty good number considering them having an S-grade. Probably a few hundred thousand if he was guess-

"Like a few billion per clan at least, I guess? They got their own territories, and I honestly don't bother keeping track," Villy casually answered.

Jake nearly fell out of the air as he flapped his wings wrong. "How the fuck are there so many?"

"It isn't that many?"

"Dude, Earth didn't even have ten billion before the system, even less now..."

"Oh man, it will be a culture shock when you get to some of the cities with trillions of citizens."

"Now you're just fucking with me," Jake laughed as he kept flying.

The Viper didn't answer, but he felt like he could see the smug smile of the god.

"You are just fucking with me... right?"

He never got an answer.

Chapter 354 - Unexpected Visitor

At the end of the Treasure Hunt

Caleb used his Hunter Insignia to leave the Treasure Hunt as he found himself back inside his main office located in the center of Skyggen. He quickly checked the time on a clock on the wall and saw only a bit less than ten hours had passed since the Hunt began.

He briefly reflected on the battle between the Sword Saint and his brother but quickly shook his head as he got to work. There was loot to categorize, and when he got the message about the Auction a moment later, he naturally also added that on his to-do list.

Just as he was exiting the office, someone else slammed the door open, surprising Caleb as he saw one of the workers there.

"Judge! Hurry, we had an invader, and something is going on at your home!"

Caleb stopped for a moment as he let the words sink in. Without any hesitation, he activated a skill as his body turned to lightning, not even giving a chance for his aide to elaborate on the situation.

He flew through the city for a few moments before his residence came into view. He saw it surrounded by people, including some of the recently returned D-grades. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he slammed down in front of them all as he turned corporeal.

Pushing past the people around, he saw that they were taking a defensive perimeter. The situation was tense, but when he saw his wife holding his son while standing with some of the guards, Caleb breathed out a sigh of relief as he hurried over.

“Maja, what happened!?” he said loudly as soon as he was within earshot, running over to her.

She looked calmer than he expected with all the commotion, and when she saw him, she just shook her head. “I already told them everything is fine, and they’re just overreacting.”

“Ma’am, an intruder managed to break through all the barriers and enter the residence without being detected...” one of the guards beside her said.

“And he didn’t do anything besides talking once he did,” Maja countered.

“Give me a rundown,” Caleb ordered the guard.

“Sir, approximately two hours ago, an individual managed to sneak into the city and get through the barrier around the residence and entered without being detected. We only became aware when he triggered an alarm on the way out, and guards are currently in pursuit, joined by Matteo and Nadia,” the guard quickly answered.

Caleb frowned as he considered it. Someone had purposefully waited for the Treasure Hunt to enter, and based on his ability to sneak in had to be D-grade at least, so he chose not to join it on purpose. Who the hell?

“What did he want?” he asked his wife.

“Just to talk, he wanted information about you and Jake. Just regular stuff... like who you were and what you did before the system. He even asked questions about you two growing up, and it didn’t feel malicious in any way,” she explained with a shrug.

“Who was he? Did you get a name?”

“Just a young man. Now that I think about it, he never gave a name. He said he was friends with Jake and knew quite a lot about him, he even told me about Jake’s tutorial, and it was pleasant enough. Debra and Robert didn’t even consider not answering as we all assumed he had gotten in with permission with a proven identity. And again, nothing seemed weird, just an old friend of Jake who had gotten split from him after the tutorial and wanted to get to know him and you better,” she kept explaining. “It was only once he left we figured out something was wrong as he tripped the alarm, and then all hell broke loose. That was fifteen minutes ago or so.”

Caleb’s frown deepened as the entire situation was just too damn weird. The alarm when exiting was far easier to avoid when getting in. Why sneak in, to begin with, if he didn’t do so with bad intentions? Much less clearly purposefully trigger the alarm when he left.

“Where are mom and dad?” he asked

“Just inside, I decided to go out and handle it,” Maja answered as she held the sleeping baby. “I don’t really think any of this is a big deal?”

Nodding, Caleb considered her words as he turned to the guard. “What direction did they leave in?”

The guard made it easier than a mere direction by giving him a locator for Matteo.

“Maja, go inside and wait, okay? I’ll check it out,” Caleb said as he gave her a hug.

“Okay, please don’t get into any unnecessary fights; he didn’t seem like a bad person,” Maja answered.

“Of course.”

With that, Caleb took flight again as he turned to black lightning and followed the locator towards Matteo. His head was filled with potential scenarios, none of them quite making sense. Was it the Holy Church? It was a possibility as he was never quite sure what they were doing. It had to be someone powerful, not just in infiltration but also mental magic... because Maja sure as hell wasn’t acting normally for just having had someone break into their home.

Was it the undead? No... no, Maja would have noticed even with the mental influence. Valhal? Why would they? Also, using mental magic was not in their MO. An independent faction? Did they even have anyone strong enough to break in? Honestly, Caleb was lost for possibilities. Unless it was an inside job, it was hard to determine who it could be, and even then, he would know of someone with such skills.

I guess I will have to investigate directly.

He soared across the terrain and the settlement built within the hidden valley, seeing the evergrowing city. Soon, he was outside the border, and he kept flying onwards as he felt himself get closer and closer to where Matteo and the others were.

It only took him ten or so minutes before he spotted something in the distance, and what he saw wasn't what he expected. He saw a large cube of silver-like metal. Matteo somewhere within.

Without any hesitation, Caleb summoned his staff, and he smashed down onto the cube, breaking the roof as he hit the ground within. Orienting himself, his eyes opened wide as he saw Nadia and a dozen or so other assassins all lying on the ground. Some were missing limbs and covered in blood. Some turned partially to metal, and in the center, a single armored figure holding the passed out Matteo.

"You got here faster than expected," he heard the armored figure say as he let down Matteo's unconscious body.

Caleb did a quick check and found not a single one of the assassins were dead. Who the fuck?

He tried to use Identify but got a somewhat expected response.

[Human – lvl ?]

A skill to obscure it.

Caleb took a defensive position as he didn't underestimate the person before him as he asked: "Who are you, and why are you here? What the hell do you want with my family?"

The person just regarded him as he spoke: "You two look a lot alike, and even your demeanors are similar. Seeing you, it makes more sense as I was beginning to doubt Debra and Robert were truly his parents. I do wonder how such regular people can give birth to you two... but I guess it is related to the Bloodline?"

Frowning, Caleb listened as he worked his identification skill to pierce the other guy's obfuscation skill. He managed to after a while and was shocked when he saw the level.

[Human – lvl 172]

How the hell, Caleb thought as he began formulating a plan to retreat. But he also had an idea who the person in front of him was.

"You must be William."

Caleb just didn't see any other possibilities, and when the armor of the person in front of him retracted, he got his suspicions confirmed as he saw the man appear. But he looked slightly different than what Caleb had heard. He was supposed to be a teenager, but he was clearly older by at least a few years.

"Well, at least you know my name... your brother didn't the last time we met," William answered calmly. "I guess you are the one who inherited all the intelligence points, huh?"

"Why are you here?" Caleb cut to the chase, not wanting to bicker meaninglessly. Another reason was due to the constant influence he felt. Some kind of mental skill was slowly attempting to bore into his mind, so the longer he spent, the more dangerous it would become.

"Wow, both of you somehow managed to develop such rudeness despite having two perfectly polite parents. As for why I am here? Master always talks about how information is the true path to victory and the best way to overcome gaps. So I am gathering intelligence," William answered with a smile. "I must admit, it was more pleasant than expected. It turns out that having non-shitty parents does a lot for a kid's development, allowing even a freak like your brother to learn how to function within a civilized society."

Frowning, Caleb felt more and more unsure about the entire situation. For the disciple of Eversmile to show up like this was clearly no coincidence, much less the timing. He had somehow known when the Treasure Hunt would end, timed it, so he left just before Caleb returned and then baited him to follow. It was a trap he had walked straight into, but he had no idea what the purpose of the trap was quite yet. So instead, he tried to probe for information.

"My brother has always been a bit special, but I don't think he was ever quite a basket-case like you. I do wonder, how did you manage to find a way out of our universe this fast? Much less spend all your potential time in D-grade within Nevermore?" Caleb asked.

Off-world teleportation was something the forces of Earth were all working on to connect with their factions in other universes. While they could not offer much assistance, it would give the inhabitants access to areas and opportunities elsewhere. Such as where William had clearly been based on his aged appearance: Nevermore. It was the only dungeon Caleb was aware of with built-in time dilation without any negative consequences, besides the limited amount of time one could spend there per grade. Based on Caleb's estimates and his aged appearance, William had to have spent a few years in Nevermore to get to his current level.

But, even if he could leave and go to Nevermore... why do it? He had not attended the World Congress, which one could argue wasn't really missing much, but the Treasure Hunt? It gave a title that was massive by multiverse standards, and, of course, it was a lot of loot lost just to do something anyone could do anyway once they found a way to other universes. So why would Eversmile make William do that, or if it was William's own idea, allow him to?

One thing had to be clear, traveling to another universe wasn't actually that hard. Well, it was, but it only had to be for one side – either the receiver or sender. This meant the other side could soak all the cost of bringing someone from the 93rd universe and doing the same when sending them back. All you needed was someone sufficiently skilled to put down the transfer formation on Earth, which a talented mid-tier D-grade space mage should be capable of.

"I have my means and my reasons. So does my master. But enough about me... I am not here to fight, as if I was, everyone around us would be dead. We would also already be in the midst of it – if you wouldn't be dead already, that is," William answered nonchalantly, Caleb, annoyingly so, was unable to dispute it. While he did believe he could escape... the level gap was too high for him to want to risk anything.

"Not here," Caleb answered. He still didn't rule out it could lead to a fight, and fighting with his unconscious allies around him wouldn't be wise. Also... he had already sent back an emergency message to Skyggen, making his family go to a safe house, so he needed to buy at least a bit more time. Assistance was also coming, but not to fight. They would not be helpful, and he only called them to retrieve the injured.

Smiling, William happily agreed as the metal cube surrounding them folded up and shrank as the caster absorbed it into his body.

The moment it did, Caleb's eyes opened wide as he finally detected them. All around him, a net of thousands of strings of wires unraveled as William absorbed them too, Caleb only now becoming fully aware of how much of a trap he had just entered.

"Let's go then," Caleb said, faking being unfazed as he headed off directly away from the city, William following after.

While William clearly wanted information off Caleb, Caleb would also try and use this chance to figure out what the hell William had been doing. Most importantly, who had managed to make a teleportation circle able to transport out of their universe ahead of any of the major forces. The fact that he didn't know about it also meant the Court of Shadows didn't know... and while it was incredibly difficult for the gods to peer into their universe, the fact that no one had known had to mean it was the Primordial who had blessed William that was ultimately behind it.

Now, the only question was if William was a player in the game of his master or just another pawn thinking he was.

Present day

Four entire fucking days was how long Jake spent just zooming through the terrain as he traveled faster than two commercial planes stacked on top of each other – with better fuel efficiency too, and way less carbon emission.

Since the start of the tutorial, this had been the most boring period with seriously nothing interesting happening. Jake felt bad about nagging Villy, so he didn't want to constantly ask him about stuff, and while Sylphie was interesting to communicate with, it had to be done in small doses.

Additionally, the King sleeping in the mask was a real lazy one, not waking up a single time during this period no matter how much he poked it. Or maybe he was just being ignored. Either way, it sucked.

But! Finally, he noticed that the compass seemed to move more back and forth whenever he didn't run in a straight line, indicating he was getting close. And it truly was about time.

For these four days, Jake had not had a single good fight. He had had a few scuffles with beasts, but all of them either got out of his way or weren't strong enough to put up a good fight. It had been mostly flat land between Haven and Skyggen, and the few mountain chains, forests, or large lakes he came across could either fly over or just run through. Well, he did dodge a single especially large mountain as it quite frankly would take too long to try and get over. Jake had really wanted to explore it but had held himself back.

Anyway, to summarize, Jake had found at least a few interesting places to explore if he had to run back to Haven again or just wanted to go on a bit of an adventure someday.

A few more hours passed before Jake finally saw something far in the distance. It was night by now, and he saw faint lights on the horizon. He sped up as he finally felt his journey be near its end, and he promised himself to next time ask about how long there actually was. Though to be fair... chances are Neil hadn't known.

With a final push, Jake came over a hill as the city finally came into view. It was a large settlement, even larger than the Fort by a great deal, and Jake had to admit he was impressed so much had been built in such a short amount of time.

The entire city was placed on the plains with a large mountainside to the east and a wall surrounding it. Jake headed down, but when he got closer, he felt like something was off.

Courtesy of his Bloodline, Jake always had a good general feeling about the overall aura of an area. He could get a rough estimate for how powerful the people or beasts were, and when he was close to Skyggen, it just felt too weak. Sure, there were some D-grades, but far from as many, as he would assume.

Frowning, he still naturally headed over as he double-checked the compass was still pointing directly to somewhere in the city. So he was going in no matter what.

Now the only question was... should he sneak in or use the front gate?

Chapter 355 - Visiting Skyggen & Skyggen

Jake, in the end, decided to just be normal and enter as everyone else would. Besides, it wasn't like that much border control was going on, as the entire gate was more than ten meters wide and without any real defenses while open.

When he got closer, he saw a simple-looking registration booth with a sign advertising how to get citizenship, with another slightly larger office for the merchants to go and register. There wasn't really any visitor center or control of who entered or exited, but he did feel like he passed a barrier when he entered the city as well as a few pairs of eyes on him.

He kept walking a bit further into the city, seeing a mull of people even though it was in the middle of the night. People didn't really need to sleep much anymore, if at all, making the nightlife as buzzing as the daytime most often.

It did vary, as many professions needed to prepare things, and it just came most naturally to fall into old customs. For example, if a blacksmith needed to craft, they would spend most of the night smithing away and then sell during the day. Of course, it could be the other way around, but most others just copied and did the same if the majority began doing something.

Besides, it gave rise to other kinds of businesses, as Jake saw a bar district quite close to the entrance. It appeared that most commercial activities were centered around the entrance area of the city, with the residential part further in towards the mountainside.

Sadly, Jake was not in the mood to check out the local cuisine or watering holes but instead went into a small alley between two bars where he stopped and waited. He looked to the side, straight into a wall, as he felt the person peer at him through it, making it clear he was aware of them.

While waiting, he took out the compass and saw it pointed to a building nearby. He planned to go check it out in a bit, but first, he would deal with the police force or whoever was keeping an eye on him.

Ten or so seconds later, three people landed in front of him. The person in the front was a woman at D-grade and regarded him for a moment before she bowed.

"Lord Thayne," she said respectfully. "We were not aware you would visit this soon. May we know your order of business?"

So much for stealth being an option...

"I am here to visit my brother and deliver some things from the resident space mage of Haven," Jake answered.

"This..." the woman looked a bit unsure as she hesitated. "Would you mind following us to the city hall so we can discuss? I think that will be easier, and we can avoid unwanted attention."

Jake considered her words, and with his suspicion of the area already not being what it seemed... he would mind.

"Here is just fine," Jake answered as he activated Pride of the Malefic Viper as well as summoned an arcane barrier sealed off the entire alley. "Now no one can listen in. Tell me, where is my brother?"

The woman looked hesitant still but finally relented. "This is against protocol... but... sir, the Judge is not in this city."

Jake frowned. "Isn't this Skyggen?"

"Yes and no," she answered. "As a defensive measure, there exist two cities named Skyggen. This one is the publicly known version, and the other one is hidden and holds the true headquarter of the Court of Shadows."

“That is... actually pretty smart?” Jake said as he thought about it. It was a bit like how the Fort acted as a buffer to Haven, then this place also worked as a front of sorts for the Court. Maybe the larger factions did know, but it sure as hell had him fooled, and he was certain Miranda would have mentioned it if she knew.

It also made sense to place a public teleportation circle here.

“It is standard protocol to always set up a second Pylon city if possible to mask the headquarter,” the woman explained. “The Court also still needs to operate somewhat publicly to procure resources and recruit, as well as allow us to expand our presence, so it serves several purposes.”

Jake nodded along as he asked: “So, where is the true city?”

“Approximately a thousand kilometers to the northeast, located in a valley,” she said as she took out a small device and handed it to Jake. “This is a locator showing the direction, I have already unlocked it, but it requires a solid understanding and manipulation of dark mana to-“

“I got it,” Jake said nonchalantly. The device clicked as a small mark appeared on it. Having unlocked it, Jake also knew it was pointing him towards the real Skyggen, even though the mark didn’t look like an arrow, but more an odd eclipse of sorts.

The woman stared at him a bit as she just nodded. “Very well. You mentioned something for the space mages?”

“Yep,” Jake said as he fished out the cube Neil had given him. “I’m sure they can figure out what to do with this.”

He tossed the cube to her, and she caught it, nodding once more. "Final thing... we had an intruder a few days ago, so the security is quite high at the headquarter."

"Duly noted," Jake said as he didn't hesitate to take off right away, dispelling the arcane barrier as he summoned his wings and soared upwards and out of the city, following the locator. He was only a tiny bit miffed that he had to travel again, but at least it was only a small journey this time around.

--

Caleb sat in his office, staring at a picture on the wall as he occasionally glanced down at the report in front of him. It was transcribed based on direct communication with the Augur, Jacob, related to the presence of an off-world teleportation method. Or, more accurately, the lack thereof.

Which meant even the Holy Church had no idea who or what was behind William's trip to Nevermore. And speaking of William...

Before he had the time to process the odd encounter again, it knocked on the door.

"Sir... we have another intruder," his aide said, though with far less urgency than last time.

"Who?" Caleb asked as he got up in a hurry, still not taking it lightly.

"It appears to be your brother," the man answered.

"Oh."

Caleb went out of his office as he didn't bother turning to lightning this time. Mainly because he wanted to make his brother wait for breaking in for some fucking reason.

Jake had a good reason to break in. At least he believed it was a great reason. You see, when he came to the valley with the hidden Skyggen in it, he encountered a barrier meant to camouflage it. Of course, it mattered naught before the power of Jake's Perception, but he still found it interesting.

As interesting as the detection barrier. Jake really wanted to see if he could sneak past it, and lo-and-behold, he could. All it took was his arcane barrier being used to hide as he used One Step Mile to quickly phase through - Pride of the Malefic Viper active all the meanwhile to stabilize the mana around him and make his barrier more potent.

Now, once inside, the real fun began. Jake wanted to see how far he could make it in before being discovered as he activated Expert Stealth and snuck in. He made it to the wall and over it, using his sphere and overpowered eyesight to keep track of the movement of guards, like he was playing a stealth game.

It all went fine and dandy for a while until he suddenly felt a gaze upon him, and he knew the jig was up. He looked up at a tower and saw a woman he recognized from the World Congress look back at him through the scope of what looked like a sniper rifle. Jake waved at her, and she also raised her arm to wave while taking out a small token of sorts.

Realizing there was no point hiding, Jake exited stealth and went back the way he had come towards a fancy little pastry shop he had passed on the way. By now, it was early in the morning, and if he was visiting his parents, it would only be polite to bring cake and breakfast.

It didn't take him long to find some cake and other pastries, and the woman at the counter didn't even question him wearing a mask or anything. So he just paid and left, finding himself on the main street outside. Looking about with his sphere, it quickly became apparent why no one cared about his mask or even that his level was hidden – more than half of the people on the street wore them and had hidden levels.

I guess that's a city of assassins for ya, Jake thought as he found a bench and took a seat as he waited.

The real Skyggen was quite a bit smaller than the other one, but the overall power level was far different. Just sitting there, Jake had already detected more D-grades than he had seen in the other city, and the overall presence of the place was just on another level.

He also felt that the atmospheric mana was slightly different compared to the outside of the barrier. It was a bit darker everywhere, as the dark mana in the environment was prevalent. If Jake had to guess, then the barrier erected around it helped transform the mana, or maybe it even had something to do with the Pylon? Jake knew it could affect atmospheric mana, so he could see Caleb have a skill to affect it as the city leader.

A few gazes upon him threw him out of his thoughts as he turned his head and saw Caleb walk towards him. The observers seemed to be hidden in the area around his brother, Jake deciding to pay them no mind as he got up.

“Hello, I come representing the space mage guild of Haven, and on behalf of my client, I have come to serve you a lawsuit for false advertisement by having two damn cities named the same thing,” Jake said as his brother got close.

“On behalf of the Court of Shadows, I vehemently deny all such accusations as the teleportation coordinates were placed in Skyggen as per the terms of the contract. Having two cities with the same name is just a loophole and not my client’s fault,” Caleb answered as he walked over and gave him a hug. “Good to see you again, Jake. You got here faster than expected.”

“You did tell me to come,” Jake answered with a smile, not bothering to continue with the half-joke, half-jab. Okay, he could continue a little. “Smart trick with the two cities, even had me fooled for a moment. You got two Pylons for it?”

“Yeah,” Caleb answered. “The proximity means we can link them up quite soon and essentially make it one city, at least when it comes to bonuses and such. It also serves as a nice shield and allows this Skyggen to serve as the main headquarter and living space of the members of the Court and their immediate family.”

“As I said, smart,” Jake said as he pulled back a bit and frowned. “Now, what’s the problem?”

“Huh?” Caleb exclaimed, confused.

“Something is clearly bothering you, and you’re as shit at hiding it now as when you were as a kid. So?”

Caleb sighed as he motioned with his hand, and Jake felt several gazes disappear off him. “Let’s go to my office first, then we can go to mom and dad after.”

Jake raised the bags of pastries. "Can't be too long, or these get cold."

"The bags are enchanted, so they won't," Caleb answered, shaking his head. "This is pretty standard for all shops, even in other cities... Jake, how often do you leave your house?"

"So, what way to your office?"

Jake took a seat in the armchair in Caleb's office, finding the place overly fancy and very domineering. But then again, he was titled the Judge, so maybe it was good for him to be a bit intimidating when dealing with problems.

"So?" Jake said again as Caleb had also taken a seat.

"William came by a few days ago," Caleb said in a grave voice.

A few moments passed as Jake frowned. "Oh... him... he was still alive, huh?"

Returning his frown, Caleb asked: "Didn't you have a conflict or a fight with him?"

"I wouldn't call it a fight," Jake answered, shaking his head. "Honestly, I haven't thought much about him for quite a while. Last I heard, he was with some therapist or something. Either way, did you kill him?"

"No... it isn't as simple as that," Caleb sighed. "A few days ago, he managed to break in while everyone was absent going to the Treasure Hunt, and..."

Caleb explained what had happened, and the more he said, the more Jake began frowning. After he finished, Jake sat in silence for a while.

"172, huh?" Jake commented. "So, he's trying to get revenge or something?"

"That's the thing..." Caleb began. "I don't think this situation is that straightforward. He didn't kill anyone when he came, and he didn't even do any real lasting damage. He also possesses some powerful mental skills to the level where I believe he has maxed out his profession or is at least close to it. I can also admit that he is more powerful than me... but despite it all, I never felt any killing intent."

"Then what did he want?"

"Just information, it seems. I followed him, fully expecting a battle, but instead, all I got was a questionnaire about you. Who you were growing up, what you did for work, your hobbies, your likes, dislikes... honestly, it was just damn bizarre. But I did manage to pick up some things myself," Caleb answered.

“First of all, he seems to have grown a lot both mentally and power-wise based on prior information, so I estimate he has spent the full five years D-grade can be in Nevermore. This means he must have gone there shortly after the World Congress.”

“Villy did tell me it isn’t super hard to leave the universe, but last I heard, no faction was able to yet, so how could he leave already?”

“I don’t know, but I have some theories. Anyway, the second thing I learned was just how little William knew of you. Even the current you, meaning I doubt he has many human companions who are in the upper echelons of humanity. Thirdly, and this is a weird one... he didn’t use your name even once,” Caleb said.

“Did he forget it?” Jake asked, half-jokingly.

“Based on his reaction when I said it? No, no, he did not. He winced back when I mentioned your name directly, swiftly trying to wrest back the flow of conversation. He only referred to you as “your brother” or “that guy” or other generic terms during our talks. He didn’t even use other words used like “hunter” or “Chosen” or anything like that,” Caleb explained.

“Okay, that is weird,” Jake agreed.

“Maybe... maybe not. I don’t think you are a person in his mind, at least not right now. William is trying to make you into a person again by discovering how ‘human’ you are. I sensed genuine fear just at the mention of your name, so to answer the question if he is coming for revenge? Not right now, I don’t think so. But maybe soon, as he seems to be building up both strength and courage. If it is to kill you or merely face you, I don’t know.”

“So?” Jake asked, Caleb instantly getting what he was asking.

“I can’t tell... but if I had to guess, I honestly still don’t think he has a chance. He is powerful for sure, stronger than me... and maybe even stronger than you before the Treasure Hunt. Now, though? It is hard to determine without a true fight, and he didn’t really display much, so this is primarily guesswork,” Caleb admitted.

“Any idea where he is right now?” Jake asked, the implications clear. If the little fucker wanted to fight, he would gladly come to him, also just to tie up a loose end. If he had just stayed out of Jake’s way for good, he wouldn’t care, but now he dared show up in front of his parents? Yeah, that ain’t gonna fly.

“No, but I have an idea who he is with,” Caleb began. “As I said, he teleported off-world months ago, which I would think to be impossible... at least for humans.”

“You mean?” Jake asked, getting it.

“William isn’t working with another human faction – he is working with monsters.”

Chapter 356 - Family Reunion

It was a possibility Jake hadn’t really considered before. The human factions were often at the forefront of the mind when thinking or talking about the most powerful on Earth, but one had to remember that humanity only existed on a small part of the entire planet.

Long ago, Jake had felt the presence of what he believed to be C-grades deep within the forest Haven was placed in the outskirts of, and even during his trip to Skyggen, he felt powerful presences. The large mountain he dodged, as an example, gave off a powerful aura of what could potentially be a C-grade.

The implication? Monsters on Earth were far more powerful than humanity many times over. Yet they were also inherently very territorial, and while Jake had heard of human cities being attacked and monsters wanting Pylons, the more powerful ones had yet to leave their areas. He didn't know what kept them there, but he was happy they stayed.

Because Jake was pretty damn sure that if a single C-grade decided to go on a rampage, no one could stop it. Not him or the Sword Saint or anyone else. Maybe the Holy Church would have some massive ritual where they sacrificed a million people or some shit, but Jake doubted it.

There was just one question...

"Why would monsters work with that little twerp?"

"That I don't know," Caleb answered. "May have to do with his karmic powers, or it may have to do with some deal they made. Perhaps it is as simple as Eversmile blessing some of them and ordering them to work together. Either way, they must get something out of it."

"It can't be a coincidence he finds a beast or other type of monsters with powerful space magic allowing him to leave our universe, and to make those formations, you need specific training and guidance from outside forces," Jake commented.

"Indeed," Caleb agreed.

They both sat in silence for a while before Caleb added. "When we go and see the others, please don't mention William at all, and if they ask about him, do keep it neutral, please. I think I have shrugged off the effects, but the mental magic may still influence them a bit, making them have an unnaturally favorable view of him. So if you speak about killing him or anything like that, you may get a very negative reaction. Just know they have a skewed view, and it isn't their fault."

Jake frowned. "I fucking hate mental magic like that..."

"The worst part is that it isn't really the normal kind of mental magic, so healers can't do much about it. At least it is wearing off, and the more they think about what happened, the odder and more 'wrong' it will begin to feel in their minds. That is the good thing about karmic magic at least... without constant exposure, the effect lessens or disappears entirely far faster than other kinds of mental fuckery."

"Noted," Jake agreed. "I won't bring up curb-stomping the little fucker into the ground repeatedly until he is dead for good. Again."

He let out a bit of his anger as his aura flared, and Caleb shook his head as he muttered: "Well, at least I can get why the guy is scared."

Jake just shrugged. "His fault for being a damn psycho."

"Pretty sure that ain't how that works..."

“Who are you to say? Neither of us are doctors, so who can truly tell.”

The two of them kept bantering a while longer before they left for Caleb’s home.

On the way, a feeling welled up Jake had not expected. He had been looking forward to seeing them, so there was much anticipation, but that anticipation was soon joined by a strong sense of nervousness. He hadn’t met his parents or Maja for half a year or so, and he had changed a lot during that time.

There was also the whole baby-angle he had to consider. A part of him felt shitty for not visiting earlier knowing Maja had given birth, and now he was afraid she would be angry at him. He did have excuses, but were they good enough?

Caleb seemed to pick up on his nervousness as he smiled and patted Jake on the back. “Relax, they’ve all been looking forward to seeing you again. Things may have changed for all of us, but the fact that we’re family hasn’t.”

“Is there anything I need to know?” Jake asked.

“His name is Adam.”

Jake nodded as he smiled, Caleb having already mentioned it before, but it was a bit hectic back then. “After Maja’s grandfather?”

“Yeah, and it also seemed oddly fitting considering the circumstances,” Caleb answered.

“Has everything been fine with Maja and Adam? Anything to mind with the system and all?” Jake asked, still feeling nervous.

“Babies are a damn lot easier than before, that’s for sure,” Caleb laughed. “Besides that, the growth seems pretty normal, besides him being stronger than a baby has any right to. It isn’t really a problem as everything around him is also more durable, but it is something to watch out for when a baby can crawl across a room in seconds.”

“I can imagine,” Jake smiled, remembering Sylphie when she was a newborn chick. Wait, if Sylphie was his niece and Adam his nephew, did that make them cousins of sorts?

Before long, they found themselves at a large residence, far larger than any around. It was several stories tall and was more a small compound with several buildings of varying sizes. The entire thing was walled off with enchantments and a barrier protecting it all.

“Fancy,” Jake commented. “A lot bigger than my lodge.”

Or at least it was until his massive underground lab and facility were finished. Before he left, he had briefly seen the progress, and it was looking good.

“Gotta keep up appearances,” Caleb chuckled, slightly embarrassing. “Also, it allows mom and dad to practically live next door, which is just convenient.”

“Oh, you just like flexing on the plebians,” Jake chuckled along, trying to suppress his own nervousness.

“Now who is the judgemental one?” Caleb shook his head as he took out a token making the double-sided front gate open. They both went into a small yard with the largest building in front of them and two smaller ones to the side.

The courtyard itself was filled with several plants, and he even saw a few plant boxes placed next to one of the houses. He instantly knew that was where his parents had to live, as mom had always loved gardening. Well, and he saw them inside with his sphere.

They went up the stairs to the central one. Jake couldn't hold himself back as he observed all of his family in his sphere and smiled. His parents were both sitting in what looked like a shared office of sorts. Once they entered, Jake heard Maja come out of a side room, Adam sleeping within.

“You're back early today, did something else hap-“

She turned a corner as she saw Jake stand there. He had already made his mask invisible before he had even entered the office with Caleb earlier that day.

“Hi Maja, long time no see,” Jake greeted as he raised his arm to wave.

He barely had time to raise it before she rushed over and pulled him into a hug. He didn't resist but just returned it, Caleb standing to the side with a big smile.

“You finally made it!” Maja exclaimed as she pulled back, looking him over. “Did you just arrive? You look worn down, and look at those boots; they look like they haven’t been fixed up for decades...”

“It’s how they came,” he shrugged as he also looked at her. “Good to see you again.”

He had never been the one for many words, and Maja didn’t hold it against him as she kept smiling, as she turned to Caleb. “Why are you still standing there? Go get mom and dad!”

“Aye aye,” Caleb agreed as he made a joking salute, Jake shaking his head.

“Now come inside, let me make something to drink. Do you want coffee or tea? Juice? Or something else?” Maja asked as she ushered Jake into another room.

“Juice sounds nice,” Jake agreed as he lifted up the bags of pastries. “I brought cake.”

“Oh, from Jerry’s? That’s great! Can you help set the table? Everything is in the cabinet over there,” she said as she pointed to one on the left wall.

“Sure thing,”

Jake didn't even think much as he summoned several mana strings and manipulated them over to open the cabinet and bring out plates, cups, and glasses as he telekinetically set the table – as one does in a post-system world.

"Show-off," Maja commented from the small tea kitchen where she was making some coffee.

"Telekinesis would have revolutionized the entire hospitality industry for sure," Jake joked back. It was funny; he didn't really think much about how he would set the table... he just jumped straight to using magic. It was the same when he did alchemy. Why use your hands when a mana string is both faster and more versatile?

"How did you get here, by the way?" she asked. "I heard they were working on a teleportation circle, and Caleb said you would probably come when that was finished, but I don't think it was quite done yet?"

"I ran," Jake answered. "And flew a bit too. But it was mainly running, and it was quite the trek too."

Maja just shook her head. "You don't mean to tell me you spent the last four days since that Treasure Hunt just running?"

"And flying," Jake corrected with a smile.

They kept talking for a bit longer until they heard his parents' voices, and once he did, the feeling of nervousness from before returned in full. It was the longest period in his life Jake had ever gone without seeing, much less speaking to his parents. He had managed to keep himself busy, and knowing Caleb

was with them had put his mind at ease... but he would be lying to himself if he said he hadn't missed them.

"What surprise are you talking about? Did you-"

Jake heard his mom's voice as she opened the door to the dining room and stopped the moment she did and saw him.

"Jake?" she said with disbelief, standing there frozen as she stared at him.

"Hi, mom," Jake said a bit awkwardly as he pointed towards the table. "I brought cake."

His mom didn't really react to the cake but hurried over and gave him a big hug, Jake reciprocating without hesitation. They held each other for a while as Jake made eye contact with his dad, who stood in the doorway, smiling.

"What happened to your eyes?" his dad asked first thing, making Jake chuckle a bit internally. Upon hearing the question, his mom pulled back from him and looked at his face discerningly, both of them waiting for an answer.

"Just a skill I got," Jake answered. "How about you two? You're looking better than ever. Can't even spot any of those gray hairs, dad."

And he truly had. Both his parents looked younger and healthier than ever before, no doubt due to the advent of stats and their evolutions. Maja was the same. None of them were close to D-grade, but Jake hadn't expected them to be either.

"You've gotten cheekier," his dad said as he walked over and gave Jake a light hug. Neither of them had ever been the types for much physical affection, so that suited Jake just fine.

"It comes with the territory," Jake answered. "Though I still can't measure up to the leader of a massive, literally shadowy, assassin organization."

"Says you, with your-" Caleb began, attempting to throw a jab.

"Not now," his mom interrupted as Caleb promptly shut up. "Come, take a seat!"

Jake's mother ushered him over to the table and sat down. Maja had gotten done with making drinks and brought it over as everyone took a seat.

A lot had happened since the last time they all sat around a table and ate breakfast. The world had been turned upside down and made practically the size of the sun, and they had all gotten superpowers and been through tutorials and experienced death at close hand.

Jake had gone from an office worker to one of the most prominent people on Earth; Caleb became the leader of the Court of Shadows, making them both leaders of the new world in some capacity. In addition, Maja and Caleb had become parents, Robert and Debra grandparents, and Jake arguably an uncle twice.

Yet despite them all not being the same they were the last time they sat down to eat, there was no tension. Instead, Jake felt like it was just like before. The biggest difference was his mother's worried questions of how he was doing, shifting from his job performance and how he got along with his coworkers to how he was doing fighting ancient vampires and old men who liked to talk about spring inside crumbling worlds.

His dad was the silent type as always but was very interested to hear about Haven and how things were going there. Jake was a bit more sparse with details there but could talk more extensively about the underground complex being made beneath his lodge.

Sadly, he didn't get to meet his nephew right away as he was sleeping. Small children were apparently still prone to that sort of thing after the system, which was probably a blessing for the parents.

Also... damn, the cakes were good. Jake really had to eat more food. Also just for the bonuses, as it increased regeneration out of combat quite a lot, which could be useful while crafting. Besides that, it was just tasty, so why not? Jake was pretty sure he didn't have to watch his weight anymore, and he got plenty of exercises when killing stuff.

After nearly an hour of pleasantries and sharing stories, the question came that Jake had been waiting for.

"So... I heard something about some alchemist Order?" his mom asked. "I don't know much about it, but I don't want you getting involved in anything bad."

Jake saw Caleb snicker across the table with schadenfreude as he suppressed his desire to go smack his little brother on the head.

"I'm not a member or anything; I just know some people from there," Jake defended himself. "It's more that I'm good friends with the leader of the Order, so it isn't really anything to worry about."

"I just also heard and read some bad things about this friend of yours..." she said, looking even more concerned than before.

Jake glared daggers at him, but Caleb quickly raised his hands in defense: "Hey, don't look at me, I didn't say anything. We just have a public library, and the exploits of the Viper aren't secrets."

"Your mom is right," his dad also chimed in as he looked serious. "There is a power dynamic far more prominent than any we knew before this system, and not just one based on social constructs and hierarchical structures. I don't think it's healthy, and you really need to be careful about such things. If not, it could end badly, and not for the one on top of the pyramid. Just be careful, okay?"

"Mom, Dad, I got it handled," Jake said, shaking his head. "My relationship with the Viper is mine to deal with, alright? Putting down a healthy boundary here, so just relax. I got this."

"You're sure?" Mom asked again.

"Yes," Jake shut it down.

“As long as you’re aware and thinking about it,” Dad nodded as he returned to nurturing his cup of coffee.

Nodding, Jake confirmed again, trying to put their minds at ease.

He understood their concerns, as quite frankly, his and Villy’s relationship was bizarre. Jake had been put into bad situations at prior stages of his life by being too trusting or not skeptical enough of how others treated him – his university days were a great example of this. However, he would say he had gotten better at it in recent months, no doubt also helped by his intuition allowing him to judge people better. Also, just by limiting who he trusted and let in.

Believing the storm was over, Jake began to relax as his mother uttered an even more perilous question:

“So, is there anyone special we should know about? A girlfriend, perhaps?”

Chapter 357 - Exploring Relationships

The damp cavern was filled to the brim with life as countless beasts, and other kinds of monsters congregated. There were bears, wolves, insects, birds with even elementals, and plant-based lifeforms present.

William made his way through the crowd as the monsters regarded him, but none attacked. Not that they were not threats, for every single one of them was at least at level 150, with a few approaching the peak of D-grade.

He had just returned from his trip, and the three days of travel, as well as the one day of talking with Ms. Kim, had not been pleasant. William had believed understanding his origin would help. But he still didn’t get it.

The Judge had been strong, but he was still just human. Not like him. He saw those damn eyes in his dreams every time he closed his eyes; constant visions haunted him day and night, and nothing he did seemed to help. If he didn't know better, he would think he was cursed...

Nevermore had been a good escape. Five whole years just spent practicing his karmic magic in the cities in between the dungeon layers, years just fighting and improving his skills. Yet when he returned and wanted to ask his master if he was finally strong enough... he couldn't bring himself to do it.

The question would mean he either had to fight or realized he still wasn't able to win. Neither option was one he wanted, so Ms. Kim had suggested he try to understand what he was afraid of. Apparently, a direct investigation was not what she had meant, but it had worked well, and it wasn't like he had just randomly decided on doing it as he did.

His master had approved and even recommended his approach.

Walking through the cavern, he soon reached its end as he stood before an underground pool of water. They were more than a hundred kilometers beneath the surface of the earth, below one of the independent cities William indirectly controlled.

Standing before the pool, he waited a few moments as William felt the approaching aura. All the beasts around him lowered themselves as he also felt the pressure mount as he gritted his teeth. Yet he was less affected than the others, as while what was approaching was a monster... he had felt worse.

The water before him rippled as a form emerged. A translucent being surrounded by wiggling tendrils extended all throughout the cavern the moment it appeared, the air heavy with mana. More accurately, space mana.

[Planeshifting Jellyfish – lvl ???]

It was a massive jellyfish with its tendrils hundreds of meters long, even if its own main body was no more than a few meters across. Furthermore, its form looked everchanging as it almost folded in upon itself, seemingly halfway between two dimensions.

A voice echoed in William's mind as the powerful monster spoke to him:

"News do you bring, Disciple of Eversmile?"

The voice couldn't be determined to be male or female, as the pitch changed with every word. The words themselves were telepathically transmitted but oddly made the air vibrate as odd sounds echoed throughout the cavern.

William was the only one who still stood unmoved before the form as he answered. "The cities still grow, and the Pylons grow with them. So while a beast horde could topple even some of the more powerful ones, it is not worth it at the current stage. Not before they've had more time to grow more. If it ever becomes worth the risk."

"Humans will destroy us if we do not destroy them first," the jellyfish insisted, space itself vibrating as William felt its anger.

“Can they? Do you really have any reason to fear humans? I am one of the most powerful humans on the planet, and am I a threat? Humans are only a threat if you force them to view you as one... in which case they will band together and become far more dangerous,” William explained for what felt like the twentieth time.

“Hence we wait. We have to wait. We grow as they grow. We prepare, so we will be ready.”

“Exactly,” William agreed. “For now, patience is the best decision. Has your Patron relayed anything new?”

“Patience... are also their words. So we wait... what do you need from me, Disciple?” it finally asked, getting to the crux of it.

The jellyfish was an odd creature, William not quite able to determine how intelligent it truly was. Or maybe it just had a thought process too far removed from humans. Either way, one thing was absolutely clear... when it came to space magic, it was a genius.

William pulled a small disc of metal out of his hand as he injected some mana into it and threw it into the air. It had barely left his hand as it was teleported away to who-knows-where by the jellyfish.

“I need transportation to the city of Sanctdomo, the largest of the human settlements on the planet, home to tens of millions of my kind and some of the most influential leaders,” William explained.

Without any more words, the jellyfish began its magic. The mana density in the cavern spiked even more as William felt the movements of space mana. Then, out of the water, a stone platform more than thirty meters across rose with an incredibly intricate magic circle carved upon it. It was one William had used several times before, most recently to travel to Skyggen, and five years or so ago, to do what no human faction could.

Teleported out of the 93rd universe.

The jellyfish was not only a powerful being but it had also been blessed by a god William did not know anything of. All he knew was that it was one of the best space mages on the planet and fully capable of not only teleporting him to nearly anywhere on the planet using the magic circle it had created but also to other universes. Maybe even planets.

“Dangerous?” it asked him as William floated towards the platform.

“Yes,” he just answered. And it was the truth too. While Sanctdomo didn’t have the most powerful individuals on the planet, it was still the most dangerous city. The Holy Church had truly mastered the turtle strategy, and their rituals and the insane defensive measure could prove lethal to even the jellyfish.

To even a fully-fledged C-rank monster.

But they would still be in deep trouble if the jellyfish could leave the ocean. The cavern he was in currently was linked to the ocean through a deep net of tunnels, allowing the C-rank to get inland somewhat, but it couldn’t go further than the cave they were in. Not yet, at least.

William wasn't certain of all the details, but it had something to do with their pledge to gain power so quickly. They had all gained power through powerful natural treasures, and they also needed to fully defend and consume those treasures to stabilize their own power.

This didn't mean these beings were without contest, for there was more than one C-grade even in the immediate area. The jellyfish would only come by sparingly and swiftly teleport back if its domain was threatened, meaning it honestly couldn't go too far.

Stepping on the platform, William motioned to the jellyfish as he felt the space surrounding him begin to change. The metal disc he had given earlier included the coordinates of a place close to Sanctdomo, given to him by another smaller gathering of beasts also working with them.

His goal in Sanctdomo was to scout the city and talk to the Augur – that Jacob guy. It would be a bit awkward considering their last meeting had resulted in William killing him, but something told him the religious fanatic didn't care much. He was still going to apologize, though.

Most beast and other monster factions and gatherings did not actually desire any conflict with human settlements – at least the smarter ones didn't. They instead wanted access to what the humans could supply and craft and potentially enter some rudimentary form of diplomacy or at least trade.

Now, why was William involved in all this? Truthfully, he had no fucking clue; he was just following what his master Eversmile had guided him to do. Ms. Kim had also supported it as it forced him to converse and have non-violent relations with other creatures.

Ah, but he did have some personal reasons to go too. Jacob had known him before the system and could be a good source of information. Additionally, he had learned some interesting things from the parents of the yellow-eyed monster. The monster did have enemies of the past, ones who had a high likelihood of still being alive. Ones who had been close to him once upon a time and betrayed him.

Apparently, during the monster's younger days, there was a girlfriend named Madeline and a friend named Andrew. William did not know if these two would provide useful information, but their karmic connection had to still exist even if they didn't. Worst case, their memories, and impressions could be useful.

The only problem was that William had no idea where these people were, and his master had an odd approach to everything involving him. He would offer no actual help or useful advice but only subtle guidance, making William do everything himself. With advice from Ms. Kim, of course.

But if anyone could find them, it would be the Augur and the Holy Church.

Finally, he felt the magic around him stabilize as space mana rose to a crescendo. He nodded towards the jellyfish, and in a flash, the mana enveloped him as he was whisked away.

--

Mothers often asked their children questions they would prefer not to answer, and Jake's was no exception. He had tried many different strategies to avoid answering them in the past, and through trial and error, he had identified the most effective one as misdirection.

This was the moment Jake truly regretted not bringing along Sylphie, as she was a master at attracting attention. However, now he would have to get on something else as it was the type of conversation he always felt uncomfortable with and wanted to avoid.

Staring at him from across the table, Caleb's grin was larger than ever as their mother expectedly looked at Jake for an answer. Even his dad looked on with a raised eyebrow with interest, with Maja just smiling.

"Nope," Jake answered as he quickly tried to change the subject. "But I did manage to become great friends with a family of magical hawks and very close to their child who I partly helped raise."

It was a complete slam dunk.

"Hawks?" Maja asked with interest, Jake taking full advantage of her love for animals.

"Yeah, the first one I met is a guy called Hawkie, and then, later on, I met his mate Mystie," Jake began but was promptly cut off.

"Was that their actual names?" Maja asked inquisitively.

Jake took a moment to consider before he answered. "They've never had any others, so of course."

"Jake named them," Caleb, that goddamn traitor, said. "He was also the one who decided to name the city Haven because he has no creativity and wanted the most generic one he could possibly get on."

“Says the one who named his city Skyggen,” Jake shot back. “What does that even mean? You even did it twice!”

“Not my sole decision,” Caleb answered. “Also, it’s better.”

“Neither was it my sole decision to name it Haven,” Jake defended himself.

“But... Hawkie? Really?” Maja came in, shaking her head. “You seriously named a hawk Hawkie... but why did you name the other one Mystie?”

Deciding to come clean, Jake muttered. “Because she’s a Mystsong Hawk...”

He heard his dad chuckle from across the table as the judgemental gazes drilled into him.

“How about their chick? Did you also have sole discretion on the naming there?”

“He named it Sylphie,” Caleb butted in once more.

“Oh, that’s a pretty good name and not that weird” Maja nodded in approval.

“For sure! Wait, what was Sylphie’s race again?” his damn brother asked as he looked at Jake, that damn smile still on his lips.

“It’s a hawk, duh,” Jake answered

“A what hawk?”

“A Sylphian Hawk...”

“Jake...” his mother said, looking at him with disappointment. “Names are important and not just something you give out on a whim.”

“Like you named me after a vodka brand?” Jake asked, attempting to wrest back control in the losing battle.

“It was whiskey,” his dad commented with a big smile. “And real quality stuff too.”

“There were other reasons,” his mom said, giving his dad a stern gaze. “And even if it was true, then two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“So, I heard Sylphie was in that system event with the rest of you?” Maja asked, finally changing the topic away from how much his entire side of the family sucked at giving names. He gave her a mental thumbs up. Nice save!

“Yeah, Sylphie was there with the rest of us,” Jake nodded.

“How did you come to meet those hawks anyway?” his mom asked.

“Oh, it was just when I had gotten my wings...”

He narrated how he had met Hawkie and been taught how to fly. How they had gone to the sky island to fight together and explore, and slowly grown more powerful together. He told of the time Hawkie brought him to his mate, getting a few comments from his dad about overprotective mothers.

Jake narrated how he had helped Mystie and Hawkie with the magical ritual and how he cared for the egg together with her parents for a good while before it hatched. They all laughed when he gave anecdotes of her shenanigans when she was very young and how much of a clutz she was in the early days. She still was, but less so.

The Union Oath he skipped over, only saying that he and Sylphie had a special bond. It wasn't that he didn't want to tell them, but that he believed it would be best not to. In fact, he skimmed on a lot of details, and based on how little they knew of many things, Jake was certain Caleb also didn't share many intricacies.

He also understood why and agreed. It was incredibly risky to let them know any of his secrets, the entire scenario of William proof of it. Even if he trusted his parents, he didn't trust that no one would try and take advantage of them.

Something like the Minotaur Mindchief was also proof of this. With powerful mental magic, it could warp his perception of reality and even make him think the minotaur was his comrade for a moment. He could imagine what an even more powerful entity could do to even weaker people. Maybe someone could even walk in and impersonate him without them noticing. It was just a risk he wasn't willing to take.

"You need to bring her next time," Maja said after he finished.

"I will next time if possible," Jake agreed, "and I will for sure after the teleportation circle is done. But she is busy fighting and growing stronger. A real go-getter that one."

"I guess you two get along as you're also quite a fighter," his dad said, oddly approving. "It's also good to see all that archery becoming useful."

"I think many regret not having picked up some martial art or something," Jake said with a nod.

"Just don't get into too many unnecessary fights," his mother said with a worried voice. "Especially not with other people..."

"It's fine. Jake only fights people who pick a fight with him first," Caleb defended Jake, making him believe his little brother was on his side again.

But it was all deceit.

“Jake only takes the initiative when beating up old people.”

More judgemental gazes were turned to him, and Jake didn't even try to defend himself. Instead, he just looked at his dear little brother.

“Hey, Caleb... now that I'm here, wouldn't it be a great time for some healthy sparring?” he said with a big toothy smile. “I promise to go easy on you!”

Jake wouldn't go easy on him.

Chapter 358 - Umbral Lotus

Jake sat on a chair he had just summoned as he ate an ice cream – a delicacy he had not enjoyed for more than half a year. He had to admit, Skyggen had a lot of good stuff, though he also had to admit that it was very likely Haven had all of this too.

He had decided to just take these last three days before the Auction as a holiday to spend with his family. And for his family, he had agreed to go and help Caleb a little with training some of the Court of Shadows recruits.

Which is how he found himself sitting and eating ice cream surrounded by people kneeling or crawling on the ground as they tried to move towards him. When anyone managed to move a bit, Jake just looked at them to use Gaze or amplified his Pride of the Malefic Viper a tiny little bit.

Caleb stood at the back, shaking his head as more than half of the E-grade assassins had already passed out, with only two of them able to hold on somewhat.

“Make sure you don’t kill any of them,” his little brother commented.

“Relax, none of what I do is lethal unless I make it,” Jake said dismissively.

While this wasn’t the most exciting thing he had done, it was good practice. It was not often he could find living test subjects that were also intelligent, and he didn’t want to go out in the wild and just torture innocent animals for his own practice.

It was important to learn to control your skills, not just at max power, but also at lower volumes – to correctly identify how much intensity you needed to put into neutralizing someone or something. To begin with, Jake was already pretty good at this, but more practice was always welcome.

And the reason why Caleb had asked him to help? Well, it was Bloodline-related. Caleb knew Jake had a Bloodline simply by his own lived experience, even if he didn’t know what it did in detail. But, staying true to his promise to Villy, Jake had not shared the description of his Bloodline with anyone. Ever.

Instead, he had leaned into one part of it, the part which amplified his presence and also had a suppressive effect of sorts. It was one impossible to hide anyway, and if the public perception was that it was all his Bloodline did, that would only be beneficial to him. Keeping that he had one a secret was impossible no matter what, and it wasn’t that overpowered if all it did was the presence-stuff.

But even this effect was incredibly potent, as Caleb had tested and confirmed a theory over these last three days – prolonged exposure gave permanent resistance. Presences of more powerful beings passively exuded pressure on those weaker than themselves, with this effect being especially noticeable between grades. A qualitative difference.

While the more powerful person could suppress this element, it was still there, and if you found yourself before a far more powerful foe, having resistance to presences would be priceless. Training this resistance was difficult, though. Being around more powerful people did help build resistance, but it was more of an acclimation process. It wasn't permanent, but more like how Jake had adapted to being deep underwater.

There were ways to train it, skills to give resistance – Jake's own Big Game Arcane Hunter as an example – and items helping too, but what Jake did was on another level, according to Caleb. It led to qualitative growth.

Caleb himself was a prime example as he had become borderline immune to presences. He could stand before Umbra, and while he did feel the pressure, he could handle it. Jake was in many ways just desensitizing others to presences. If one had stood before the Primal Hunter, was a god really that scary?

"How long can you keep it up?" Caleb asked as Jake finished his ice cream.

"I don't think that's the question here," Jake shrugged as the last guy's eyes rolled behind his head as he passed out. All of them were only around level 50-60, so it would be a bit too much to expect of them to hold out against the legendary Pride and Jake's Bloodline.

"I guess not," Caleb agreed as Jake got up and deactivated his skills. He deposited the chair as he went over to his little brother, preparing to leave.

A few people came in after Caleb motioned to them and carried the passed-out recruits into a room to rest. Now, while Jake was an awesome brother happily helping family, he wasn't doing this for free. They had come to an agreement, and as it was the last day before the Auction, it was time to get his payday.

The two of them walked to a heavily protected building and passed through a few barriers with a token.

Walking in further, they came to what Jake could only describe as an elevator.

"You guys made an elevator?" Jake asked. "Why not just, I dunno, a small teleportation circle?"

"Cost and security," Caleb answered. "Space mages can hone into close-by circles and use those. Also... this is just as fast and just safer in every way. Additionally, it's easier to lock down and trap someone beneath using this method."

"Oh? Thinking of locking me in the cellar?" Jake asked teasingly.

"Not gonna lie, it would probably work quite well and annoy you plenty," Caleb answered.

"Oh, I would definitely be annoyed and then proceed to break out and have a little 'sparring' match with my dear little brother. Again," Jake threatened. And it was a threat.

Their sparring match a few days earlier had not really been a match. Instead, it had been Jake and Caleb going to the outskirts of Skyggen, followed by a fifteen-minute beatdown where Jake countered his brother's moves one by one until Caleb's boosting skill ran out.

It turns out that a super-fast assassin focusing on taking down his foe in swift, unexpected blows isn't the most effective versus someone with near precognition and insane instincts. After their little bout, Caleb had even expressed his condolences for any assassin ever hired to kill Jake.

"Then I guess I won't lock you inside the storage vault," Caleb answered, clearly not wanting a repeat.

"I hope some good stuff is down there," Jake commented.

"Doesn't mean you get it," Caleb teased.

"I can just take it."

"Then I'll tell mom and dad and get you in trouble," Caleb countered flawlessly.

"Goddamn snitch," Jake grumbled with faux anger as the elevator began traveling downwards to somewhere deep underground.

They were silent on the rest of the way down as Jake estimated they went roughly four or five kilometers beneath Skyggen. The elevator finally stopped as they reached the bottom, and even on the

way down, Jake felt the intensity of dark mana increasing. By the time they were at the bottom, it was far more intense than even the Forgotten Sewers back during the tutorial.

Anyone without the affinity would be utterly blinded for sure, though naturally, it didn't bother the brothers.

They entered a large cavern with magical scriptions and reinforced walls after passing through a few more barriers and physical gates. Inside, Jake saw several storage items locked away behind barriers.

But what instantly caught Jake's attention was what was in the middle of the cavern. A pool of what looked like completely black water with a diameter of around eight meters. It surrounded a flower only a meter across that gave off a powerful aura, and Jake's Sense of the Malefic Viper was making him aware of how potent the herb was.

He naturally used Identify.

[Umbral Lotus (Legendary)] – A lotus born of eternal darkness in the shadow of a god. This lotus flower releases incredible amounts of dark-affinity energy into its immediate surroundings, creating an Umbral Domain. Anyone deemed an enemy by the Lotus may be consumed by the shadows to become nutrients. It periodically sheds leaves that contain some of the flower's power. As long as it stands beneath the shadow of Umbra, this flower will forever grow. Limited alchemical uses, but all creations will be incredibly potent with neurotoxin and perception-limiting effects. Consumption will lead to corruption.

The flower was utterly black, and the leaves seemed to almost be swaying in the air. The center of the Lotus was still partly closed, and from deep within, Jake felt more dark-affinity mana than he had ever felt before. It was a natural treasure... or perhaps it wasn't right to call it natural? It seemed too well-fitting for the Court of Shadows to find a flower directly related to their god like this.

“Where did you get it?” Jake asked as he stood there impressed.

“Beautiful, isn’t it? As you may guess, it isn’t naturally occurring but something we more or less created. The custom option in the tutorial store allowed us to coordinate and buy the items necessary to summon it, even if it was only at ancient rarity when we first got it,” Caleb answered.

“It grows that fast?” Jake asked, surprised. He had read herbs and other natural treasures could grow... but to go from ancient to legendary was not easy and could take countless years.

Caleb smiled as he pointed to the center of the flower. “It ate a Pylon. My Pylon.”

Momentarily shocked, he looked at his brother in disbelief. “Is... that smart?” Jake asked with genuine concern. He knew from Miranda’s profession that the Pylon was very important, and if they lost it for good, the City Lord would suffer severely.

“I don’t think it can be anywhere safer, and once it is fully consumed, the Lotus itself will serve the same function. Pylons are incredible energy sources anyway, and fusing them will only bring benefits. Hopefully, this Lotus will be a source of power for the Court for many years to come. Also... once fully merged, the Lotus can move.”

Jake nodded, as he was still skeptical. He could see some benefits, but also issues that could arise.

“Anyway, payment?” Jake finally said, returning to the topic at hand. “I don’t assume you’re giving me the flower, even if I would be very flattered.”

“No, I’m giving you this,” Caleb said as he raised his hands towards the Lotus. It responded as dark mana swirled around it like a whirlwind. It disappeared as fast as it had appeared, and towards them floated three leaves.

Jake didn’t even wait for them to land before he Identified them.

[Umbral Lotus Leaf (Ancient)] – The leaf of a legendary rarity Umbral Lotus. This leaf is incredibly poisonous and releases dark-affinity mana all around it. Consuming it may lead to adverse effects. Many alchemical uses and creations will have neurotoxin and perception-limiting effects.

Caleb caught the three leaves as he held them out towards Jake. “This is your payment.”

Staring at them a bit, Jake frowned. “This seems like overkill for three days of terrorizing new recruits.”

“It may seem like that, but honestly? The Lotus has been shedding them passively for a while, and no one could use them for anything besides a ritual here and there. While I don’t doubt our alchemists can make great use of them in the future... none of them are up to snuff quite yet. So better you use them before they go to waste and wither,” his brother said.

“Well, I ain’t gonna say no to great stuff,” Jake relented, not requiring much convincing. He put the leaves in his storage as he began to consider what he could make with them. Well, naturally, he would make some kind of neurotoxin; the thing just was... Jake had never made a neurotoxin before. Guess that’s one thing I’ll have to learn for sure.

On a side note, he and Caleb had considered having Jake teach the alchemists of the Court a bit but decided not to. First of all, Jake had no teaching experience, and trying to speedrun learning it in three days seemed a bit dumb, and secondly... Jake really didn't want to.

He would rather be with his family and had instead spent these three days just being on holiday. He had relaxed with his parents, gone shopping and eaten out with them, and just seen the city. Both of them. It was a bit sad to say, but Jake was now more familiar with both Skyggen cities than he was with Haven.

Jake had also met his little nephew, which was a novel experience as the baby began crying hysterically every time he got close. At least for the first two days. Caleb had insisted on Jake still seeing Adam and just had either him or Maja stay with them to calm the kid down. Jake knew what Caleb was doing and wasn't sure how to feel about his brother using Jake to make a newborn build up resistance to presences, but he also understood why he did it.

These days had been great for Jake to calm down and relax. To ground himself and just focus on more mundane elements of life. He hadn't crafted a single thing or had a single fight outside of smacking around his little bro for being cheeky.

The two brothers took the elevator up from the underground vault again as they split up, with Caleb having some work and Jake heading home, where a meal was already halfway prepared. Jake was ushered out of the kitchen and sent into another room where he played with his little nephew, making full use of his experience with Sylphie.

All children liked when he made things float around in the air.

Also... while Jake didn't explicitly practice anything during this time, he couldn't really help himself. His ability to conjure stable arcane constructs improved day by day as he worked on realizing his dream of making a fully-functional toy firetruck. He had succeeded earlier that day, and it had been a great success.

Maja was with him in the room as Jake sat with the kid that was no longer scared of him, rolling a purple firetruck of pure mana back and forth.

"Have you ever considered getting kids of your own? I think you would do great," Maja said with a smile.

Jake shook his head. "No... not really. And it isn't something I plan on truly considering for a long time. It isn't a simple decision. To me, for more reasons than most."

The thought had appeared, primarily when he talked to Villy about Bloodline-related things. Jake knew it was called a Bloodline because of its hereditary elements... which meant there was a chance Jake's children would have his Bloodline in some form or another. It was rare a direct copy for the more powerful ones, but just elements of it, and it was even possible he had a child with an improved version. For that reason, and the fact he was still a young bachelor with dreams of killing dragons, he had no plans to settle down anytime soon.

"No pressure," Maja shrugged. "I heard from Caleb you plan on becoming immortal, so you do have literally all the time in the world."

"That's why I'll never say never. Well, except just now," Jake said with a cheeky smile.

They kept chatting a bit longer, Caleb out of the house to prepare for the upcoming event. Jake saw him enter the compound in his sphere just before an announcement appeared.

System Announcement:

The Auction will begin in one hour. All participants of the Treasure Hunt can also attend the Auction. The Auction will be an opportunity to dispose of unwanted treasure and procure what you desire. A select few items will be provided directly by the system during the Auction based on Earth's performance in the Treasure Hunt.

Note that no fighting will be tolerated during the Auction, and the event will last for one full day. Further details will follow if you choose to participate in the Auction.

"One hour for the Auction," Jake said to Maja, who nodded in acknowledgment.

It was no doubt an important event and one Jake had been looking forward to somewhat. Mainly because he had a lot of Credits and liked new shiny things.

But... before that, he would sit down with his family and have a nice dinner as he knew it would be a while before he would come by again. They all knew, which is why Caleb had gotten things done early to be home.

The meal passed by uneventfully as they chatted and enjoyed each other's company as time slowly ticked by, and soon it was time for the Auction to begin.

Chapter 359 - Sorting Time

Miyamoto sat in a chair with a cane at his side as he waited for the Auction to begin. Reika had gone to organize things while he had taken the opportunity to speak to a certain someone.

“Embracing the gift will likely lead to an immediate reprieve if not outright healing of your current state of weakness, “ the former Monarch of Blood said as he stood beside him, looking out onto the field of flowers. The Sword Saint identified him as he still found his presence surprising.

[Vampire – lvl 135]

He was still bound to the treasure and himself, too, as his level was the same as Miyamoto’s own. If he had regained them, that is. He had ‘gained’ a single level during this time through his Sword Meditation, but he would have to wait till he felt better to truly regain them.

As for becoming a vampire?

“I have no desire to stop being human, and even if I did... as long as ambiguity as to ownership of the Legacy persists, I shall do nothing with it,” Miyamoto answered, shaking his head.

“That ambiguity can even exist is baffling,” the vampire who Miyamoto had learned was called Iskar commented. “The Viper’s Chosen was not a simple foe, and pardon my judgment, but you were no match.”

The old man just smiled as he shook his head. “The change of seasons can bring about many surprises.”

Neither of them spoke more as they just waited for the Auction to begin. The Legacy was currently bound to Miyamoto, but he was fully prepared to share it with Jake. As for handing it over? While the Sword Saint could not say with confidence, he had won...

He knew for a fact he hadn't lost.

The arrow at the end had scratched the side of his head as he had managed to divert it by cutting the bow while twisting his neck, but he was also fully aware that he was a dead man walking even then. His wounds alone, much less the poison, would have been the death of him. He also knew he had been in a favorable arena... but he did not view that as a factor when determining a victor. He also knew Jake wouldn't. A battle was a battle, and no matter the outcome, to blame everything on the circumstances surrounding it wasn't something any fighter with respect for themselves would do.

Closing his eyes, the old man smiled to himself as he knew both of them wanted a rematch sometime in the future... he just hoped he would be able to keep up.

And knew he would do everything in his power to.

"You got any idea how this entire event will function?" Jake asked as he stood in the courtyard and waited for the Auction to begin.

"Through advanced research and pouring in every ounce of manpower the Court can afford, I believe it will be some kind of Auction where one can possibly buy and sell things," Caleb answered cheekily. "In all seriousness, I believe a certain number of items can be set up for sale per person, and we will then bid on those afterward. Considering it lasts a day, I reckon there will be a lot of things to go through."

"I guess we'll find out," Jake just shrugged as he saw the timer slowly tick down towards zero. None of them said anything as the last ten seconds elapsed, and they both disappeared from Skyggen. His parents and Maja were still inside the house just behind them, the brothers having already said their temporary goodbyes.

--

Jake found himself standing in a massive hallway the next moment, with intricate carvings on the walls and ceiling. Soon after, many more figures appeared around him, all of them wearing similar dark clothes as he felt the faint dark affinity energy all around him.

So, I got teleported with all the folks from Skyggen, he chuckled a bit to himself. His brother Caleb appeared beside him, and to his other side, a man wearing a metal mask popped into existence.

"Oh hey there, been a while," Jake greeted the still somewhat disorientated KL he hadn't seen since that Rubik's cube during the Treasure Hunt.

The guy looked around and saw Jake stand with Caleb as KL answered, bluntly and surprised. "Oh damn, why are you here?"

"Was visiting family; I'm surprised you didn't know; I wasn't subtle," Jake said.

"I've been holed up in my workshop preparing ever since returning... but good to see you, man!"

“Likewise,” Jake answered. “I better head off to get to the folks from Haven. Cya Caleb, KL!”

Before he even gave them time to answer, he began using One Step Mile towards the group from Haven. As for how he knew where they were? Sylphie, of course.

Just as he set off, a message appeared in front of him.

System Announcement:

Welcome to the Auction! This event will allow the denizens of Earth to sell and procure items obtained both before and during the Treasure Hunt using Credits.

The first hour will allow all participants to put up a certain number of items for sale based on their performance during the Treasure Hunt. Individuals with trade-related professions may put up additional items and are allowed to put up auction items for others, getting their assigned quota. Only items of rare rarity and above may be put up for auction. Final rewards will be given after the conclusion of the event based on the total value of items sold for all merchants (WARNING: This only pertains to those with trade-related professions).

After the first hour, there will be a brief intermission. Afterward, phase two will begin with all rare rarity items sold. The subsequent phase will include all epic rarity items, phase three, ancient rarity items, and the final phase will include all legendary items and above. Between each phase, an intermission will be held. During intermissions, items can be put up for sale too.

After the final phase, a bonus auction will be held with items extraordinarily rewarded due to the performance of Earth during the Treasure Hunt.

Note: No fighting or violence will be tolerated during the Auction.

Jake read it over, and while no fighting was allowed, teleporting on the ceiling luckily still was as Jake zoomed through several halls as he began to get a lay of the land. The Auction area was a circle of halls with rooms on the outside and a large hall in the middle – what he assumed to be the auction hall.

Currently, the huge gates to the middle area were locked, but Jake could still see the other side with his sphere. The entire place was pretty large, but not exactly massive. He did pass a few groups and factions on the way, including Casper and the undead.

Shortly, he spotted the group from Haven, which he had to admit looked pretty damn poor compared to all the other major factions he had passed. It was just Miranda, Sultan, Sylphie, Arnold, Neil with his party, and a couple of folk Jake didn't really know.

It wasn't as if Haven was the only small faction as he passed a lot of small groups with only a handful in them, with even a few singular individuals walking about. In fact, these smaller groups were the vast majority. One must remember that even if the major factions were the most powerful quality-wise, the same couldn't be said about quantity, where the independent factions dominated.

It turns out that making yourself effectively subservient to some foreign god didn't mesh that well with Earth's culture from before the system, thus resulting in many unwilling to join. Who would have thunk?

Jake landed in front of Miranda and the others casually. He hadn't even summoned his wings but just decided to run on the ceiling because, in his mind, that was a normal thing to do.

"Lord Thayne," Sultan greeted as the first person. "As we are pressed for time, should we hurry and go through items you wish to put up for sale?"

He quickly exchanged a look with Miranda, getting a nod. Jake agreed, and they quickly moved into one of the many side rooms.

Inside the room was a single large altar of sorts with nothing else around. Jake looked at it and instantly knew it was where one deposited items to be sold. Once they were all inside – all, in this case, being Miranda, Jake, Sylphie, and Sultan - they closed the door after them, which activated an enchantment locking it.

Sultan was there as the merchant, of course, and Jake came to learn that Miranda was there to make sure Jake didn't put stuff up for sale that would be a lot more helpful for Haven to keep or to at least potentially counter-bid.

As for what he wanted to sell... well, he would just have to go through it one thing at a time. He had a lot of shit he really didn't need or want, some of it from Vaults and killing Counts, Sylphie's bounty from the Hunt, and some of it from... well, killing a large group of humans from the independent factions.

Having less than an hour, they got started right away.

Rare items? Fuck that noise; Jake didn't want any of it besides the things he thought he could use for alchemy. It was only now he truly realized how much shit he had collected during all this time as he tossed out nearly two hundred rare weapons, armor pieces, and other items.

Miranda vetoed some of it to keep for Haven, with Jake not having any complaints. She even promised to pay him for it using funds from Haven once possible, but Jake rejected it as, quite frankly... he didn't care much for money, especially not what he assumed would only be small sums. A bit weird, considering he worked in finance before.

Moving on to epic-rarity items, it got a bit more tricky as there were some things he actually wanted to keep and even more things Miranda wanted for Haven. It still ended up with Sultan getting around forty epic rarity things to put up for auction. He seemed happy with that.

Now for the ancient rarity things. This is where it began to get real spicy as every single ancient rarity item was incredibly valuable. The first thing to address was the Altars and Coffins, which Jake chose not to address at all quite yet.

He still had to talk to the Sword Saint about things related to those due to their bet. While Jake did believe he had lost and wouldn't contest the divine item, he still wanted to make sure and confirm with the old man before he made an executive decision. The same was true with the ancient rarity weapon that came from merging all the Count items.

But even then, he still had quite a lot.

Jake began going through them, and soon they came to one of the first ancient rarity items he had gained from the Hunt.

[Nalkar Crown of the Dominant Mind (Ancient)] – A crown created by a powerful crafter from the Nalkar vampire line. The crown is made of an unknown metal and is extremely durable. A processed heart of a powerful Nalkar Vampire is embedded in it, soaking it with magical powers. The Nalkar Heart enhances all mind, illusion, and phantasmal-based magic. Passively grants resistance to all mind-affecting magic while worn. Enchantments: +200 Willpower, +150 Wisdom, +100 Intelligence. Dominant Mind of the Nalkar. Requirements: lvl 130+ in any humanoid race.

Miranda looked at it for a bit before she meekly asked: “I... this may be presumptuous, but-“

Jake looked at the crown and then at Miranda as a lightbulb lit up in his head. “Sure, just take it.”

It gave exactly the stats Miranda needed for her class, boosted mental magic, which she had quite a bit of, and gave her resistance against mental attacks. She also sorely needed to not get screwed over by other city lords or just in-general manipulative assholes. Like Sultan, who looked a bit miffed at seeing her claim it. She had already taken the epic-rarity wand that kinda fits with the crown, and Jake got the impression that mind-altering items were in high demand.

Moving on, he went over some more items, most of which were put up for sale. None of it was anything Jake wanted, and while someone from Haven could probably use them, Jake didn't really want to just randomly hand them out. Miranda also didn't want to go overboard and claim anything that didn't benefit the city directly.

However, it all got a bit complicated when they reached a certain item. Or, more accurately, a set of items.

[Akashic Tome of the Fulgarian Depthcaller (Unique)] – Allows the user to acquire the class Fulgarian Depthcaller if compatible. Requirements: Lvl 99-199 in any class. Compatible user.

[Storage Orb of the Fulgarian Depthcaller (Ancient)] – A storage orb containing items to assist a Fulgarian Depthcaller, including equipment and guidance. This orb is near-indestructible by anyone below A-grade, and any item within will be destroyed if the orb is. Requirements: Fulgarian Depthcaller

It was stuff from the water level Vault, and quite frankly, Jake had borderline forgotten about it, primarily because he really had no idea what to use it for. A part of him also wanted to just forget that entire shitty experience.

“Do you have any other information on it?” Sultan asked as he inspected the tome and orb with extreme interest.

Jake searched his inventory and found the book describing it. He handed it to Sultan, who only placed his hand on it for a moment as his eyes seemed to glow and a greedy smile appeared on his lips. “An A-tier Legacy class...”

He turned to Miranda, who looked conflicted as she spoke. “Jake, this is a very valuable item... are you certain you wanna sell it? I am certain we can find someone from Haven who needs it, if not now, then in the future.”

“You know what?” Jake said after thinking a bit. “Just sell it. I’m not going to hand out expensive classes to people, and besides... do we really care? Do we truly have people who are loyal to Haven and won’t just leave? No, better put it on the market and at least earn some Credits. Shit, I’m not even sure I want people loyal to Haven, and if they want great classes, they can always get them themselves.”

Miranda nodded in acknowledgment. “Very well.”

“Speaking of which, I got one more of them,” Jake said as he fished out another massive tome, this one quite a bit older than the Treasure Hunt.

[Akashic Tome of the Lucenti Mage (Unique)] – Allows the user to acquire the class Lucenti Mage if compatible. Requirements: Lvl 24-99 in any class. Compatible user.

Sultan looked at the book in shock when he summoned it as he muttered. “How in the hell did you get two?”

“I kill a lot of things,” Jake just answered. “Anyway, how about this one?”

“Hm...” Sultan said as he looked at it. “I do not have a compatible appraisal skill, so I cannot tell you the tier of it, and without that... It’s risky. If it’s only a D-tier Legacy item – the lowest tier – it’s not worth much at all, while if it’s S-tier or above S-tier? Then I would be hesitant to even sell it.”

“What do those tiers even mean?” Jake asked, genuinely confused.

“An S-tier Legacy will have a defined path all the way from the current grade you get it and to S-tier, making every evolution far simpler, and often you have well-defined methods to progress and improve. Meanwhile, a D-tier Legacy will only allow you one well-defined evolution. The higher a tier, the better the class or profession will also be during each step, and the most powerful ones even have many variants per level, with the most powerful having near-infinite. The most numerous evolutionary Legacy-system is the ones created by the Holy Church, and they often hand out many tomes to those they judge worth it. Worth it and compatible. Anyway... as said, selling this tome will be risky,” Sultan just shook his head.

"If I may," Miranda said. "While it may be a risk... Lillian has quite a high affinity for light magic and likely even this Lucenti magic... so we may consider allowing her to use it? She is already a caster, and her current class is not exactly powerful."

Jake considered a bit as he asked. "Does she even want to progress her class and fight?"

From his knowledge, she seemed to only do administrative and city-related work every day, and he couldn't even remember ever seeing her fight. Heck, back during the whole Minotaur Mindchief debacle, she hadn't even gotten on the wall and fired any spells.

"That is something we should talk to her about if we wish to offer it," Miranda recognized with a nod.

"So, let us shelve it for now," Sultan came in. "I must remind you, we are pressed for time, so please, let us move on swiftly."

So pushy, Jake thought jokingly as they moved on, and soon they finished going through all the ancient-rarity items and moved on to the most interesting part:

Legendaries.

Chapter 360 - To Sell Or Not To Sell, That Is The Question

Ah, legendary items. Everybody loved them, not a lot had them. Jake himself only used a single one actively with it smack on his face, while he knew many didn't have one at all. For equipment, crafting legendary items was often difficult as the required materials were often not viewed as worth it,

especially for those at lower ranks. Why pour a large number of resources into making a weapon for a genius that will only use it for a few years at most, especially considering that weapon may risk becoming a crutch? And if you give it to those weaker, the value of the item will be lost if they die in many cases.

This meant most legendary items were actually auxiliary ones or Soulbound. After all, a good cauldron could be used for many, many years, if not your entire life. The same was true for items for blacksmiths or whatnot to use during their crafting processes. In turn, this also meant these items were often much more expensive.

The second reason an item would be made legendary was for the pure prestige of it and to prove it truly was a valuable item. This is where we got to the first Legendary for Jake, Sultan, and Miranda to consider.

[High-tier Alchemy Token of the Malefic Order (Legendary)] – A token created by the Order of the Malefic Viper. This token represents a deal made with the Nalkar vampire line to grant a set number of the Nalkar Clan vampires membership to the Order and includes a set number of benefits. This token has never been turned in, and doing so may lead to certain rewards. Gives off an aura that encourages growth in toxic alchemical products.

“I apologize... but I do not think it wise to even attempt to sell that,” Sultan said, shaking his head. “Even if it isn’t you selling it, I doubt anyone will want it considering your status within the Order. Enemies will know you can make the reward meaningless, and allies will see no true value. The neutral would probably prefer to stay off your radar and not risk it big by spending a vast amount of Credits on the token.”

“No problem, I didn’t really plan on selling it anyway,” Jake said with a shrug. Which reminded him, he had totally forgotten to ask Villy about it. Would have to do that after the Auction event.

Anyway, back to the topic of why an item would be legendary. Before, it was about why someone would make it legendary. The thing is, natural treasures didn't really decide what they wanted to be; they just were their rarity based on their Records. Natural treasures also included what dropped from rare or powerful creatures. Such as vampires.

[Nalkar Vampire Heart (Legendary)] – The heart of a powerful C-grade Nalkar Vampire. This type of vampire is a rare variant with extremely high innate abilities in illusion and mind magic. It often possesses a larger reserve of blood energy than most other vampires. The rarity is higher due to the high innate talent of the Nalkar Vampire that left behind this heart. Has many alchemical uses.

"I'm keeping that," Jake just said, not leaving anything up for discussion. He did not have a shadow of doubt in his mind that he could find uses for the Heart in alchemy at some point. Also, it would feel kinda weird to sell, considering how he got it.

With nothing to discuss, they moved on.

[Safebox of Perennial Sustainability (Legendary)] – A cube containing a spatial storage within, specially made to store items of high value safely. The cube can be manipulated and a password set. Due to the construction of the cube, it is near-indestructible by anyone below S-grade, and if the item is destroyed, a space storm will be released. The time of all items will be frozen within, and mana leakage will be severely alleviated. Mana leakage is nullified entirely for lower-value goods. The difficulty of the password is determined by the user.

"Haven is keeping that," Miranda said, getting an annoyed scowl from Sultan and a thumbs-up from Jake.

Next!

[Paint Brush of Ephemeral Power (Legendary)] – A brush made from the wood of an ancient tree with a powerful time-affinity. The concept of time has been further amplified by using the hair of a C-grade Temporal Fox variant. All paintings or illustrations made by this brush will hold significantly higher effects; however, they will also cease to be within a short amount of time. Allows the user to release a blast of Ephemeral Power, having unpredictable effects based on the last five creations made using this brush. This effect cannot cause direct harm to others. Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race.

Sultan looked expectedly at him for a moment before Jake spoke. “Sell.”

The man happily took it to be sold as they went on with their work.

[Dewstone of Serenity (Legendary)] – A small stone created by the combined effort of a group of water nymphs to help heal a close friend. A powerful vampire eventually acquired this stone and brought it to Yalsten, where it has been ever since. Will passively transform surrounding water by infusing the power of serenity into it. Effect lessens, and transformation progresses slower the larger the pool of water. Has many alchemical uses.

“Gonna be real honest, I just got an idea what to use it for right here and now, which is a nice way of saying I’m keeping it,” Jake said shamelessly, not giving any pause as they went to the next item.

[Supreme Carbonic Focusing Catalyst (Legendary)] – This item is made of a rare type of carbon and is known to be able to bond and mix with most other materials in existence, making it incredibly potent as a catalyst in most crafting endeavors. This Carbonic Focusing Catalyst is of extremely high quality and has absorbed affinity-less mana to allow itself to grow for countless years, making it reach legendary rarity. Has a wide variety of uses in alchemical creations and will increase the power of most crafts where this item is used as a catalyst.

“Keeping it?” Sultan asked half-rhetorically, knowing it was just a damn good item for pretty much any crafter.

“Keeping it.”

Next up: something Jake did not keep.

[Forgestone of Eternal Embers (Legendary)] – A Forgestone infused with incredible quantities of fire-affinity mana. The concept of embers burns strongly within this stone, never allowing the flame ever truly to die out. Unknown alchemical uses.

Miranda looked like she wanted to keep it for Haven but did not say anything as Jake looked at Sultan.
“Go ahead.”

Sultan was happy.

Now, the third-to-last legendary item was a bit... complicated.

[Orrery of the Godless One (Legendary)] – An orrery made by a man who refused to acknowledge any gods during his life but only viewed the celestial concept as worthy of being recognized as divine. This orrery will passively map out all nearby celestial objects and give insight into their basic properties. This effect is entirely passive and cannot be altered by outside means, and may take a significant amount of time. This effect bypasses all attempts to hide or mask these celestial objects done by anything below divine-level skills.

Jake was honestly unsure what to do with it, but he also felt like it could be useful. Sultan looked at him with high expectations. Thinking on it a bit further, Jake reached a conclusion.

“Sell it.”

What ultimately made him decide to sell it was the fact it was a scouting tool created to map out a territory. Jake already had something he believed more reliable for that: his eyes. Jake was going the full-perception-build; it would be shameful to embrace auxiliary tools!

Also... if it maps out celestial objects and takes a long time, Jake could always just be a sneaky little boy and break in and look at it anyway. He would probably even be allowed to visit and look at it if someone he knew bought it. Considering how he knew most of the people with a lot of dough, it likely be an acquaintance.

Finally, they reached the second-to-last legendary item. These last two were not ones obtained by Jake himself, but the little green ball of feathers with him, who proudly puffed herself up as the first one was revealed.

[Supreme Escape Token (Legendary)] – A token once given to genius members of the vampiric race of Yalsten to keep them safe when venturing outside of their world. This token allows the user to escape a dangerous situation by merely infusing mana into it and activating the emergency escape feature. The emergency escape immediately teleports the user to a distant place divined to be safe. Additionally, a spatial anchor can be placed at any place and then be teleported back to if within range. All effects besides placing an anchor can only be used a total of three times. Uses remaining: 3/3

Sultan looked at Jake, but Jake just pointed to Sylphie, who had been standing on top of his head throughout the entire thing. “Ask her; she’s the owner.”

Looking even smugger than before, Sylphie looked at Sultan for a bit before she graciously allowed Jake to decide what to do with it. He quickly asked if she wanted it, and she clearly didn't. As for Jake?

"Would it not be wise to keep this item with you in case of danger?" Miranda said with some concern. "It will allow you to explore more risky areas and still have a safe backup to escape. You know, insurance."

Those words convinced him.

"Yeah, sell that crap."

How boring would it be to carry a get-out-of-jail-free card around with you at all times? It was the whole "don't resurrect me if I die, Villy" situation all over again. Less risk just made life less interesting and fun. Jake didn't want to have a probably overpowered escape token ready at all times and walk around with that knowledge in the back of his mind. If he picked a fight, he couldn't escape himself or win... well, good riddance, he would deserve to be screwed.

Sultan looked extremely delighted at his decision as he gladly took the small token. Next-up was the final legendary item which had also been procured by Sylphie.

[Supreme Illusary Defense Array Disc (Legendary)] – An array disc created by a powerful B-grade Nalkar vampire in Yalsten to hide her personal residence from the outside world and defend it. While it has degraded in power with time, the magic circle itself still persists. Allows the user to make the Array Disc expand and take the form of a large illusionary defensive barrier that can cover a vast area. The barrier will block both magical and physical attacks from the outside, and any living things entering it will find

themselves stuck in an illusory world. Requires a power source. WARNING: Due to degradation, the disc will break after placing down the Array.

Jake really had no comments on this one at all, and neither did Sylphie as they both turned their heads to Miranda simultaneously with questioning gazes.

“I will admit, this could be very useful for Haven,” Miranda commented. “We do not currently have any defensive barrier in neither the Fort nor at Haven itself. We mostly rely on the deterrence of beasts due to the... nature of the area. Also, while I do have some defensive means with help from the Pylon... we are lacking if any determined invader comes. We are especially in a bad spot versus humans.”

Nodding, Jake acknowledged that they really didn’t have anything against humans. Heck, Sultan even nodded in agreement as the man had just broken in no problem only noticed due to his big flying merchant ship. Jake also knew most other cities had barriers.

Skyggen – both of them – knew he was there pretty damn quickly, and he only managed to sneak into the second Skyggen due to his arcane barrier and Pride masking his presence. But, even then, he had clearly triggered something based on how quickly he was found. Oh, and for some reason, his brother refused to tell him their internal security system details.

Sultan had been silent on the matter but also added his comment: “I am not going to lie, I have a hard time determining the value of this Array. The item is clearly valuable, but the customer base may not need it. Most major factions, who will also be the primary capital holders, already have barriers or inherited methods from their divine heritages to defend their cities.

“To add to that, this barrier may be worse for them. Perhaps not in the short term, but in the long run. As an example, the Holy Church requires barriers with holy energy and sets up an intricate network of magic circles working together. As they grow, they can empower and add on new elements, with the

barriers also empowering those with holy power within. Similar situations are present at other factions. The only major faction I could see needing this is the Noboru Clan, but having one major buyer is far from ideal in an auction-based setting.”

“I guess that answers it then,” Jake said.

“We must remember that items can also be put up during the intermissions, and with this time, I can also try to probe for interest related to some of the items we chose to not put up for sale. Perhaps even make us reconsider some of the things we have chosen to put up for sale,” Sultan explained, Miranda nodding along.

With the final legendary item sold, they began going over some other things. Because Sultan was not only interested in selling things for Jake but also buying them, and if he was being candid, then he was totally fine with that. Not having to sit there and bid yourself? Fuck yeah. Jake still wanted to bid himself on equipment of any kind but rare alchemy ingredients? Sultan could go all-out himself there.

Jake also considered one item that he believed probably fell into the same category as the Array in that there was perhaps only one potential buyer. The Root of Eternal Resentment.

[Root of Yalsten’s Eternal Resentment (Unique)] – A wooden root from an unknown tree that has absorbed the curse energies of the black mist that has hung over Yalsten for unnumerable years. The deep and eternal resentment towards the vampires that permeates the curse has now been absorbed and concentrated. After absorbing nearly all the mist within Yalsten, it has begun to take on properties of the hidden world, allowing it to help other curses grow in power faster. With the destruction of Yalsten, the curse is aimless yet remains more powerful than ever. Unknown alchemical uses.

Out of all the items he had yinked from the Treasure Hunt, this was potentially the most valuable overall. However, for the average joe, what the fuck would they use some old root with an incredibly powerful curse within for?

The description had also changed a bit since the last time, with all references to vampires gone as apparently the energy of the curse was now rather aimless. That didn't mean he knew what to use it for, and he had already planned on getting in a room with Casper to talk about it during an intermission. What he did know, however, was that he was not giving it away for free. Because oh damn, did it give off an aura.

"Do you have more?" Sultan said with some expectations.

Jake thought for a while as he went over what he had in his storage. One item suddenly popped up, as he remembered the one he had absorbed in his Palate of the Malefic Viper: the ancient rarity Suncore Fragment he had gained after killing his second Prima.

Yet the moment he remembered it, a flood of knowledge also came as the idea of selling it instantly evaporated. During the time he had it absorbed, Jake had slowly gained knowledge related to it, and one of the things he had learned was a potential use for the Core. A use many alchemists did throughout time:

Make an artificial sun.

Not a big one, just a small sun. He recalled the Challenge Dungeon and the sun in the garden there, and the knowledge clicked together as he knew that the sun back then had also just been an item with an incredibly high level of sun affinity. Sun affinity was a mix between life, fire, light, and a bunch of other stuff Jake couldn't fully pinpoint quite yet without spending a while delving into Sagacity, but he did know a sun was more or less mandatory for many herbs.

A plan to transform the Core into a small sun and use it down in his alchemist lab was already formulated as he reminded himself to also see if he could buy any items during this Auction to make that possible.

Returning his attention to the present, Jake just shook his head. "Nope, that should be it."

The merchant nodded as he took out a contract. "Now for the trade agreement."

It was only a single page – primarily due to how it was written with mini-words – and it only took Jake a few seconds to see and understand it all.

"Why the hell do you take a one Credit fee per transaction?" Jake asked with confusion.

"If not, it would be charity, and I am not running a charity," Sultan just said with a wry smile. "As for taking a higher fee, that would risk a healthy future partnership, so I keep them as low as possible for the time being. Besides, if I buy anything, it will be with your Credits, but the experience and rewards from the event will be all mine."

"Sounds like I'm being taken advantage of," Jake answered cheekily.

"We are taking advantage of each other," Sultan answered before quickly realizing the words could be misinterpreted. "Professionally, of course."

“Professionally,” Jake agreed.

They swiftly finished up the contract, did another inspection of some of the items, as Sultan put them up for sale using all of his merchant powers to hopefully make sure Jake wouldn’t get scammed and end up selling a legendary for a dozen credits.

Soon, the first hour had passed, and it was time for the first phase of the actual auctioning to begin.