

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 281: Better Boots

While Jake was working on his elixirs in a trance-like state, everyone else around the globe also progressed. Parties dove in dungeons, hunted down more and more powerful beasts and crafted items more potent than anything they had ever created before.

Every single day more D-grade appeared, and in these last two weeks, it was easily in the triple digits every single day. At this point, Neil and his party had also all managed to reach D-grade and begun hunting as a group to get in a few more levels.

Sultan had spent fewer days within Haven but gone hunting himself with the one remaining slave who remained under his charge to get some more levels in too. Miranda had taken charge of the other, and she would also join the Treasure Hunt.

There was some bad news, though.

Miranda was in her office in Haven, Phillip in front of her, sitting slumped over on a chair.

“I guess I’m just not really that up to it anymore,” Phillip said as he sighed.

Miranda also sighed as she sat together with the man. He looked a bit thinner than last, and his eyes were a bit sunken. He had gone hunting many times but always returned faster than anyone else. His entire demeanor was just that of a tired man who looked to have stretched himself thin. He was still high level... but his progress had stopped.

[Human - lvl 99]

He was level 99 but had not gotten any chance to evolve. His class was not maxed out yet, but it too had only gotten slower. Miranda was fully aware of what it was all about.

Phillip had lost his purpose after she and Jake had come to take over the Fort. Phillip wasn't someone who had risen to the occasion out of desire but out of responsibility. He was a career-man in the military, and the soldiers at the Fort were his to lead, so he led them. He sought power not because he wanted to but because of the constant pressure from the bovine hordes. In the tutorial, it had been the same, as he only progressed because he had to, not because he wanted to.

But now? Now, he didn't really need to do anything. He still led the soldiers in day-to-day operations, handled personnel, and acted as head of what was essentially the police, but that was it. The man had little to no desires outside of this and only really worked due to obligations.

To say it in the nicest way possible, then he was burned out and halfway to retirement. In a less nice way? He had gotten lazy and complacent when his own personal power stopped mattering as much. The meeting with Sultan seemed to have fully pushed him over the edge. Phillip didn't believe such an event would never repeat itself. One where a single individual could just show up, and he and the soldiers under his employ would be powerless to do anything.

Miranda did have some sympathy towards him. She herself only had a purpose now because she was given one. Without Jake, she knew she would have also been directionless, only trying to survive. She would likely have settled down somewhere and maybe worked with the local smithy or a group of craftsmen. Maybe she would have tried to start a company or something. She sure as hell wouldn't be the leader of one of the premier cities of Earth, have a Divine Blessing, and work directly under the Chosen of a Primordial.

"Have you considered a replacement yet?" she asked him.

The conclusion was clear. Phillip was planning on stepping down within not that long. He would still work, but he would not be the one in charge, more a supporter who helped where needed while otherwise enjoying the retired life.

"I have a few in mind, and I swear they'll do good. It will still be a while before everything is finalized, but I'm working on it," Phillip said with a tired smile. "Thanks again."

"You gotta look out for yourself sometimes," Miranda just said, returning his smile. "I'm sure we will be able to find a way to manage without you, and I'm sure your successor will do wonders. Just... no rush, and if you want to stay, we can always find a position or change things up. But ultimately, the choice is yours and no one else's."

The two of them discussed a few more details before the man left, leaving Miranda alone in the office. Things like this could just... happen. Unless Phillip experienced some massive change in mindset, he would never even reach D-grade, and if he did, that would surely be where his road ended. He likely wouldn't ever reach the mid-tiers of D-grade.

It was an unfortunate reality, but one everyone had to accept. It was the truly driven and often a bit 'off' people who truly did well. Sultan, Jake, Arnold, the fanatics of the Holy Church, heck, even herself were examples of this. All of them weren't exactly normal by old-world standards anymore. They were now all driven with strong internal motivation. Miranda wanted to do her best, not because she had to, but because she wanted to. She would dream of the ways Haven could expand, of where she could stand in a decade or a century, and how far she could go.

Nearly all of it was reliant on Jake, of course. She had resigned herself to that, and while he could be a bit... challenging to deal with, one thing was for damn sure.

If anyone were driven by internal motivation, it was him.

"And another brew done, and another brew done, and another batch in the pot," Jake sang slightly offbeat as he finished up another batch of elixirs. This was his ninth successful batch of the uncommon-rarity Sensus Elixirs, and he was feeling quite good about himself. Lillian had even come by with a shitload of cores and ingredients for his perception-elixirs earlier, making him a very happy man. He had spent most of the time these last ten days just pumping out agility elixirs, so he was happy he could now focus more on perception.

He bottled it up in two bottles and Identified them both before chugging them down. That meant he had consumed eighteen uncommon-rarity perception elixirs total. Along with that, he had also downed another fifty-one of the common-rarity version for a total of +243 more perception.

[Sensus Elixir (Uncommon)] – An elixir created from a mix of uncommon and rare ingredients as well as a D-grade Beastcore of a Sunshade Eagle. Allows any who drink this elixir to receive some of the innate power of the materials, enhancing one's Perception. +5 Perception upon consumption

Requirements: D-rank or higher.

He still had 433 stats to fill out even with so many elixirs consumed. Well, he could just bite the bullet and consume some of his many agility or even the vitality-increasing ones, but that would have to wait.

With the successful brewing also came a notification. It was Jake's third level during these past ten days. It turned out that churning out elixirs was a damn efficient way of leveling, even if it wasn't as fast as his last trance-like state. That one had been quite intense, and as his familiarity with making elixirs increased, so did the diminishing return of crafting similar things kick in. Still, three levels in ten days wasn't bad at all.

****'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 129 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 129 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Jake had reached level 129, and now his class, profession, and race were all the exact same level again. Additionally, many would argue 129 was close to 130. Naturally, this meant...

It was time.

Jake packed up his cauldron and instead summoned the token he had been saving.

[Token of Akashic Awakening (Epic)] – Infuse into a piece of equipment to attempt to awaken or amplify the Records within, upgrading the item to a maximum of Epic-rarity. If the item is already Epic-rarity, it will try to amplify existing effects through awakened Records. Overall effects may be unpredictable. WARNING: Touching directly upon the Records of an item may make others related to the associated Records aware.

Requirements: User must be below lvl 130.

He had been saving the token for this day. His boots on his feet were ready to be blessed and become better boots. All he hoped was that their comfy feeling would remain untouched as he would despise losing that. They were the snuggliest boots he could imagine, and he remembered those times he walked with bare feet, such as when he washed. It was far worse. Truly, the boots were superior to all other types of footwear.

Identifying his beloved boots again, he did note that their stat values were a bit... outdated.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Rare)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the alchemist have left a deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Enchantments: +20 Endurance, +15 Agility. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a small amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants.

Requirements: Lvl 25+ in any humanoid race.

This was one of his oldest items, gained from an ancient Challenge Dungeon that the Malefic Viper, one of only twelve gods at the time, had made. Jake wasn't sure if the boots were from all the way back then, but to him, they had always felt old. If they truly had relations to the first universe, the Records simply from the passage of time had to be quite something.

Jake took off his boots and held up the token. He had tried it before, and with little fanfare, he activated it.

A soft glow encapsulated the boots, and with his sphere, he saw them within. Visually, not a single thing was changing, and it actually made Jake fear something was wrong. The token had not been cheap, and he had really been looking forward to the upgrade.

But that doubt was quickly dispelled as he felt the aura of the item change. He felt it become stronger, and as the item was already bound to him, he suddenly felt an influx of stats. At that moment, he knew it had been a success.

The entire process hadn't been flashy in any way, but just like those times he upgraded items back in the tutorial. Then, as the glow faded, he saw the boots, looking exactly the same as before, and he didn't hesitate to identify them.

[Boots of the Wandering Alchemist (Epic)] – Boots once offered to an alchemist before setting out on a journey to experience the world outside at the behest of his master. Despite being made of simple leather, the Records of the ancient alchemist have left a

deep mark on this item, allowing it to transcend many ranks. Further amplified by a Token of Akashic Awakening, these Records are now more prominent than ever, heightening their effects, although only a fraction remains displayed. Enchantments: +125 Endurance, +100 Agility, +75 Perception. Reduces stamina expenditure from all movement-related skills by a moderate amount. Increases sensitivity towards earthbound plants and Natural Treasures.

Requirements: Lvl 125+ in any humanoid race.

The changes were subtle... but it did give a bit more info now. First of all, it now made clear the alchemist was male and that he had set out because of his master. It had also gone from improving not only his sensitivity towards earthbound plants but to now also include earthbound Natural Treasures. To be perfectly honest, due to his high perception and Sense of the Malefic Viper, that effect had always been kind of useless. Maybe it would be a bit better now.

In the stats department, it was a huge improvement too. More endurance, more agility, and most importantly, they also even gave perception now. Jake was over the moon with the stats, as all of them were important, and none made him get capped out in anything.

He did still wonder about who the boots could be related to. Was the Viper the master spoken of? Who was the alchemist in question? A disciple of the Viper at the time? It couldn't be Duskleaf; Jake was pretty damn certain of that. Duskleaf had become the Viper's student far later on, after all.

Jake was also aware the person was no doubt dead by now. If not, it would have to be one of the other eleven Primordials, and he seriously doubted it was one of those. Well, ten Primordials, as he was pretty darn certain that Stormild didn't wear shoes.

I'll find out eventually, he told himself as he did something he had been looking forward to. He slowly put his feet inside the boots one by one and walked a bit back and forth on his porch. His face was filled with unabashed shock as the impossible had been achieved: the boots had got even snugglier.

After just walking around for far longer than could ever be reasonable, he did the only next logical step: more alchemy. He wanted to spend these last two days grinding out a few more elixirs, make new batches of his best poisons and potions of all kinds with all his stat gains and whatnot. Of course, he had also planned on making potions for everyone else in Haven who would enter along with him, so that was what most of his time would be spent doing for sure.

That was the final preparations for the Treasure Hunt he had in mind. His Path of the Heretic-Chosen still didn't respond, so he couldn't attempt to upgrade another skill yet. He didn't have time to make any other new types of creations either, as, well, a bit over two days wasn't a long time.

There was no transmutation to make either. The Nanoblade was not really fit to be transmuted at all, and chances are he would only break it or make it worse. The true value of the blade did not come from its magical properties but the materials used and the craftsmanship. So yeah, that one was out of the question.

He didn't have time to go hunting either, at least not properly. He had chosen to prioritize making elixirs and get his stats maxed out from consumable items.

Lillian had come by and told him they would have a meeting around 24 hours before the Treasure Hunt to make sure everyone was ready and do some strategizing, so he also had to do that. Jake reckoned he would be done making elixirs and would hand out all his excess ones during the meeting for those who wanted them. Well, Sultan would have to buy them. The two slaves too. So yeah, he would give some to Neil and his party as well as

Miranda. Besides that, he really was set for the whole event. The Treasure Hunt was surely going to be an interesting experience.

Jake could barely contain a smile as he remembered a certain someone he was sure would attend - the old man known as the Sword Saint, who was the only one to truly make him pause. They had a fight scheduled, and Jake was looking forward to it nearly as much as the event itself.

But for now...

For now, it was just a bit more alchemy.

Chapter 282: The Power of Haven

System Announcement:

The Treasure Hunt Special Event will commence in: 23:14:53

All qualified participants will be invited at the allotted time. Those within the territory of a Pylon will be able to enter together, while any not within a Pylon's territory will enter as individuals by default.

Neil, Christen, Eleanor, Silas, and Levi were all chatting in the room, waiting for the rest to arrive. It was right next to the newly expanded City Lord's office, where a large meeting hall had been made, primarily for this day. The five of them had all gotten the notification about the Treasure Hunt along with every other D-grade in the city. Likely across the globe.

"Gotta say, Miranda ain't a slouch either," Levi commented as they chatted about the other D-grades from Haven who would join the Treasure Hunt.

"You totally got a crush on her," Christen teased at the man who had made similar comments many times before during their hunting trips.

"No, I'm simply acknowledging reality," Levi defended himself, faking offense. "By the way, you know who else is coming? Besides those randoms, that is.

The randoms, in this case, were something entirely unexpected.

Around a week before the Treasure Hunt began, D-grades had started appearing at the Fort and Haven. All of them had come for a few reasons. One of them was that they weren't sure if they could enter the Treasure Hunt without being within the area of a Pylon and had come to make sure. That reason had now been debunked, but another purpose was to hopefully enter with a stronger group and team up with others.

All the big cities wouldn't just enter with a dozen people. The party of five had spoken about how Sanctdomo, as an example, apparently had D-grades in the four digits associated with their city enter. Not all of them were members of the Holy Church, but a lot of them sure were. Independent parties who didn't want to join some powerful faction

needed somewhere else to go, and it appeared that Haven became one such place. No doubt, along with a lot of other smaller settlements around the world.

So far, a bit over forty D-grades had come to Haven. That didn't sound like a lot, but it sure felt like it was, considering Haven didn't even have half that.

Haven only had their party, Lord Thayne, Miranda, Arnold, Sultan, and those two creepy women, along with one other guy who had joined a month or so ago. Phillip was one they had expected to enter too, but he wouldn't come. Christen had heard he was retiring, so that was a bit weird.

"Just those we discussed," Neil answered.

They kept chatting, only stopping when another person showed up.

"Ah, you guys and gals are already here," Miranda said as she entered. "Good, the rest should be here within the next half an hour, then we can get started."

Her words proved true as two men wearing medium armor and sheathed swords entered, not even a minute later. Two minutes after that, a man and two women came, and five minutes after that, Sultan arrived. The room kept filling up, and close to the half-hour mark, Lillian entered, practically dragging Arnold, who had his head down reading on his tablet.

This would ordinarily not cause much of a fuss, except... Arnold was the highest-leveled person in the room, and practically none of them knew about him. He was the kind of guy who stayed hidden away in his workshop months at a time, so only people like Sultan who had gone to sell him stuff knew the man properly.

Yet, despite quite a few with decent levels coming and Miranda herself having a respectable aura, the forty or so independent D-grades did notice an issue. Haven was weak. Their strongest party was decent, but there was another traveling party present equal to them in power. Miranda, Sultan, and Arnold were perhaps powerful in their own right, but ultimately they were outnumbered heavily.

Confusion and some discontent spread in the hall as people talked. Many had come to Haven because of rumors of the city's power and now found themselves incredibly disappointed. Five minutes passed without anyone showing up. Ten minutes. Fifteen.

They all just talked and discussed, their voices getting louder as many stopped bothering to hide their discontentment.

"Why is Lord Thayne not here yet?" Silas asked in a low voice to his party.

"I don't know... but looking at Miranda, I am pretty sure she has something planned," Neil answered in an equally low voice.

They could only trust she had predicted this would happen and made an adequate plan. None of them except Silas and Eleanor had met the owner of the city recently, and the last time they did, he was just shopping or interrogating Sultan. They knew he was strong... but was he strong enough to handle a hall of nearly forty D-grades who had come to believe Haven wasn't all it was made out to be?

Jake put the last batch of poison in bottles as he prepared to head back. He had gone a good distance away from the city to not contaminate anything as he crafted his uncommon-rarity necrotic poisons and had now stocked up with a few dozen bottles at least. He didn't know if it was enough for the entire Treasure Hunt as he had no idea how long it would be, but he had a feeling he could just craft some more in there if it came down to it.

Through this last push for more stats, Jake had gone on a full-on crafting spree to get out as many perception elixirs as he could.

This meant Jake had consumed 22 uncommon-rarity perception elixirs and a bunch more of the common-rarity ones during this time. In the end, through consumption of perception-increasing elixirs, Jake had gained a total of +440 perception over his crafting frenzy throughout this last month. Unfortunately, that was all he had time to make enough elixirs for. Yet, he had still wanted to get as strong as possible, so he decided to just cap himself out before the Treasure Hunt.

The rest he had chosen to fill out with agility. 40 uncommon-rarity agility elixirs and 41 common-rarity elixirs had gone down his throat, and quite honestly, he was damn sick of the taste by now. He was now fully capped out at the 900 stats he could get from consumables. Additionally, he still had quite a few vitality-based elixirs left as well as plenty of agility ones. He would have to hand those out.

Finally, he had gained a single more level in his profession, bringing him to 130. He was now officially at a stage where his profession was ahead of his class again. Something the Treasure Hunt would very likely change.

For the first time in a while, Jake opened up his full status as he did a final check of everything before he headed off back to Haven and that meeting.

Status

Name: Jake Thayne

Race: [Human (D) – lvl 129]

Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter – lvl 129]

Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper – lvl 130]

Health Points (HP): 29573/29580

Mana Points (MP): 39888/40812

Stamina: 20021/24870

Stats

Strength: 2050

Agility: 3711

Endurance: 2487

Vitality: 2958

Toughness: 2124

Wisdom: 3265

Intelligence: 2781

Perception: 6708

Willpower: 2814

Free points: 0

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jake went over it all with a smile. His stats had grown a *lot*, and he felt far stronger than before. If he faced the Altmar Census Golem now, the fight would have gone far differently. Every part of him had improved, and especially his agility and perception had experienced explosive growth.

Since the time he faced the golem, he had gotten nearly two thousand more in stats from equipment, about equally as much from consumables counting all the percentage bonuses. All of this wasn't even counting the many levels.

Closing his status once more, Jake began his travel back to Haven. For once, he wasn't actually late, even if it was later than the planned time. This was all with directions from Miranda about how to approach the situation. She had informed him of the influx of D-grades and asked him one simple question:

Did he still believe he was the strongest human on Earth?

Jake had answered with: "how the hell would I know?" but made it clear he sure as hell would gladly fight anyone to find out. That was good enough for her to assign him to play that role they had decided he would play a long time ago.

He would enter as the overpowering owner of Haven that would squash any doubt about the city's power. Jake could do that, but there was one more participant in the plan. He had mentioned her to Miranda, and her participation was also just fine.

Because as Jake flew past a certain treetop, a green figure zoomed up to him and began flying beside him. Jake smiled at her when he saw her.

"Let's show them how awesome we are, eh?" Jake said with a smile to the green hawk.

"Ree!" Sylphie happily screeched as she flew beside him, easily keeping up with his speed. She had returned as agreed, and as for his requirement for her to reach 110 in eleven days?

[Sylphian Eyas – lvl 117]

Yeah, she had smashed past it. The hawk had gone in a carnage during this time, and from what Jake had seen, it was only truly now that she was in D-grade she could show her full power. It barely had to be mentioned, but she was more powerful than both her parents by now. Jake wasn't even certain if he could have handled her right after reaching D-grade. He sure as hell would be unable to do jack shit if she decided to leave.

The two of them kept flying as he soon spotted the meeting hall. "Time for the grand entrance," Jake said with a smile, Sylphie mischievously screeching in agreement.

He had wanted to show off his Pride of the Malefic Viper when other people were involved, and what was a better opportunity than this?

Neveah wasn't as vocal as the rest of her party, but she too showed discontentment on her face. They had operated out of a smaller settlement for a while as a party of D-grades but had some disagreements with the local City Lord as he began demanding a portion of all crafting materials gained during hunts. This was in their minds ludicrous, and the breaking point was when one of them acquired a spatial storage ring and was told they had to hand it over as it was a tool to conceal goods.

Sure, the City Lord of Haven hadn't done anything similar, and the city had a great location with many great hunting spots so close, but that didn't mean it was great being there. There was a general lack of high-level craftsmen, and there were long waiting times on anything from those who were competent.

But hey, at least Haven was super powerful, right? So far, it seriously didn't appear to be. They had a pretty strong but super shady merchant who was probably the city's greatest asset with his valuable materials. The temple was also decent enough, but compared to the one in Sanctdomo, it was nothing. According to what the city folk said, the sculptor wasn't even there but had been holed up for around a month now. It was ridiculous.

The City Lord also didn't appear overly strong. Sure, she was good enough, but not some dominating powerhouse. Neither was the one party that operated out of Haven. They were another case of "good but not great," and Neveah would rank their parties about equal. For reference, they were the fourth-best party in their old city, behind the three 'sponsored' parties.

Finally, there was that nerdy guy with a tablet. His level was high, the highest in the room, but he gave off the aura of a pure craftsman. He could probably do a bit of combat, but he didn't strike her as a combatant at all.

So, in conclusion? Haven was a nice enough city to live in and seemed very secure and relaxed with the forest aesthetic, but calling it a powerful city was just wrong. She *had* heard that the reason why Sanctdomo – the closest other Pylon – hadn't come to claim Haven was due to the owner of the city.

The thing was... Neveah couldn't see that making much sense. She and her party were aware of extremely powerful people. They had seen the premier party of Sanctdomo, which consisted of five absolute monsters, every single one of them likely able to take down their entire party. So she got how a single person could be strong...

But strong to cause the 40 D-grades in the room to be careful, or even beat them all alone? Yeah, no, that wasn't something feasib-

"Huh?" she exclaimed as she suddenly got the chills. No one even noticed it as they felt it a fraction of a second later. Power descended upon the entire hall as if an invisible pressure held them all down. Neveah felt like she was being watched by some powerful beast, and she drew her weapon without even thinking. She wasn't the only one either, as nearly every single D-grade not associated with Haven did the same.

Why are they not doing anything? she asked herself, looking at the residents of the city. An answer she got right after.

The door to the hall opened, and in walked a single figure. The air appeared to vibrate around the creature. The entire body was covered in dark clothes, and a mask covered the face with only two beastly yellow eyes peering out. She was unsure if the being was a human or not, and Identify...

[?]

Identify did nothing. She only noticed a second later that perched on the figure's shoulder was a small hawk. It was green and looked a bit otherworldly to her eyes, and when she used Identify on the hawk...

[?]

She got the exact same response. When she Identified the hawk, it looked her way and did what she could only interpret as a scoff. Neveah didn't dare say anything as her entire body was frozen. No one dared attack this newcomer. Everyone with even the faintest ability to judge the power of a person based on their presence was acutely aware.

This person could kill every single D-grade present in the room.

Miranda stood up on the small podium. The entire hall was blanketed in a presence that even sent a faint chill down her back, and that was her being used to him. She looked below and saw all the independents stand frozen, some of them even glancing around covertly for potential methods of escape. They were scared shitless.

Now, she knew that she had asked Jake to come in with a show of force and establish some dominance. She could own up to that.

But how the hell could she have predicted he was going to come in with a presence like that?

Chapter 283: Treasure Hunt? "Let's Go!"

Man, people can get so tense sometimes, Jake thought as all the people looked his way. Most of them even had their weapons drawn! Even Neil and his party looked on the edge, and only Sultan and Arnold were rather unaffected by the entire situation. Well, Arnold did look up from his tablet, frowned briefly, and just looked back down.

Miranda threw him a glance he couldn't quite read, but he did get the faint feeling that he should maybe tone it down a little. He did so, and as if timed, Miranda spoke: "Lord Thayne, thank you for finding time to be here."

Jake didn't answer but just nodded her way as he stopped infusing his presence with mana. That took the pressure off of them, but all of those independents were still looking at him with fright. And honestly? He was okay with that. He scanned them all and found that not a single one of them was above 115. Not a single one of them was a threat. What did this also mean?

This meant the baby bird on his shoulder likely was the second strongest person in the room – and she knew it.

Sylphie was happy if a bit annoyed. She had worked sooo hard, and even when she was done working and wanted to go and spend time with Uncle, she couldn't as he needed to play with his smelly pot. He had made her wait behind, and only now could they have fun together. Though she did think it was a bit boring being around so many weak humans. They weren't even proper humans as none of them had shiny eyes like humans were supposed to. Or maybe they weren't supposed to? The lady human who looked to be in charge didn't have shiny eyes, and Uncle seemed to know her well.

The same was true for the guy who gave Uncle his new string-shooty-stick. Though he was a bad guy who was sometimes a good guy because he had tasty treats. Sylphie still didn't like him, and Uncle didn't either, so that made her not liking him right.

As for all the other humans? She either didn't care or looked down at them as they were all super weak. She felt like all of them were weaker than mom and dad and compared to Uncle? Sylphie was pretty sure they were some worse kind of human than Uncle for sure. Like she was a super bird compared to all the stupid birds, Uncle was a super human compared to all the stupid humans? That made sense to Sylphie.

This is why she stood tall on Uncle's shoulder and threw judging glances at all the weak humans. They all looked back, scared of her and Uncle, which only made sense. They should be. Because super birds were better than stupid humans, and she would make sure they knew their place!

Well, at least Sylphie seems to be having fun, Jake thought as he sat, debating with himself if he could take a nap without being noticed. Sylphie had moved from his shoulder to the top of his head, throwing piercing gazes towards anyone who dared look their way.

Meanwhile, Miranda ignored his presence as he just sat off to the side with his arms crossed. He would say he looked menacing, but the bird on his head kinda ruined that look. Or did it? From what he saw in his sphere, people still barely dared to look his way, and those who did clearly didn't look like they thought he was being funny.

Miranda spoke about the Treasure Hunt and did give out some good info. She informed them about general knowledge of other humans who would enter, general descriptors of those she was aware of that people should avoid, and overall the purpose of this meeting seemed to be making sure everyone knew each other at least somewhat.

Valhal, the undead, the Holy Church, the Court of Shadows, and a bunch of other smaller factions were mentioned and described as well as the powerful people associated with the factions. She also mentioned a few wildcards with little to no information on them. That included a lot of people Jake didn't really care about... except for two names.

The first one was Eron. Jake remembered him as the one other guy with a bloodline at the World Congress and a man Jake had deemed "not worth fighting," as it felt meaningless. That didn't mean he was stronger than Jake, just that an eventual battle wouldn't lead to anything productive.

As for the second name?

William.

Jake wasn't even going to think about that guy. He had no desire to seek out the little psycho and would rather have someone else handle him. But again, if the guy did come to make trouble for Jake and his friends, he would happily end him for good the second time around.

The entire meeting continued for a little while longer until Miranda finished up and moved to the next important topic. Miranda looked Jake's way, and he nodded as he got up, moving all eyes to him.

He walked to the center of the room and waved his hand as a wooden table appeared. Another few waves and potions upon potions were stacked on top of it. Mana, stamina, and health potions in the hundreds.

Jake enjoyed seeing all the independent's eyes go wide as they saw the display. There was something very satisfying about seeing others awed at your handiwork, no doubt about it.

All of this was naturally a part of the plan Miranda had made. The good old carrot and the stick. Jake would come in, make it resoundingly clear he was the one in charge and suppress them with pure power, and then afterward show that he was far more than just a big stick. The purpose of the first part was to build fear and the other respect.

"Lord Thayne has prepared some potions for the Treasure Hunt; please take a maximum of five health potions and a mix of four stamina and mana potions.

Not to worry, this is a gift sponsored by the city and Lord Thayne himself,” Miranda declared to the hall, surprising quite a few of them.

Jake just stood back, thinking about how a table full of colorful potions looked quite awesome. A sentiment shared by everyone else, especially one rather skinny guy who walked up and Identified one of the potions.

”This... this gives more than 8.000 mana!?” the man exclaimed loudly.

Jake was about to defend himself that he hadn’t practiced making potions much in recent times so that they weren’t top quality was only to be expected. Sadly, or perhaps luckily, a woman spoke up first.

”What!? Are you serious? How can it give that much!?” she said as she ran over and picked one up. This led to a bit of a scramble as most of the forty D-grades hurried over to the table. None dared to actually take any potions quite yet until finally a person looked pensively over at Jake and, seeing him not react, put it in a small pouch.

This led to people picking out potions, everyone taking five health and mainly mana potions from the looks of it. Everything seemed to be going well, but of course, there had to be an asshole. There always had to be an asshole.

The expected happened as a single person swiped his hand, and nearly forty potions disappeared. The man turned around before any of the other people could react, but he didn't even have time to take a step before his entire body froze up.

Jake sighed under his breath as he took a step forward and grasped the man by the neck before he could move again. He squeezed a bit as his fingers sank into flesh, and blood began running down into his collar.

"Really, this is what you're willing to die for? A few batches of potions?" Jake asked, disappointed. A level 103 human had risked his life for something so insignificant...

The entire room was frozen as everything played out in less than a second, from when the man grabbed the potions to being helplessly held by his neck. The man being held wasn't the first to answer, but instead, it was Miranda.

"Please, I believe this is just a huge misunderstanding, is it not?" she said with a smile as she walked closer. Jake knew she was addressing the man, likely not wanting the moron to just die there and then. He could understand why. It would be bad vibes and would ruin the nice carpet he was standing on.

"I... I..." the man tried to stutter out but was unable to as Jake may have squeezed a bit too hard. Miranda threw him a glance, and he let go as the man fell to his knees, still shaking. Jake did consider giving him a little poke with Touch of the Malefic Viper but decided against it. Again, wouldn't wanna ruin the carpet.

Miranda walked up to them and pointed at the man as she sent out a small green beam into his shoulder. "Now, please return what you took and stay around till we're done to discuss your conduct moving forward. Ah, and don't try to run; I have placed a little mark on you, okay?"

"Same," Jake said, his one word seemingly having more impact than Miranda's very unveiled threat as the man shook a bit at it.

Luckily the rest of the meeting and distribution went through without any hiccups. Miranda made a few closing remarks and otherwise allowed people to figure stuff out themselves. They all seemed thankful, and a few even sent

remarks Jake's way in gratitude. He didn't really see handing out a few potions as that big of a deal, but fair enough.

Afterward, people began leaving, and only those originally from Haven stayed behind at the request of Miranda, partly at the request of Jake. The little thief was told to stay within Haven and be a nice boy until Miranda came by and dealt with him later. Jake would just let her handle that one.

Once everyone was gone, Jake handed Miranda a bunch of vitality-elixirs to hand out to those who wanted them. He also handed a few extra potions to those who were actually from the city to make sure they had enough. Jake planned on crafting a few more in the last few hours anyway.

He left with Sylphie not long after as they headed back to his lodge. Now, Jake also had many elixirs of the agility-variety that he had not given out, even if they would no doubt be useful for people like Levi and Eleanor. As for why?

Because what else would Sylphie drink?

Casper sat on top of the castle wall, staring down at the courtyard where Priscilla was riling up all the D-grade Risen and humans alike. It was filled to

the brim, and he reckoned there were around a thousand. Quite good, considering the undead faction wasn't the largest.

He grasped the locket at his chest and spoke. "Are you ready, Lyra?"

"Naturally. Let's show them the strongest duo of Earth!" she answered in high spirits.

Casper made a rare smile as he looked into the horizon. "That we will."

Matteo played his piano as he tried to get in the right mental state before the Treasure Hunt. Nadia was working on making some specialized sniper bullets in the background, and a few other elite assassins were also present in the room as they made their final preparations or discussed the Hunt in whispering voices as to not disturb the man playing.

The only notable absentee was their leader, Caleb Thayne, and for a good reason too. His type of training wasn't one where others could be present. Matteo still remembered the last time he had come by. The chamber was hidden far beneath their main headquarters, behind wards and physical barriers alike.

It was a chamber set up for only the Judge to use. A magic circle of incredible power made the entire room one of soul-shattering pressure. Matteo had been knocked unconscious only after a minute in there. It was a room meant to amplify and direct the pressure of the dark heavens above. Nobody had lasted in there for more than a minute. Nobody, except for Caleb.

He hadn't left for a week.

Carmen pulled out a bottle of water and poured it over her head to get some of the blood out of her hair. It normally didn't bother her that much, but it had begun sticking together a bit too much, getting annoying. As for the rest of her body? She could deal with that being blood-covered, and the Self-Repair enchantments would take care of that minor annoyance soon enough.

She hadn't bothered to return to her city in preparation for this Treasure Hunt. She didn't need to, as the message would allow her to join anyway. In her mind, there was no reason to enter together with them anyway. Her city was now already managed by Sven and his men, and she didn't have to do jack shit. So she just spent all her time fighting as that was all she was good for.

When her leg stopped itching from being healed, she walked over to where the corpse of a huge lizard had been just moments ago. It had evaporated the moment it died, something she hadn't encountered before. She saw that in its place were two small things. A Beastcore and some weird small golden metal thing.

She picked it up and inspected it before just throwing it in her spatial storage.

What the fuck does the "Seat" in "Seat of the Exalted Prima" even mean anyway? she asked herself as she headed off to kill some more shit before it was Treasure Hunt time.

"The teams have been prepared and instructed according to your commands, Augur," the man said as he bowed.

"Good, you may leave," Jacob said as the priest left the room. The parties for the Treasure Hunt had been pre-established according to what he and others believed would lead to the best results. He himself would move with Bertram and his party, using his abilities as an Augur to seek out treasures as fast as possible with as high accuracy as they could.

From all their deliberations, staying together as one big group would be inadvisable, which was why they focused on smaller teams and parties, ranging from single individuals with high personal abilities in stealth to a large group of around 200 D-grades led by someone with a commander-like profession.

Everything was laid out for the Holy Church to the faction coming out on top, as they without a doubt entered with the most people, and hopefully the most power. Jacob only saw two people on Earth able to truly challenge them, but he had hope regarding those two...

Jacob didn't need his Augur skills to know the Treasure Hunt would be a confrontation between Jake and the Sword Saint. Hopefully, one that would take the pressure off the Holy Church as those two outliers would distract each other.

The old man opened his eyes as a blue sheen flashed for a moment. He watched the counter for the Treasure Hunt as it slowly ticked down.

Miyamoto smiled. "May this lead to a season of prosperity."

Jake sat with Sylphie as they both stared out onto the pond, as the timer finally reached 0.

You have been invited to the Treasure Hunt. The Treasure Hunt will be an event focused on the acquisition of treasures through a variety of challenges. This is a combat and challenge-solving event, and death is an ever-present factor, so be warned. Exiting the Treasure Hunt early at the loss of obtained rewards will be an option. Do you wish to enter now?

Time to decide: 9:59

"You got it too?" Jake asked to make sure. The hawk gave him a nod, and he snickered as he spoke.

"Then let's fucking go!"

Chapter 284: Treasure Hunt: A World of Mist

The mist rolled over the hills as the vast open plains that were otherwise desolate suddenly saw movement. First, a figure appeared, a hawk still on his shoulder. Then,

another person appeared a second later, and within two minutes, over fifty people stood there.

Jake saw Miranda had entered with both the slave woman and the thief. He wasn't sure what she had done, but both seemed to be under her charge for now. As far as he could tell, it wasn't any kind of slave contract or something like that, but there clearly was some kind of control involved. But, ultimately, it wasn't something he bothered dealing with.

The Treasure Hunt was far more important.

He noted they were currently within a transparent bubble of sorts. Likely there until everyone had entered the Treasure Hunt. While the others were talking, Jake decided to spend this time more efficiently as he tested some things. The first of which was his divine connection.

Jake felt inward, and while he could feel his connection with Villy, he couldn't pull on it. It was like the World Congress with the gods completely cut off. He was fully aware this was advantageous to him, and he was more than happy to have the system block it out. It meant far less bullshit would go on, and it would just be mortals fucking up other mortals.

Seven minutes or so later – when the original invitation time was over – a notification appeared as the bubble around them faded.

Welcome to the Treasure Hunt!

The Treasure Hunt takes place in the ruins of a fallen realm, one where civilization still left behind many signs of its existence. Explore their world, challenge the many monsters that still roam these lands, and most importantly, claim their treasures.

A mist hangs over these lands, hiding many secrets and forgotten places. Venture through it to discover the dangers and opportunities that lie within or stay in the safety of the plains. The choice is yours, but be warned of what the mist may hide.

Each Treasure Hunter has been given a Hunter Insignia that allows them to store treasures within. All spatial storages are restricted during the hunt. This insignia can be activated to transport the Hunter out of the Treasure Hunt prematurely at the cost of leaving all rewards behind.

The final reward will be calculated at the end of the Treasure Hunt. The Treasure Hunt will last a total of ten days. May fortune be with you!

Time remaining: 9 days, 23:59:59

Jake read it over and nodded to himself. He was currently standing on a grassy plain, except he noticed the grass has a neon blue color and was even giving off a very faint amount of light. The first thing he did was test the insignia versus his spatial storage. Jake tried to activate his spatial storage and easily took out his bow. He deposited it again without any issues.

Existing items I brought in are unaffected, he noted. Next, he picked up a small handful of grass from the ground and tried to put that in his spatial storage. It didn't work. Next, he tried to put it in the insignia storage, and that worked just fine.

All items from in here must be put in the insignia. Pretty simple, Jake thought with a nod. The insignia itself could be summoned anywhere on the body at any point and was just a box with some runes he couldn't recognize within. He saw some people had it appear on their hands or arms, with the back of the hand seeming like the preferred position for most.

Jake also naturally listened in to the chatter all this time. It had been going on since anyone entered, and he was looking forward to leaving, but he still took the time to hear if anyone had any interesting insights he didn't'.

"The mist is dense," he heard someone with a bow say - an archer of some kind.

"I can't see shit," another one answered.

"I think we should stay in the plains for now..."

They were all currently standing in the plains and not very far from a barrier of mist. It was like a wall, but Jake could see it curving slightly, making it more circular in shape. If his guess was correct - which he was certain it was - then the plains were the center of this entire Treasure Hunt with a ring of mist around it. Jake looked to the side, and far off in the distance, he saw another group of people. Looking inwards, directly away from the barrier, he also saw people far off in the distance. Further, into the plains, he even saw a few buildings scattered about. The mist was still present in the plains, but it was far thinner and more just a light fog.

This place is fucking huge, he thought as he peered into the mist. He saw it moving a bit uphill away from the plains, and far off in the distance, he saw the outline of what looked like tall hills or mountains. Wait, wasn't a tall hill just a mountain? Or did it have something to do with how rocky they were? Hm...

"Everyone, let us split up here," Miranda said. "A larger group will be able to find far fewer treasures, and considering that our relative safety is guaranteed, there is no need to stay as a larger target, is there?"

Jake scoffed a bit internally. Of course, Miranda didn't want to bother with these independent D-grades either. Not that he thought they wanted to deal with her either. He decided to be a bit nice for once and gave them a warning.

"Be warned, there are unnatural movements within the mist; my guess is that creatures hide within," Jake said, having all the independents turn to him. Considering he still had a lot of goodwill from the potions and now the warning, he got a few thankful smiles and nods. It was the easiest brownie points of his life.

Five people took off individually just after he spoke without a word but still giving Jake a nod in thanks. They had likely just stayed behind to be polite to him and Miranda and saw both him and her speaking up as approval for them to leave.

Miranda looked over at Jake, and he looked back and smiled beneath his mask as he nodded. She would handle the rest, and now... now it was time for Jake to do what he was good at.

This was a Treasure Hunt, and he was a Hunter. A Treasure Hunter, even, as the system called him and everyone else.

And Jake was very good at hunting.

Miranda observed as everyone left one by one or in smaller groups. Most went into the unknown mists after some discussions, while others left for the plains. Neil and his party had chosen to enter the mist, too, Eleanor's abilities as a scout offering them some comfort.

The only people remaining were Sultan, the two slave women, the potion thief, and Arnold.

"I don't care what you do," Miranda said to the one slave woman and the thief, "just don't cause any trouble. Now, get out of here."

The two of them didn't have to be told twice as they both took off towards the inside of the plains. Together. She didn't question that one but just assumed they saw each other and decided to stay together for now. Miranda would bet a thousand Credits they were gonna fuck over each other the moment they found anything of value.

"What are your plans?" she asked Sultan, who was standing there patiently with his one remaining follower.

"I would ask you the same," he answered with a smile. "Should we perhaps go together? Strength in numbers, and I do believe we have powers that would mutually benefi-

“No,” Miranda shut it down. “Thanks for the offer, but I am perfectly capable on my own.”

The man shrugged. “In that case, we shall leave.”

With those words, he and his slave entered the mist. Miranda saw an aura be emitted from the man, and she felt a slight prickle in her mind looking his way. No doubt it was some kind of soul-magic, likely to scout the area after Jake’s warning.

She turned to Arnold to ask him, but the man just stood there with his damn tablet out, pointed towards the ground. He also repeatedly looked at the insignia that he had summoned on the back of his hand, and he even took a small needle to it, put the needle in a small slot in the tablet, and nodded in understanding just after. Miranda had some serious doubts if Arnold coming to the Treasure Hunt was a good idea, but he had chosen to attend. In the end, she just shook her head and asked anyway.

“What will you do, Arnold?”

He looked up at her briefly. “The objective of this Treasure Hunt, naturally.”

Arnold was already looking down again as he walked a bit back and forth; the tablet still pointed down, and he sometimes did stuff on it. Miranda shrugged as she also left. “Good luck, I guess.”

With that, she also entered the mist to find her own fortune.

Now, if only she could see more than a hundred meters ahead of her, it would have been nice. She summoned wisps of verdant light that flew out in all directions to at least give her some awareness of what was happening further ahead.

Arnold finished his scanning and located a suitable spot. He opened his jacket and took out a small pen, pressed a button, and saw it enlarge nearly a hundred times over. He placed it in the ground as it began drilling. Then, opening a small pouch on his belt, he took out a handful of small objects that he tossed into the air.

None of them fell to the ground but took flight on their own as they began scouring the plains. Finally, Arnold took out what looked like a mix between a rifle and a cannon and pointed it upwards. He pressed the side of his glasses as they showed grid lines in the sky.

BOOM!

He fired as his entire arm hurt. Unpleasant but necessary work. Five more shots later, and he felt like his entire arm was paralyzed. Thankfully, he was done with his part.

Arnold summoned dozens of mid-sized drones that he sent into the air and into the mist. Once they were sent off, he saw that the drill was about done. It had managed to get nearly fifty meters down, which should be enough.

The drill was pulled back up with a command on the tablet, and he placed a final drone on the ground. Then, he jumped down into the hole and let himself fall till he reached the bottom, where he sat down in the cramped space. Finally, he took out what looked like an umbrella that opened and pierced into the dirt, also making a platform beneath him to sit more comfortably.

A swipe on the tablet later, and the drone above began filling the hole up, the umbrella making sure he wasn't covered. Once it was done covering the hole, it would self-destruct to make it look like a fight had been going on, masking that a hole had been dug.

As a final thing, he took out an armchair from his spatial storage and sat back.

He looked down at the tablet as hundreds of small displays appeared from his many drones sent out. Then, a minute later, another message appeared.

Satellite uplink successfully established.

Countless factions and powerful individuals had entered the Treasure Hunt. Many with their own agendas, but the majority only with the hope of finding treasures to help themselves advance in this new world.

Anyone that had managed to reach D-grade was at least partly driven and competent. The majority of the larger factions quickly entered the mist, but a bit of reshuffling was necessary for some groups. An oft-forgotten ability was more essential than ever in this event:

Scouting.

The mist made seeing even a hundred meters ahead of you a major challenge for the common D-grade. An archer or other class with scouting skills, especially the near-omnipresent Archer's Eye, and its many upgrades did help alleviate this issue somewhat.

A majority of these parties had made it as far as they did by being careful and organized. The Holy Church used light mages to create a path through the mist while carrying giant light-torches burning like the sun.

The undead summoned ghosts or apparitions to scout ahead for them when they didn't have a more regular scout class available. The Court of Shadows were naturally stealthy and carefully snuck through the mist as many of them spread out tendrils of darkness to warn them of any approaching threats.

People found solutions and were careful. Everyone tried different skills and tactics to safely explore the new environment they found themselves in. They knew things could turn deadly, not just by the hand of other humans but also potentially the environment itself.

But... some parties and overconfident people did none of that. Some parties and individuals had gone with the tactic of trying to get as good a headstart as possible. They were quick on their feet and identified that the better rewards would be deep in the mist, and the moment they get the chance, they rushed into it.

One such person was currently swiftly flying close to the ground as he found flying any higher incredibly difficult because the mist appeared to press him down. He was a level

104 caster, a competent fire mage who had never quite found a party he got along with, which was why he had entered this event alone.

He kept flying, sending out fireballs to light up the way. One of his blasts revealed something reflecting light ahead of him. Without any hesitation, he headed towards it. Yet, he wasn't a complete moron, so he stopped a distance away and surveyed the area as he landed.

What was ahead of him was a metal staff impaled into the ground. He Identified it and saw it was rare-rarity... an item he could use for sure. The mage carefully approached, his eyes flickering back and forth as a mantle of flame covered his body in case he triggered any traps.

Nothing happened as he walked up to that staff. Then, he put his hand on it. Still nothing. He poured mana into it and bound it to himself, a huge grin on his face as he-

****SWISH!****

The air ripped as there was movement in the mist, but just as it appeared, it disappeared again. The mage's eyes opened wide. He didn't even think about triggering the insignia to escape... that function of his mind was already gone as he looked to the side only to see a gaping maw.

Half a minute later, all that was left was a dried-up corpse that soon turned to dust and became one with the mist - the creature that killed him already gone.

Not a single trace of either's existence was left behind.

Chapter 285: Treasure Hunt: No Flying Too High

Jake sprinted through the mist, Sylphie flying along with him. His Sphere of Perception was a bit over 300 meters in radius as he scanned the area at the ground level and even scanned to see if anything was hidden beneath. With his eyes, he scouted the area ahead, seeing movement here and there within the mist. It was incredibly subtle shifts in the background, a bit of mist not moving as uniformly as the rest, or it swaying in a too predictable pattern.

Yet, he wasn't aware exactly of what lurked within. It was clearly some invisible creatures, and they were hiding from not only his eyes but his other senses too. None had entered his sphere either but seemed to keep a very healthy distance. He didn't doubt they were aware he had seen them.

Not simple beasts, he thought. On the contrary, they were careful and calculating. Smart... but not smart enough to avoid Jake's curiosity.

He threw Sylphie a glance, and she seemed to get it as he took a step forward. Jake teleported, took another, and teleported again. He repeated this seven more times until he was at the shimmering form that was hiding. It knew he had found it, and instead of trying to futilely run, it attacked.

Jake saw four long claws reflect a tinge of light out the corner of his eye as it swiped for him. No, it wasn't claws; it was nails. Long nearly sixty to seventy centimeters long nails

came for him, but Jake was ready. With one hand, he blocked the blow as a barrier of mana appeared around his hand, as with the other, he released a blast of arcane mana.

A high-pitched scream sounded out as his foe was blasted back, its invisibility now dispelled. He had naturally already seen its form in his sphere, but it was just something else when done with his eyes.

It was a thin figure with one large black eye in the middle of its forehead and a giant circular maw of teeth beneath. Its hands were disproportionally large and had what looked like useless thumbs and then four extremely long nails. Its skin color was grayish blue, and it looked sickly and thin. Unfortunately, his Identify didn't exactly help him understand what it was.

[Young Ekilmare – lvl 118]

I would ask what the fuck an Ekilmare is, but this appears to be it. Huh, Jake thought. He was honestly a bit more used to what was essentially just mutated Earth creatures. But this? This was something entirely else. Well, the Deepdwellers were also kind of weird, but they were mushroom-loving assholes so that at least made sense.

At first glance, it actually reminded him a bit of the undead, but at the same time, he clearly felt a strong sense of vitality.

The creature stumbled to its feet, but this time it didn't attack but just slowly backed away as it turned invisible again. This was totally okay for Jake as he wasn't really that interested in them. He did find it interesting how this was only a Young Ekilmarre, making him wonder what the mature version looked like. But alas, he wasn't in the mood to bully some lower-leveled creature to find out.

Sadly for the Ekilmare... Jake's bird pal was totally fine with it.

Sylphie zoomed past him as she headed for the creature. A domain of green wind spread out around her, and Jake saw the mist appear to almost be locked down as it stopped moving. simultaneously, the creature's invisibility was dispelled, forcing it out into the open where it had to fight.

Jake saw it shimmer again, but this time it didn't turn invisible. Just as Sylphie got close, it swayed and teleported to the side, and a fraction of a moment later, it teleported again, this time behind Sylphie, ready to cut up her small body.

Yeah...

A glowing wing met the claw as a blade of dense green wind cut forth, severing the arm of the Ekilmare.

That was dumb...

A sentiment the Ekilmare clearly agreed with as it hastily retreated. Impressively enough, Jake saw its arm already regenerating while it retreated. Alas, it was far too slow. The small hawk attacked again, and this time the Ekilmare didn't have a response in time.

In what would only be called a fly-by, Sylphie flew past in an insane dash, her wing extending like a lucent blade as she passed. Then, she did half-loop in the air and flew back, landing gracefully on Jake's shoulder.

A few seconds later, a severed head landed on the soft grass.

He looked at it for a moment before the body also collapsed. The flesh wiggled for a bit, but soon it died for good. *Some kind of active regeneration skill... not like the Deepdwellers*, Jake concluded.

In the end, the Ekilmare was an ambush predator and not a tank. It was fast, had a powerful attack power, and of course, the ability to be invisible and even teleport. Especially the invisibility was respectable. However, to Jake, it was far from enough. Even Sylphie could still detect them. As a hawk, she had high perception by default, and she also had plenty of magic to detect foes.

Jake walked over to the corpse and saw that it hadn't dropped anything of value, at least nothing he could identify. He did want to put it in his inventory anyway as he had decided just to take everything, considering he had the special storage for this event. However, first, he would ask the one who had actually killed the thing.

"Sylphie, can you store it?" Jake asked.

Sylphie looked at him a bit and flew down. She poked the corpse with her talon, and the entire thing disappeared.

While it seemed like a great success, it instead made Jake frown. Because he just felt the corpse enter his own inventory. “Can you take it out again?” he then asked.

She looked a bit confused for a moment, and after shuffling a bit back and forth, a corpse was dumped on the ground. This only made Jake frown even more. “Okay, Sylphie, I’ll move back like 100 meters, then try to take it in the inventory and out again, okay?”

He only added to her confusion, but she did as he said.

Jake used One Step Mile to get back and signaled for the bird to put it in the inventory. She did without any issues and then took it out again just after.

Alright... shared inventory... I see no indication of a range limit... isn’t this just kind of overpowered?

Jake frowned.

Making his way back to her, he talked. “It appears we share an inventory... do you know what that means?” Jake asked with an excited smile.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched.

“Oh, yeah, good idea on that one,” Jake acknowledged as he took out a bunch of potions from his usual inventory and put them in the Treasure Hunt one. “But, it also means we

can split up and get twice the loot! Imagine how many tasty pellets you could get if you managed to collect some cool stuff?”

Sylphie’s eyes went wide at the thought as she screeched in agreement. It was lucky they could split up, as, quite frankly, they weren’t exactly good at fighting together. Jake sucked at fighting with a partner, and Sylphie also had many flashy attacks and stuff like that.

As for the risks of splitting up? If Jake had learned one thing about Sylphie during their time together, it was how difficult she was to put down. In fact... he would say she had a higher chance of escaping than he did if they met a foe he couldn’t handle. Her fully stepping into D-grade had not been a small upgrade. Far from it.

“Ree! Ree?” Sylphie screeched.

“Yeah, of course, just pull on that bond if you need any help; I will make sure to do the same,” Jake answered with a big smile. It was something else both had easily noticed after their contract. Both could vaguely feel the location of the other, mainly just the general direction, but also if the other was still in good condition. It was nice to have, as Jake only believed he could get a warning if Sylphie was in bad trouble without it.

“Then, bon voyage, and may your booty be plentiful,” Jake said snickering, getting a confused head-turn from Sylphie, making him re-word it: “Good luck getting those shinies.”

With those words, Sylphie nuzzled a bit up to him, and he rubbed her head. Then, with a determined look, she took flight towards one of the hills in the distance, a green tailwind left in her wake.

Jake himself turned towards a more prominent mountain far off in the distance. Even the hill Sylphie had chosen was a far ways off, and this mountain was even further in... and damn did he hope there would be more worthy opponents the deeper he went.

He took off, focusing on his sphere the entire way. He did spot a few minor things, like a rock his Sense of the Malefic Viper picked up on containing a lot of mana, a herb here and there, and stuff like that, but nothing truly worthwhile. Well, he took everything he found as sending out a mana string or a quick sidestep on his path didn't slow him down much.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, but he noticed that the Ekilmare liked to cluster around these treasures, likely waiting for something to come by to try and claim them. Or were they just close because they themselves absorbed a bit of mana from the items? It was hard to say, and frankly, it didn't matter. The creatures ran whenever Jake got close, not a single one of them trying to ambush him, and naturally, he didn't bother chasing them either.

Throughout this time, he also made sure to completely ignore any other humans. Considering he was likely the one with the highest perception in this entire Treasure Hunt, he easily spotted them all before they had a chance to spot him.

Surprisingly enough, he didn't notice anyone having a scuffle. Maybe they just hadn't spotted each other... or maybe there was some collective agreement that it simply wasn't time yet. Jake did not hold doubt in his mind that the more time passed, the more humans would switch their goal from finding treasures to stealing from other humans.

In some ways, it was the tutorial all over again, except you would get *all* their treasures this time around. Even if the person were incompetent, over a week's worth of collecting

would still add up to a lot. Certainly, more than one could feasibly collect in a short period.

Not that it was anything Jake particularly planned on doing. Though, of course, if someone wanted to rob him, it would only be fair to rob them back in kind, right?

His journey continued for nearly an hour as he ran at high speeds. He avoided using his One Step Mile to not miss anything with his sphere and also to give those invisible stalkers time to get out the way in time. Additionally, it gave him more time with his feet on the ground. And what did feet on the ground mean?

That's right, more time spent feeling his super comfy boots and their ability to feel earthbound herbs and natural treasures. This did expand his searching perimeter quite a lot, and Jake was essentially a one-man locust swarm, scouring anything of value in his journey.

He also checked the inventory and noticed many corpses appearing, progressively feeling more powerful as they grew in levels. *Sylphie seems to be having fun*, he thought with a smile as he pulled out an uncommon-rarity sword from the ground and tossed it in the inventory.

Finally, he reached the base of a mountain. He looked up and saw that the fog got denser at higher altitudes. It even began changing color from white to black further up. Even with his insane perception, he couldn't see more than a few kilometers up the cliffside.

All game logic told him the good shit should be up mountains like these. Jake had seen only two mountains and three hills from where he started, this being the smallest of the

mountains. He honestly wasn't sure how tall it was as he couldn't see the top back then, and even as he stood before it, it was still a mystery to him.

Without further hesitation, he summoned his wings as he began flying upwards along the cliffside. He had noticed a while ago that the mist seemed to push him down, making flying harder but possible. Sylphie also constantly rebuffed this effect with her winds, making it not really affect her much.

Jake kept flying upwards as the mist got denser and denser. Soon, he spotted something above. An angle that wasn't natural. It was a half-circle that should not appear on any regular mountain. As he got closer, he noticed what it was.

It was a balcony.

As it entered his sphere, he saw it truly was a balcony leading out of the mountain. He also saw that it had been carved into the mountain, making him frown a bit. Was this entire mountain actually some kind of construction? Or was it carved out as a residence at one point?

This Treasure Hunt was meant to take place in a fallen world that still retained traces of civilization. This mountain appeared to be related to that, and beside those buildings down in the plains, the only sign this place had ever been anything more than a hunting ground for monsters.

Jake reached the balcony soon after and landed on it. It was substantial, nearly forty meters long and reaching out fifteen or so meters. He saw the entire edge was lined with what looked like plant boxes. Had they used this place to grow herbs and stuff for those within the mountain?

Looking up, he didn't see any other balconies. Why had they placed it this low down? Did it have something to do with the dark mist above? Jake decided to give a test, so instead of entering the mountain through the large gate on the balcony, he flapped his wings and flew upwards.

The first kilometer went fine, and he didn't spot any other signs of the mountain being inhabited beside his Sphere of Perception reaching inside, scouting it. He couldn't see much as it appeared they had only built far inside the mountain.

Two kilometers up from the balcony, he noticed how it really began to darken.

Three kilometers up, he, for the first time, truly noticed a difference. His skin began prickling, and he covered himself in scales when he saw himself begin taking a bit of damage from the mist. Yet, he decided to keep flying up.

The scales held back whatever damaged him as he sought to analyze it with Sense of the Malefic Viper. It was black, but he didn't sense any immediately familiar concepts in it. It wasn't dark mana or any kind of poison as far as he could tell, and Palate didn't seem to have any effect either.

Five kilometers up, he began taking damage again. The pressure from flying also increased, and he felt like he was swimming through water. No, it was like his body was covered in glue. The damage also only kept increasing, and it was about that time he noticed something even worse... it was accumulating. It wasn't just some purely environmental effect... something was invading his body, actively seeking to destroy him. Yet it also felt faintly familiar... like he had encountered something similar at some point. He stopped advancing and began slowly flying down towards the balcony again. Attempting to get any higher would just be needlessly reckless, and even he could only see

a few dozen meters ahead of him with his eyes that high, and based on his sphere, he wasn't even close to the top.

When he landed back on the balcony, he took a knee as he inspected himself. He dispelled his scales and saw thin rune-like lines covering parts of his body, and upon further examination, he finally discovered what the energy reminded him of.

It was a fucking curse.

It was one of the worst kinds of magic. One that relied more on an odd, almost entirely metaphysical concept that Jake wasn't still entirely able to understand. One that relied more on emotions than raw power. One far harder to dispel than some average poison or nearly any kind of magic affinity.

Fuck me, he cursed as he entered meditation to dispel the foreign energy that had invaded his body, as he made a mental note to both himself but also one he sent towards Sylphie:

No flying too high.

Chapter 286: Treasure Hunt: Fire & Ash



"I fucking hate curses," Jake muttered out loud as he got up. It had taken nearly an hour to fully eliminate the energies in his body, and he had only been up in those dark clouds for a minute or two. Shit, he had even lost over a thousand health during the process. When he imagined what was further up, he shuddered.

Seeing that traveling up the side of the mountain wasn't an option, he went for just traveling inside it. Before that, however, he took all the plant boxes on the balcony into the inventory. None of them gave off any special aura, but they were made out of some kind of metal, so he reckoned they could prove useful. Also... the storage given seemed borderline infinite, so why not just swipe anything you could?

Walking up the entrance of the mountain, he inspected the large black gate. He frowned a bit as he put his hand on it. He noticed how it almost seemed to reject him, and when he tried to pour in a bit of mana to inspect what it was made of, it was just repelled.

It wasn't that the door was enchanted either. Perhaps it was once upon a time, but not anymore. Instead, it appeared to be made out of some kind of metal that completely rejected all mana. Jake also saw further inside with his sphere that another gate was only five meters inside the hallway leading into the mountain.

Considering that his danger sense was silent and he didn't detect any magic, he decided to head inside. Two handles were attached to the door, and he grasped one of them and pulled. The door was heavy as fuck, but he managed to get it open after a bit of struggling. He noticed some mechanism made it close by itself again, making it harder to open as it constantly wanted to stay shut.

Jake was pretty damn sure the door was opened by some kind of enchantment when this place was actually used. That, or they actually kept it well-oiled. Anyway, he went inside and had the door close behind him nearly instantly as it slammed shut.

Once inside, he noticed something, or rather, the absence of something. There was no mist inside, and what had entered with him was quickly dispersing. On a closer inspection... two gates... locking out stuff... yeah, this was totally an air-lock. Well, a mist-lock would be more accurate, as clearly it sought to keep out the mist.

Did those who used to live here fear the mist? Jake asked himself as he went through the second door, now truly entering the mountain. On the other side of the second door was just a long boring hallway with several etchings along

the walls and floor. No doubt old inactive enchantments or something. He did test something, though.

BOOM!

The Pillar of Encumbrance was summoned, and he slammed it into the wall, feeling his arm hurt from the feedback. In retrospect, not the smartest decision. As for the wall? Well, he had taken a small nick out, so that was something. Needless to say, this confirmed the walls of this mountain were strong as fuck. It was like back in the Challenge Dungeon and the indestructible walls back then. Man, he couldn't wait till Hank learned to make invincible houses.

He put the Pillar back in his inventory as he began running forward, taking in the environment. After running nearly half a kilometer, he finally reached another door. All the enchantments or other tools to keep people out were long gone, it seemed, and now anyone who could open the door was free to enter.

Enter, and steal all their shit.

Well, at least he hoped they had a lot of stuff because the entire place seemed quite bare so far. Getting through the third gate, he now truly entered the mountain and what was hiding within, and inside he found... more hallways. But! These hallways also had rooms attached to them - a massive improvement for sure.

Sadly for him, what was inside the rooms was the opposite of interesting. All of them reminded him of those small shitty cabins you got on a cheap cruise ship, with only a single small mat in each and none of them larger than the smallest of apartments.

The only objects inside were a few pieces of old furniture, most of them made of stone. He did see some signs of what had likely once been wooden furniture, but all of those had long rotten away. Additionally, he did notice something else. Ash. Nearly all the rooms had ash, often on the mats that Jake assumed had once been used for meditation or maybe sleeping on.

An enlightened race for sure, Jake confirmed to himself.

Now, Jake did say there were no real objects of value... but that didn't mean he didn't take anything. For example, if a stone looked slightly shiny, he swiped it. Something made of metal? In the inventory you go! Glass? Inventory!

So far, he hadn't spotted any signs of living creatures inside the mountain. Jake didn't rush through but carefully tried to get an understanding of the area. He counted thousands of residences. If the construction within the mountain had as many floors as he theorized, then a million people could have easily lived in there. Probably far more.

Walking down one of the long corridors, he passed a few stairways and what looked like a lift. A lift that had long ago become unable to operate, but he saw no other reason to have a long vertical hole going up and down the mountain.

After walking a bit further, he finally spotted something out of the ordinary. There was a large hall ahead of him. A communal area? It was towards the center of the entire mountain, and once he spotted it, he rushed out.

Entering the room, he came to realize it wasn't really a room at all. Instead, it was a huge open space. Looking up, he could see pure darkness above... he could see the sky. The top of the mountain wasn't made of stone at all, but it looked like it had at least been partly hollowed out to make a huge skylight. The entire mountain was truly just a megastructure. More than fifteen kilometers tall, he now stood on one of the lower-middle floors of what he now rightly identified as an atrium.

This mountain... was a city. A large one. To explore it all properly would take a while even with his sphere, as picking up all the information from it at once was more than a little challenging. So instead, he closed his eyes and focused on Sense of the Malefic Viper and the ground beneath his feet at the same time.

At first, he felt nothing. The entire mountain felt... hollow. Not a single ounce of life or trace of mana anywhere. No... there was some mana. The natural mana in the atmosphere was always there. Always seeping into the natural materials of the world. Yet, he noticed some areas had far less mana than others, which meant that something else had to consume it or keep it out.

Jake jumped out over the balcony and into the open space in the atrium. His wings spread out as he began flying upwards. The lower floors appeared to be where the common people had lived, while the higher floors were where this civilization's rich or powerful had resided.

That, or it was just where they kept the good stuff.

When he was nearly at the top, he took a turn and landed on one of the over a thousand balconies extending all the way up the structure. This specific floor was slightly different from the others, as within, he detected what felt almost like a vacuum of mana.

He soon found the reason: another black metal door. This one wasn't leading into a hallway, however.

Jake opened it with a good push and stepped inside. He found himself in a large room a few stories high with many tall bookshelves lining the walls.

It was a library with pretty much no books. All that remained was dust where the books had once been. Everywhere... except for one place. Directly ahead of him was a single three-meter tall bookshelf different from any of the others in that it actually contained books.

Oh yeah, and a giant magic barrier sealing it in – no doubt the reason why this bookshelf still stood after this long.

It was also the thing that had sucked away all the surrounding mana. Jake walked closer to the barrier... and then finally, something actually happened.

Because what was a good Treasure Hunt without a trap-filled room?

The door behind him sealed shut, the barrier in front of him intensified, and the entire floor lit up with an orange color. Jake didn't know what he had expected. Maybe some elaborate trap that fired out many weapons and different mixed concepts or something. But what did he get?

Fire.

A lot of fire.

Jake pushed a hand out to each side as he activated Limit Break at 10%, and a bubble of arcane energy began forming around him. At the same time, scales covered his body, and he even used his already summoned wings to wrap around his body.

The entire room began glowing orange, and soon the bookshelves caught fire. Next, the balconies and everything else not either within a barrier or made of stone began burning with intense heat. Jake was counted as within a barrier.

At least for now, he was. The room became hotter and hotter, and sweat began dripping down Jake's brow as he tried to hold it back. His scales protected him, but they were far from perfect, and for every moment that passed, it only got hotter in the room.

That was the exact moment Jake learned something new. If the heat got high enough and the fire-affinity intense enough... even mana itself would burn. Everything would burn.

A dozen seconds later, the magic formation died down, and the fire stopped. The atmosphere ceased burning, and all that remained in the room was a single barrier covering the bookshelf. The barrier was the only thing that was not black ash, but one other place was slightly different: a sphere of ash, looking almost like an egg.

An egg that cracked a moment later as two crispy wings fell to the ground, an ash-covered Jake below.

"Tha-" Jake tried to say but ended up just making pained coughing sounds as his internals had taken some damage from him stupidly breathing in.

That sure was something, he just thought instead as he shook his body like a wet dog, sending ash flying everywhere, revealing his mostly undamaged armor beneath. The only thing that had really taken a beating was the cloak, and even that was fast repairing, courtesy of the Self-Repair enchant.

Jake had to admit it was quite the trap. Perhaps someone with skills made to detect the trap would have discovered it earlier, but Jake really wasn't good at those magic formations. What he was good at was listening to his danger sense... and throughout it all, it hadn't really activated. In other words, the trap simply wasn't good enough to be a serious threat to him. Which made sense. Because if this room were a legitimate threat to him, it would kill nine out of ten parties from other factions.

It would still kill half for sure. Well, not really kill them, as they would have plenty of time to choose to leave the Treasure Hunt.

Either way, the trap was gone, and now he just needed to find a way to open the barrier and-

Jake heard a sound around him, like a gust of wind, had picked up. He looked down and saw the ash-covered ground glow again, this time with an odd gray light. *Oh... the formation isn't done yet.*

All the ash in the room began swirling and gathering together in front of the door. Magic hummed to life as the formation transferred all its energy into the amalgamation of ash that soon took the form of a semi-humanoid with two long arms. Jake immediately recognized it as an elemental and used Identify.

[Ash Guardian – lvl 141]

The elemental was nearly twenty meters tall, and faint embers were visible on its body as it moved to attack. It raised its large arm to smash it down towards Jake and-

BOOM!

An explosion sent ash flying everywhere as the arm was destroyed, and before the elemental could react, it was hit again.

BOOM!* *BOOM!* *BOOM!* *BOOM!* *BOOM!

Five explosions nearly scattered the entire elemental as Jake stood with his bow out, another explosive arcane arrow already at the ready. He naturally shot it and made the arrow split into five in mid-air, exploding the elemental again.

It attempted to reassemble itself, and parts of the ash moved towards him to stop his assault. A tornado of ash kicked up around him with red glowing embers mixed in between, but Jake easily dodged back and avoided being surrounded.

He kept bombarding it with arrows. The only thing he would admit was that it was durable. Everything else was just terrible. Maybe it could hurt him if it managed to completely surround and practically absorb him into its ash, but with how slow it was, that would never happen.

The inevitable result was that the elemental died within five minutes of being conjured.

****You have slain [Ash Guardian – lvl 141] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake saw the elemental slowly fall apart as the ash fell to the ground, showing no signs of moving again. He inspected it with his sphere and found himself disappointed at the lack of loot. God damn magical constructs. It didn't even have an orb like the Cloud Elementals as it was spawned by the formation.

With the death of the elemental, something else also finally happened at the barrier. Jake felt the mana in the entire room shift, and even the door open up, as it seemed like all restrictions on the room were lifted.

The barrier didn't disperse but instead coalesced into a figure of pure mana.

Jake frowned a bit as he saw it. It looked humanoid but a lot thinner and taller. He couldn't see any details as the figure was a dark blue color and more an outline than anything else. It didn't take a genius to know what this was as Jake prepared himself for the exposition dump that was to come. Alas, it was okay as any information about the Treasure Hunt area would be valuable. As for how he knew it was exposition time? What else would a damn library be for?

Almost on cue, the figure in front of him began talking:

“If you are hearing this message, it means you have broken through the defenses of the archives and that the last of us have either fallen or entered slumber. I do not know which world you hail from or if you are even sapient, but I hope for the Records of this world to live on. It may be a lot to ask, but if you listen to the end, I shall reveal information related to the greatest treasure this world holds.”

“Now that’s just playing fucking dirty,” Jake muttered out loud at the projection that just continued without any pause.

Chapter 287: Treasure Hunt: History Lesson

Jake searched his inventory and found a stone chair he had swiped before. He summoned it and sat back as he listened to the projection talk. This wasn’t a case like in the Undergrowth dungeon and that Altmar elf. This was just a recording, nothing more, nothing less.

“This place is – or perhaps was – once called Yalsten. We were always a secluded small world with few exits or entrances since this place was created. For many years it was a paradise. A place of study and learning, free of war and conflict. A united people under the banner of the creator. We cultivated resources, trained fighters, and did as we were commanded. But, alas, this would not last.

“The creator was known as Yal, the world named after him. A mighty A-grade on the crux of advancement. Yet time was coming for him. He sought to advance but found himself unable. He sought power but faltered. Do not misunderstand; I do respect the creator for making this world... but I have long been disillusioned towards his person. He was just another greedy mage seeking to advance through any means possible. This world is ultimately nothing but a prison for his family to be kept safe forever. It was a place for his family to be kept safe...”

Jake looked up to the black ash-covered ceiling as he listened, hoping it would soon get to the good part. So yeah, some space mage or something had made this world and put a bunch of people in here, including his family. He guessed the next part was about how shit had gone wrong.

*“While his life was long, he knew it was ending. So the creator sought ways to extend it. Natural Treasures consumed in droves, forsaken rituals of old, everything in his power he sought out. Everything appeared to be in vain... until **he** showed up.”*

Jake frowned at that. The projection had perhaps not done it on purpose, but he felt the intent and will injected into that word - the pure hatred, powerful enough to survive even within an otherwise completely powerless projection.

*“**He** came bearing a gift that would turn out to cost more than Yal could ever afford. The creator accepted the gift as he underwent the Ritual of Blood and joined the vampiric race to extend his lifespan and-“*

“Oh damn, vampires,” Jake muttered out loud. “So, this is vampire land? I hope it’s the cool sort of vampires...”

“-throughout the years, he began offering this same gift to his family. Once his family converted, they spread it to their servants, who then spread it to their families, and within a few decades, nine out of ten had joined the vampiric race. The last ten percent were still on the fence or not deemed worthy. I must admit, my ancestors also joined them... and this entire change led to a period of prosperity.

“The creator reached S-grade not long after, and this world began creating C-grades like never before who left to join the wider world outside. Our kings grew to B or even A-grade, and we became a powerful family under the banner of the vampiric race. All signs indicated that we would prosper more than ever before, and our future was bright. Until the Bloodless Night happened... and everything changed.

“Without the power of the True Ancestor, we were forced to feed... we were made to consume the lives of others to sustain ourselves. As a third-generation inheritor of the True Ancestor, the creator was harder hit than anyone else and went insane. He died only a month after the Bloodless Night, hunted down by the Templars of the Blessed Sun. Our kings, fearing for the future, tried to hide our world away entirely, cutting off all connections to the multiverse.”

It was quite a lot of information at once, and Jake frowned a bit at the many terms used. So... Bloodless Night, True Ancestor, Templars of the Blessed Sun... Jake had the feeling this recording expected him to know what all these were about. Naturally, he had no clue. But man, True Ancestor and Bloodless Night? Totally vampire-related. The Templars? Jake remembered hearing those were often associated with the Holy Church, so did the vampires get hunted down by an army of paladins?

A bit cliché.

“However... this was not a suitable solution. We needed to feed to live, and if we locked ourselves away, we would not be able to get livestock. We tried to nurture some, but it was not feasible in any way. Our time of prosperous growth ended up being one of the primary causes of our downfall... without proper livestock, the most powerful of us deteriorated and, in the end, had to leave this world behind to try and make it outside.

“Those that remained tried to find ways to survive without life energy. Alchemists kept us going for a while, but it was far from enough to sustain us. So we kept looking... and finally, someone came up with an idea.”

“This is where he tells me about how they made some fucked up experiment or ritual that ended up creating that mist which ruined the entire place for good,” Jake spoke out loud.

“A ritual was theorized-“

“Fucking called it.”

“-to change the nature of the mist that hung over our world.”

“Shit.”

“The mist was but a natural part of this world. It had always been. The mist held special magical properties, allowing certain Natural Treasures to grow, and was no doubt one of the reasons why we could grow as we did. So, the one remaining Vampire King – a powerful A-grade – came up with the idea to transform the mist. Make it into one of life that could sustain us forever. The way of doing this? A grand ritual of more livestock than ever before.”

“So the Vampire King left, and a century later, he returned. He came with several planet’s worths of livestock. Most of them were humans, but it also included elves, scalekin, beastfolk, and most enlightened races. More than a trillion. All to be the fuel of the ritual.”

“Okay, that’s kinda fucked up,” Jake said. He knew – or at least hoped – that Villy was just joking with the whole planetary sacrificial ritual thing, and now he was hearing that was actually a legit thing. Seriously... a trillion was a fucking lot. That was more than a hundred times Earth’s population before the system. He did understand that planets could hold far more people now due to how massive they were, but it was still just too much.

“This Vampire King was a master of curse magic, so he thought it would be smart to create a special kind of curse to infuse all the livestock into the mist. He would not kill them... no, he would seal them. Make them constant batteries of life, turning their entire souls into fuel. I do not know the details... only that he succeeded. In fact, the ritual was a massive success, and for years everything seemed to be perfect once more. He was hailed as a hero.

“But the thing about curses is that they are very much alive. This particular curse evolved. Grew. It began to slowly develop, and so did those it affected. If you have been to the plains, you have seen the results of continued exposure... monsters that dwell within the mist. Once proud members of the vampiric race, now reduced to nothing.

“We were forced to flee. Take refuge underground or hide within the towers to keep the mist out, live here, and try to survive on alchemical products and what little livestock we still had. The King was more affected by his own curse than anyone else, and in an attempt to not be corrupted and fix everything, he tried a different ritual... one that ended up causing even more harm. Within the next decade, 99% of this world was consumed by the black mist. Naturally, the King died too.

“Not a single being above C-grade managed to survive this period. Our most powerful Kings, Dukes, and Marquesses died. Only the Counts remained to lead us. They tried... I truly believe they did... but it never became the same. Thousands of years passed like this, us just hiding in towers, sometimes single individuals ventured outside, but the creatures in the mist never disappeared. They were always waiting. Always hungering. Six hundred years before this message was recorded, the last gateway to the outside world closed, sealing us in completely.

“It was a slow death for us all. We deteriorated... but soon, we did see one spot of light. The mist began being cleansed. The curse weakening. All we needed was time... and so we waited. The Counts entered Eternal Slumber, and the rest of us tried to make it. This recording being necessary should make it clear we failed.”

Jake sat there, still listening to this massive history lesson. He did learn a few things. First, the mist was good for treasures and a natural part of this world. Second, the vampires had lived in these towers, and the creatures outside were mutated vampires. Third, the curse had been weakening. Fourth... there was something special about that center plain.

“Behind me is a recording of our history and some tomes with all the most valuable information we have learned through the ages. Be it regarding alchemy, smithing, construction, tailoring, or any other profession; it is there. I hope you will take this and spread the knowledge to allow Yalsten to live on, at least in some form.

“Additionally, there are many treasures hidden all over the plains and even within the hidden treasuries of these towers. Claim it all, for we have nothing to use it for anymore. All I ask is that you remember us.”

The projection stopped talking for a while and just stood there. Jake stared at it intently for a while. *Don't you fucking dare scam me on the information about the greatest treasure...*

Just before he was about to waste his time tearing the recording a new one, it spoke again.

“Finally, I offered to provide the location of the greatest treasure in this world... and I will stay true to that promise. In the center of the Mistless Plains lies a hidden structure that contains this treasure. Power left by the True Ancestor Sanguine, brought here by the creator. One that can only be accessed when the keys of nine kings come together. These kings themselves have long died... but the Counts of Blood still lived at the time of this recording, and they now hold the keys. One of these Counts resides within this tower. However, be warned... for the Counts have entered Eternal Slumber, and if they still live and awaken, they will be hungry. If you can even reach their quarters, that is. I wish you luck.”

With those words, the entire projection disappeared, leaving only Jake and the bookshelf behind in the room. Everything else was just piles of ash. Jake walked forward and looked over the bookshelf. He saw a shitload of books on so many topics. He counted about five hundred books total on the bookshelf... and there was no way in hell he was going to sit down and read anything here and now. Sure, maybe there would be some information within giving him information on where treasures could be located, but he would prefer to blindly just look for himself.

After putting the entire bookshelf inside the storage, he headed out again. He opened the huge gate and looked to see if the trap had managed to damage it in any way. It naturally

hadn't, but what he was more interested in was if the hinges were damaged. They were not.

The doors were attached through huge poles of metal on each side embedded in the stone. Jake very much wanted to steal them, but that wasn't possible without breaking down the stones. He had tried with the Pillar, and the stones were just too powerful. His arcane-affinity also didn't help much. Jake had tried everything he could and-

Oh...

Looking at all the ash, Jake remembered something. Something he probably should have remembered a bit earlier. What did Jake do the last time he came across contraptions he could not break? Because he did have one weapon. One made specifically to break down objects:

Alchemical Flame.

Jake smiled as his eyes glimmered. It was time to steal the god damn doors off their hinges.

Miyamoto walked through the mist-filled halls of the hill he had entered. A hill he came to learn was, in actuality, an underground bunker. One that had long been abandoned. Only the beasts that dwelled within the mist remained. Their claws were sharp and their attacks powerful... but compared to his blade, they all came up short.

Another figure flew in from the side as he walked past another doorway. It was only a faint shimmer in the air, but it failed to completely mask its presence. A single slice and the beast

was cut in two as its bisected body splattered onto the wall.

This was but one of many. Beasts, not even the old man's own level, sought to challenge him. He would find it insulting if their general lack of intellect weren't clear. At least the ones in the plains had learned to stay away. These beasts that had been sealed in were far more aggressive.

After walking through the halls for a long time, he finally saw a gate. One with a large red magic circle inscribed upon it. He drew his blade and cut down the center where the slit of the gate was. The rune broke, and the door flew open.

Red mist poured out of the large chamber behind the gate as he saw a coffin leaning against the far side of the wall slowly open, a figure within.

[Viscount of Blood – lvl 135]

The being's eye opened abruptly as an aura spread, and Miyamoto smiled. *Come.*

Jacob sat in meditation at the middle of their hastily constructed basecamp in what he had come to learn was called the Mistless Plains. Little time had passed since they entered, yet

they had already created large walls using earth magic and began putting down preliminary enchantments.

He, as the Augur, was not meant to join any of the fightings. This was not his role. No, instead, he would be the one directing everything.

“Group 4 should move in the 61-degree direction, and they will encounter a bunker. Have them secure it and wait for group 3 to arrive. Group 2 should move in the 146-degree direction, and they will encounter one of the mountains. There shall be an entrance along the base; I am not certain where. Once inside, scour it from the bottom to the top. I can see they will face challenges... it will not be as straightforward... the details are unclear,” Jacob muttered. “Oh, group 8 should avoid their current trajectory but switch to the 289-degree direction.”

Over a dozen mages and priests surrounded him, all with magic rituals and circles around them, allowing them each to communicate with a corresponding group. The only group Jacob personally directed was Bertram’s, also known as group 1.

“Bertram, once you’re done in that bunker, head for the location of group 2 and secure the tower. I fear we will have heavy competition.”

Jacob had seen many futures and realities, but one thing was certain in all of them: for this initial part of the Treasure Hunt, those towers would be the gathering point.

Chapter 288: Treasure Hunt: Armor of Mist

One man's trash is another man's treasure. Many would say that in a Treasure Hunt with high-rarity items spread throughout a large area, one should not stay in a single place for a prolonged period to procure things that didn't even count as items. Most would argue that was a waste of time. But to Jake, the true treasure was not the huge metal gate: it was the sense of victory he got when the first door finally fell off the hinges and slammed into the ground, making the entire archive shake and all the ash be lifted off the ground for a brief moment.

Totally worth it, Jake thought as he put the huge thing in his inventory. Swiftly he moved on to the next door and spent another half an hour slowly burning away at the hinge. Was this truly worth the metal of the door? Maybe, Jake really didn't know as he was quite clueless when it came to metals. He had just decided he wanted the metal, so he got the metal.

All arguments for it not being worth it were swiftly removed, though, as the entire process forced Jake to take a different approach with a skill he often took for granted. Alchemical Flame was a core skill for all alchemists, and Jake just used it to control the heat of the cauldron usually. That usage hadn't really led to anything... but spending over an hour focusing on improving the flame as he got the doors off? That sure helped.

[Alchemical Flame (Common)] – The flame of an alchemist is one of the most critical aspects of the crafting process. The flame itself is affinity-less and not polluted by the impurities of burning a catalyst. The path to refining one's alchemical flame is a long and arduous one for all alchemists seeking the pinnacle. Allows the alchemist to create a small alchemical flame, emitting heat. Adds a minor increase to the effectiveness of Alchemical Flame based on Wisdom

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[Alchemical Flame (Uncommon)] – The flame of an alchemist is one of the most critical aspects of the crafting process. The flame itself is affinity-less and not polluted by the

impurities of burning a catalyst. You have just embarked on the path of refining your alchemical flame, and may your path towards the pinnacle be swift. Allows the alchemist to create a moderate alchemical flame, emitting heat. Adds a small increase to the effectiveness of Alchemical Flame based on Wisdom

Jake got the notification halfway through getting the second door of the gate off. The change in the description was minimal, and honestly, he couldn't feel much of a difference. Just that his flame could get slightly larger, heat up or cool down a bit faster, and was generally just all-around improved. Which was nice. Once again, stealing doors was totally worth it.

With the gate gone, he decided to head onwards. He still had a lot of the tower to explore, and according to the recording, there were hidden treasures. It made sense he couldn't just sense them outright, as, of course, hidden treasures were... well, hidden.

Walking out of the hallway leading to the library, he frowned as he heard sound echo up from the bottom of the atrium. Jake slowly walked over to the edge of the balcony with an overlook all the way to the base of the tower and towards the top.

He looked down and saw movement in the open space below. Jake saw several groups of humans running around, and even a few that flew or jumped up a few stories. They seemed hesitant to split up, though. He wondered why for a moment but soon got his answer.

Out of one of the terraces flew a figure covered in dark armor. It looked to emit black smoke out of all the gaps in the armor and swung a dark two-handed blade as it chased after a mage who shot a fireball at it to try and blow it away.

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 110]

Jake wondered why he hadn't encountered any of these himself. Then again... he had barely been around the tower. He had walked down two hallways total, one to get to the atrium and the other to enter the library, skipping everything in between.

Looking at this armor a bit closer, Jake felt that the black smoke coming out of its gaps was actually mist. The same mist as he had encountered far above. This made him frown... how had the mist entered the tower? Were there breaches somewhere?

He kept looking down and seeing how the humans below handled these golems, which they were doing quite well. A party of four took it on, and the mage who was being chased was swiftly saved as a warrior with a shield stepped in.

A Powershot from an archer hit the golem not long after, and when a rogue-like person struck it from behind, its end was clear. Yet, something still felt off. Jake frowned a bit as the golem was on its last legs, and just as the rogue struck it in the head from behind...

The golem exploded in a cloud of black mist.

A loud scream echoed up the entire tower as the rogue fell to the ground. A healer that was not from their party, as far as Jake could tell, came over as another two people joined the party of four. The healer began doing what a healer does, but Jake just shook his head.

Yeah, good luck.

The rogue had been hit point-blank with the cursed mist. Maybe they could fix it, but with the rogue's low innate durability, he doubted it. He was proven right less than a minute later as the rogue chose to activate his insignia and exited the Treasure Hunt.

When the rogue disappeared, a large floating coin with the Hunter Insignia inscribed on it was summoned in his place, floating where he had been. The coin was about the size of a human head, and it didn't take a genius to figure out this was what contained the rogue's loot. Which made a lot of sense... having everything a person had looted just appear in the air and not within a spatial storage would be a bit silly. If albeit extremely funny as Jake could imagine a metal gate crush some unsuspecting person if Jake ever left the Hunt.

Jake kept looking for a bit longer as the two groups got into an argument about the floating coin, and in the end, it ended up being a third party who came in from the side and stole it. Jake laughed a bit under his breath as he saw the thief use Shadow Vault of Umbra. It was nostalgic to see that old skill and a little funny to him too. This was pretty much exactly what he had told Caleb the Court of Shadows should do during the Treasure Hunt.

Shaking his head, Jake decided to stop wasting any more time.

That humans would come into conflict during this Treasure Hunt was unavoidable, and he was actually a bit happy they didn't just try to kill each other outright. It had barely been a few hours since the entire Treasure Hunt started, so it would sure get bloody if people already began slaughtering now. Once again, though, he was sure that would come later.

Jake jumped out over the balcony and flew upwards. He felt a single gaze land on him from below, but that was it. He turned and saw a single archer look up towards him, but she swiftly averted her gaze when he returned her peeking.

He flew up all the way towards the top where he had been told this Count would be. If Jake could find any good challenge or good loot, it had to be in the vicinity of this boss-type enemy. He was still internally trying to figure out if all of this was 'real' or more a scenario of sorts made by the system. Or perhaps a bit of a mixture of both. True history, but perhaps a made-up place?

Well, it was 'real' in many ways, no matter what. But the tutorial, as an example, was partly system-constructed scenarios. Everything was just too neatly set up, just like this. Seriously? Collecting keys to access some big final boss, all of them conveniently sealed away in their respective boss rooms? All of it was just too artificial and game-like.

When he got all the way to the top, he noticed that the layout changed a bit. The mountain narrowed the higher one got – as mountains tend to do – and Jake saw only four total hallways at the top, each of them a good stance from the very top too. Jake presumed all of them led into special rooms like the library.

Jake looked over towards one of the hallways and saw movement. While flying up, he had been wondering why no one had gone to the very top from the start. It turns out... some had. A group of five were far inside one of the hallways, battling three foes.

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 132]

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 133]

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 132]

It was the same kind of golems as the one below but at a higher level. One of the golems used a two-handed sword, another dual-wielded shortsword, and the last had a spear. All of them were quite competent with their weapons for being reanimated suits of armor.

Similarlily the party was a coordinated group with two warriors, a healer, and two mages. The warriors kept one golem busy each, while the healer summoned magical barriers and transparent chains of mana suppression the last one. During this time, the mages were trying to swiftly finish off one of the golems, one using lightning and the other water magic. A nice combo, Jake reckoned.

They seemed to be doing quite well, as Jake looked on from a distance. As a general rule, he didn't wanna intrude in an ongoing fight as he didn't really like when people did that to him. He still remembered the asshole birds up on the cloud island. Putting into their fights was fine as they did the same shit, and besides, he was with Hawkie then. It was a bit of a dickmove just to force his own hunting policy on his feathered friend.

Just as Jake considered if he should just go elsewhere and leave before the party noticed him, the situation changed. A wooden door at the far end suddenly slammed open as another figure stormed out. This one had a sword and shield, and its armor looked slightly different. He naturally Identified it.

[Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 138]

With that use of Identify, Jake already knew the party was in deep shit, and while he generally wanted to avoid butting into the fights of others, saving their asses wasn't out of the question. So he summoned his bow, marked all the golems with Mark of the Avaricious Hunter, and took aim as he began charging.

At the party of five, the Knight entered the fray. The warriors were all busy, but their competency showed once more. One of them used a skill to make his hammer smash one of the armors away from the group and managed to intercept the Knight.

He blocked with the handle of his hammer, and Jake saw him buckle under the pressure. The healer fired a spell towards him, and the warrior moved to get up and push the Knight back a step... at least he looked like he did. Instead, the Knight simply stepped back as the warrior pushed to dodge the blow and then, with a dexterous blow, cut the warrior deep in his shoulder and smashed him in the chest with its shield.

The man was blasted back as the shield sent out a pulse of mana. At this time, the mages had picked up the pace and had just finished off one of the three Blackguards, freeing up the second warrior. Sadly he had no way to intercept as the Knight went for the healer who was still holding down a Blackguard by himself, and only the lightning mage could do anything too as the other was sealing in the explosion of mist in a bubble of water. And even if he wanted to help, the Blackguard smashed away before was now charging towards him.

As the Knight raised its blade to cut the healer across the chest, it was clear this was a catastrophe to the party. But to Jake? To him, it was an opening.

He released the arrow as an Arcane Powershot tore down the hall leaving a wake of arcane mana. The Knight froze just as it noticed the blow and failed to do anything to minimize the damage. As a result, it was hit square in the chest, with the arrow piercing straight through and sending it flying back until it smashed into a wall.

The party stood frozen as Jake shot again. This arrow split in five and went in between the five people and the two remaining Blackguards straight towards the Knight. Five

explosions of arcane mana filled the halls and sent wisps of arcane mana through the entire hall, barely not reaching the party.

Another arrow came just after, hitting one of the Blackguards in the side of the head, sending it smashing down the hall with an arrow embedded in the helmet. Arrow after arrow pierced through the hall, the party having now all stopped moving as the Blackguards had all been blasted away – now neatly grouped up together at the end of the hall.

A good barrage of more explosive arrows later, sending echoes through the halls, and Jake used One Step Mile and appeared amid the party. They looked frightened for a moment, but none made a move.

Jake looked down the hall as the dust cleared, and the three golems slowly began getting up, their armor cracked and broken as pink-purple lines of pulsing arcane mana had joined the black mist. He looked at the three of them and smiled beneath his mask.

Boom.

Three flashes of arcane mana lit up the hall for a split-second as the Arcane Charges on the Marks activated. At the same moment they died, they all exploded with black mist, but Jake simply raised his hand and sent out a blast of arcane mana, blowing it away from him. With the distance between him and the golems, chances are the explosion wouldn't have done anything anyway.

****You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 138] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Reanimated Blackguard Golem - lvl 133] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Reanimated Blackguard Golem - lvl 132] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Jake quickly checked the notification to confirm the kills before closing them all and turning to the party. The last explosion the mage handled was already fixed as the bubble had been sent flying away and exploded harmlessly to release the mist. The healer – and leader of the party as far as Jake could tell – was the first to speak as he bowed.

“Thank you for the assistance, Lord Thayne. We would have lost party members without a doubt without you. Once more, I thank you on behalf of myself and my party as well as the Noboru clan,” the man said with gratitude. “Please, take this as a token of gratitude; we found it in the plains outside.”

The man offered up a rare sword for level 105’s that he summoned from his Hunter Insignia. Jake looked down at it and shook his head. “Keep it. If you want to do something, deliver a message to the Sword Saint...”

"I'm looking forward to the duel."

The party looked at him bewildered for a moment before the healer bowed again. “I shall be sure to relay your words. I am certain the Patriarch will happily test his mettle against you, Lord Thayne.”

Jake nodded, and with that, he turned and walked over towards the three corpses of the golems. The five staring after him, their looks now far warier than before.

Chapter 289: Treasure Hunt: The Girl & The Hawk

Carmen sprinted through the mist-filled halls, smashing down any damn ghoul in the way. It reminded her a bit of the good old days of the tutorial where she smashed zombies day in and day out. She snickered as she turned another corner, and before the ghoul could react, she dropkicked it square in the face, smashing its head between her heavy boots and the wall. She identified the undead-like thing with an oddly squishy head as she leaped back and landed on the ground.

[Vampiric Ghoul Thrall – lvl 114]

Even without its head, it kept swinging. She launched into a barrage of fists before she finally put it down for good as its body was utterly pummelled apart within a few seconds. They were kind of durable, but her attacks were far from simple. Every single hit sent waves of destructive kinetic energy through her foes, destroying them from the inside.

Without slowing down, Carmen kept sprinting forward. She had entered this Treasure Hunt alone and would prefer for it to stay that way. She encountered a few more ghouls, but upon reaching a crossroad, she noticed something. Corpses. Ones not made by her.

Curious, she stormed down the corridor, hoping to find this other person, only finding more corpses than before. Finally, a few minutes later, she reached the exit of the hill... or what had been the entrance of the ghouls' killer. Cursing under her breath, she turned around and headed back inside after having gone the wrong way.

She stormed through the halls again, this time a bit angry, and she soon reached the same crossroad. Going the right way this attempt, she continued and passed through hall after hall with only dead ghouls. All of them had been cut up or ripped apart by some magic.

Carmen frowned a bit, as some of the wounds didn't look like they had been made by a human. She found deep holes in the skulls of the ghouls and jagged cuts that looked to be made by a saw or something. Or maybe it was just some magic?

Not seeing it as important enough to think about further, she continued. A big part of her hoped it wasn't another human – or worse – a party of humans. *Should I just kill them if it is? No, they would teleport out, and it could cause trouble... shit.*

Yet, she didn't want to just turn around and leave. With annoyance, she continued onwards and turned a few more corners. She noticed how she was going downwards, and the signs of battle got more and more obvious - deep cuts covered the walls and dismembered ghouls the floor.

Finally, she heard a noise in the distance. A few hallways further, and she caught a glimpse of the action. A ghoul was blasted through the hall, smashing into the wall. Next, it was hit by a barrage of green crescent blades of energy that cut it into several pieces.

Carmen slowed her approach to get a better feel for what she was dealing with. That green magic wasn't a type she recognized. Another blast later, and she felt the rush of

wind blow through the halls. *Wind magic of some kind?* she asked herself. Nothing she had seen so far was a real threat, so she ultimately just rushed in to get a good look at who it was that was fighting them.

Turning the corner, she saw it. A small figure flew through the hallway ahead at incredible speeds, leaving a green wind in its wake. A small tornado revolved around it, leaving shallow cuts on all the ghouls that got too close, and every time it waved a wing, a crescent green wave was sent out.

The three ghouls fighting it were quickly ripped apart. The last one had its entire mid-section crushed by a single talon that began glowing green and enlarged as the beast grabbed it. Carmen Identified it as she was waiting, getting nothing valuable out of it.

[?]

Frowning, she wondered if this was some hidden boss. It was a beast. A bird of some kind. She wasn't all that sure about birds. Maybe it was a falcon, an eagle, or a hawk or something. Either way, it was nearly entirely green and damn strong, if not as strong as her. This was one of the few times Carmen wasn't sure what to do.

Not being able to Identify the beast was not normal, that was for sure, and she hadn't seen any boss or enemy during the tutorial or in a dungeon in the outside world she couldn't Identify. Well, not Identify in that she couldn't see anything. Sure, if it was a lot higher level, not seeing the level was normal, but this clearly wasn't it.

The moment the bird finished off the last ghoul, it turned and looked over at Carmen. It stared at her for a while, and without breaking eye contact, she saw it summon a mana potion using a Hunter Insignia and drank it while staring her down.

Ignoring how comical it looked to have the small bird gulp down a potion, Carmen was now more confused than ever. Was this a participant of the Treasure Hunt? Why was it a bird? What was it green and a bit chubby-looking? Why did it have such big eyes?

Above anything else: why the hell was the bird so damn cute?

“Hey there, little fella,” Carmen said with a smile, trying to look as approachable as possible as she began slowly walking towards the bird with her hands held behind her back to try and look as unthreatening as possible. Approachable and not intimidating... that should work, right?

“Ree!” the bird made a weird screech at her, making Carmen stop. Did it want her to back off? Well, alright... she would... after just one small head pat!

Carmen kept slowly walking forward, talking all the meanwhile: “Did you come here with anyone? Are you alone? You’re sure a strong one, eh? I love your feathers, by the way. Those attacks were really powerful, weren’t they? You’re so pretty...”

As she talked, she saw the bird slowly calm down and just look her way, tilting its head back and forth, a bit confused. Step by step, she got closer, completely ignoring the many corpses she had to step over. The bird sat on top of a dead ghoul, being around chest height.

Then, after only a few more careful steps, she came within reach. She slowly extended her hand to pet the cute bird on the head. It looked at her hand as she lowered it to pat the

bird on top of its head. The hand was mere centimeters from the bird's head as suddenly, the bird dodged her hand as it pulled its head back, still looking at her.

She refused to give up and tried again, and once more, the bird avoided her head pat. Carmen steeled her resolve as she moved her hand a bit faster, but the bird was damn swift as it rotated its head to dodge her hand again and again.

Are bird necks even that flexible!? she screamed internally. No, this was not a battle she would lose. If the cute bird didn't want a pat... it could get a hug!

Carmen opened her arms and tried to hug the bird, but it jumped back, landing gracefully on the ground.

"Ree!" it screeched at her before turning around, just strutting away from her as its tail swayed back and forth.

"Come on..." Carmen muttered as she ran after it. The bird sped up as she ran and began making weird jumping movements before it reached a turn in the hall. She chased after it, and just as she turned the corner, she was face to face with a ghoul that had clearly been tossed her way with a blast of wind. The huge gust that hit her along with the ghoul was clear evidence of that.

The ghoul was still alive and began ripping at her, but Carmen easily pushed it away and kicked it into the wall. She didn't bother staying to kill it but chased after the bird. Now it had done it, and she would be damned if she didn't get a least get a tiny cuteness from the bird out of this entire thing!

Carmen looked on ahead and saw the bird jump down the hallway happily as it flapped its wings. She was certain it was having way too much fun with this. Carmen smirked a bit as she chased the cheeky little bird. Yeah, she had to admit she found it amusing too.

The next fifteen or so minutes were spent with Carmen chasing the bird through the halls as an ever-increasing number of ghouls chased them as the bird kept pushing them back towards her, and Carmen really didn't wanna stop up to smash them, hence abandoning her chase.

Finally, they came to a dead-end when they reached a large metal gate with a red rune on it, forcing the bird to stop. Carmen also stopped and smiled triumphantly. Only for a bit, though, as she saw the bird look behind her. She turned around and saw more than forty ghouls chasing them.

"We'll settle this after the cleanup," Carmen said, preparing herself. The bird jumped up beside her as it also prepared itself to fight. They exchanged a quick glance as the horde crashed into them.

After Jake left the party from the Noboru clan, he headed further in the hall that he assumed the party was originally heading into. Sure, he was maybe stealing their path a bit, but honestly, they would have been fucked and forced to retreat without him, so he didn't feel that bad about it.

He encountered a few more Blackguards and a couple of Knights, but none were even close to his level of power. Jake was fully aware his current strength was far higher than necessary for this early in the Treasure Hunt, which was why he headed for the best stuff first. He wanted to find the Count of Blood as quickly as possible before anyone had time to gather themselves and find it.

Jake wasn't stupid enough to think he was the only one who could kill them. He assumed someone like the Sword Saint and probably a few of the stronger parties around would manage. Probably a few others too.

He did end up picking up some more treasures on the way, but most were bad. It was a bit surprising the tower apparently held far less than the plains outside. Well, that, or they were just all bundled together in treasuries. Either way, Count first, then he would look for hidden caches.

On a side note, Jake did get the weirdest message of sorts from Sylphie. Something about making a friend and needing to say hi or something. Jake was a bit worried she had gotten herself into something bad, but decided to be a supportive uncle and took out a small pen and paper from his usual spatial storage and wrote a short message that he tossed in the Hunter Insignia as well as a few more potions. With that done, he soldiered on towards the boss.

Finally, he reached something new. Jake stood at a crossroad with a path to the left and one to the right. At least, that is what the vampires wanted him to think because the otherwise completely normal-looking wall directly ahead of him wasn't what it seemed. Instead of a solid wall, it was a magical barrier to block out physical stuff and make it feel like a wall and an illusionary barrier, making it look like one.

But to Jake? Well, even without his sphere, he could see the faint shimmering on the wall. With his sphere? He looked straight through.

Without any hesitation, Jake took out his bow and five barrages of explosive arrow later, and it was enough to dispel the barrier ahead. It went from looking like a slightly scratched wall to just a big gaping hole in the wall all at once, with the only signs of it not

just being a regular continuation of the hallway the marks left by the arcane explosions on the floor.

Jake looked through the hallway ahead with both his sphere and eyes, and the conclusion was unanimous: it was a trap room. Formations, physical traps, the whole shebang.

Anyway, to cut a long story short, Jake found himself at the other end of the trap room ten minutes later, not a scratch on his body, and the entire hall behind him now filled with black spikes glowing with poison, signs of explosions, broken stones, large blades pulsing with curse magic, and all the good old trap stuff.

With excitement, Jake turned a corner and finally laid his eyes on the end of the hallway. It was a black gate, a bit like the one he had stolen but even bigger and with some very complicated scrips on it, as well as a rune that was glowing deep red.

Walking up to it, the entire rune changed as words appeared.

Present a Rune of Blood to unlock to be granted access to the Count's Chambers.

Well, fuck me, Jake said. Why hadn't that shitty projection told him about needing a fucking quest item to get to the boss and get another quest item? It was a god damn chain quest where Jake had skipped a step.

Jake grumbled a bit to himself until he felt a slight mental nudge from Sylphie, making him break out a massive smile.

Carmen leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. The bird was also sitting down and relaxing. She had to admit... the little feather ball was strong, even if she was a fair bit stronger. But even worse than that, she hadn't even gotten her hug or even head pat yet!

She took out a potion, ready to drink it, but the bird jumped over and made a screeching sound, interrupting her. Carmen looked down and saw the bird summon a health, stamina, and mana potion out of its insignia, as well as a small slip of paper.

Picking the stuff up, she noticed how the potions were far better than her current ones. She only took the stamina and health potion, leaving the mana one. "Just keep the mana potion; I don't need it," she said as she checked out the paper. On it was a written message with pretty bad handwriting. Not that she was much better. She read the note and frowned a bit.

"Hello, my name is Sylphie, and I'm a hawk. Please be nice to me; I am not dangerous and a part of this Treasure Hunt just like you, and if you hurt me, my uncle will get very mad."

"You have a strong and awesome uncle, huh?" she asked the bird she now knew was a hawk with a smile. Also, that part about 'not dangerous' was just a god damn lie.

"Ree!" Sylphie answered happily. This time she didn't dodge as Carmen managed to land a light head pat with only a single finger. A major victory in her head.

"That sound's nice," she said, a bit sad thinking about her own fucked up family situation. "Anyway, we should-"

Another ghoul interrupted her as it came charging down the hallway towards them, likely having been attracted due to their fighting earlier. Sylphie seemed as annoyed as her, and together they attacked it. She punched it, and the hawk cut it up.

The ghoul was blasted through the hall, and once it got up, they attacked again. Their second strike ended up being from behind, and the poor ghoul was sent flying towards the large metal gate with a red rune on it. Contrary to expectations, the door neither of them could do anything to before gave way and opened to the ghoul, the rune shattering in the process.

Carmen frowned as she got a bad feeling - one confirmed right away as a red mist began being emitted from within the room they had just opened. Walking closer to get a good look inside and hopefully avoid fighting in the tight corridors, she saw the cause of it all.

[Viscount of Blood – lvl 135]

“Hey, Sylphie... let’s take this one together, eh?” Carmen said as she chugged the stamina potion the hawk had given her and then smashed her fist together, both now glowing with energy.

“Ree!” Sylphie agreed as she entered the room, a green aura already spreading from her body.

Chapter 290: Treasure Hunt: Viscount & Count

Sylphie had a lot of things she liked. She liked tasty things, her mom and dad, Uncle, biggest bird Stormild, shiny things, whooshing stuff, tasty things, whacking stuff. Oh, and tasty things. As for things she didn't like? Those were there too.

She didn't like all kinds of bad guys. Eagles were baddies, that was for sure. Anyone Uncle didn't like were bad also. Oh, and those bad monkey-things that kept throwing around smelly stuff. Those were super baddies for sure, also.

Now, she had found something else to add to the list: smelly vampire things. No, two things. The vampire things that were kinda dead and smelly were annoying, and she didn't like them, but she was strong, so that was fine. But then the big vampire thing came. It looked totally like a human was not just annoying but also dangerous. She really didn't like that Vampire Vi-something thing.

The bad vampire's eyes were entirely red; its body looked a lot like Uncle's but was taller and super thin. It was super fast, too, and was glowing red the entire time as it tried to scratch Sylphie. But! While Sylphie had found something else she didn't like, she had also found a new friend. Maybe a friend? Sylphie wasn't sure, she just knew the she-human was super good at hitting stuff, and when she got hit, she was totally fine. That was pretty awesome.

Sylphie flew through the large room with the bad guy vampire and avoided all the attacks. It used a long stick with a pointy end and kept yelling stuff Sylphie didn't understand. The she-woman did somehow and kept calling it corn or something. She kept saying corny, but Sylphie was certain the bad guy wasn't made of corn. It was also a bit weird she understood the weird gibberish of the vampire even though she couldn't understand

Sylphie properly, which was why she had Uncle make squiggly things to tell her stuff. Humans liked to talk using squiggly things.

Oh! Back to the bad guy vampire, the she-human punched it super hard in the chest, making it fly back, but it quickly got up again and attacked with its glowing pointy stick. Sylphie was flying and avoided all the red wind slicers the bad guy sent after her while waiting for a good chance to strike with her super talons.

The fight wasn't one of those fast ones like the dead vampire things. Instead, this vampire thing was faster and stronger. It used weird red glowing magic and the stick to avoid taking damage and hitting back, and whenever Sylphie managed to hit with a strong whoosh, the bad guy used cheating magic to heal.

Sylphie didn't like to admit it, but the bad guy vampire was maybe stronger than her. It probably wasn't stronger than the punchy lady, but Sylphie didn't think she could win against either. Both of them were just so super tough, and as she saw them fight, they kept using cheating magic to make their wounds disappear.

They could keep punching and stabbing each other for hours, she was sure. But, of course, that is if the awesome Sylphie was not there. Because while Sylphie didn't think she could beat either, she was sure she could cut them up real good, no problem.

When the vampire bad guy was distracted, Sylphie swooped in from the side with a big blade of green wind. The vampire recoiled, also allowing the she-human to land a punch. Next, the punchy lady punched the vampire real good, and Sylphie could super quickly swoop in and rip off a big chunk of meat from the bad guy vampire with her super talons.

The entire fight was still super long, but the bad guy vampire couldn't keep up in the end. The cheating magic got worse, the pointy stick got slow, and the red magic the baddie made got so weak it couldn't even get through her Green Shield.

The she-human punched the vampire hard in the chest, sending it flying straight towards Sylphie, who flew over, and with her awesome glowing wing, she made the head of the bad guy fly high up into the air. Without the body. This meant the bad guy was dead!

"Nice one, Sylphie," the punchy lady said, looking happy. "Name's Carmen, by the way. I totally forgot to introduce myself. We should keep this up; we make quite the team."

"Ree!" Sylphie said in recognition at the blood-covered she-woman. Compared to her, Sylphie looked as great as ever, and you couldn't even see she had been in a fight! She was a bit tired, though.

Suddenly, Sylphie heard a weird sound, and Carmen turned to look at it too. The sleepy-box the bad guy vampire had been hiding in began glowing red like the bad vampire, and it spat out a floating weird round metal thing with a shiny squiggle on it.

Also, just after, the wall to the side opened up and revealed a whole bunch of shiny things. Sylphie couldn't stop looking at the floating squiggly stone, though. It looked important. Oh, and Sylphie couldn't really use pointy sticks or cutty sticks or any of the other weird things humans used because they didn't have awesome talons like her.

"Yo, if you take the Rune of Blood, I'll take the rest, okay? We can just go for the next hill and split it the other way there. Does that sound good?" Carmen, the punchy lady, asked.

Sylphie thought about it for a moment and decided she did want the shiny disc. So she flew up and poked it with her wing, making it disappear.

A few moments later, she felt Uncle be happy! Oh! Oh! He praised Sylphie. Well, naturally, Sylphie knew the floaty shiny disc was the most important. She was good at finding good stuff like that!

Jake's annoyance at the chain quest was instantly dispelled as he felt the Hunter Insignia respond. Because it turned out this quest was one he had done in collaboration with Sylphie without either party knowing. He still wanted to punch the dude in the recording in the face for not telling about the trap room or any of all this shit, but sadly the guy was long dead.

He waved his hand and reread the words on the door.

Present a Rune of Blood to be granted access to the Count's Chambers.

The Rune of Blood appeared in his palm and instantly reacted with the gate. It floated up and inserted itself into it as red lines covered the entire thing. He heard an odd noise as the large gate began slowly opening. It was nearly six meters tall, and seeing it slowly swing open was quite the sight.

Very fitting for a boss room.

What was even more fitting was the dense red mist that slowly seeped out the gate. Jake felt an aura spread from within, and he knew whatever dwelled in there had awakened. Jake walked forward through the gate and dense mist.

He looked through the chamber and saw the walls lined with beautiful paintings and a carpet covering the floor. What Jake could only assume was expensive furniture was also everywhere in the massive chamber. Contrary to everywhere else, this room was kept in perfect condition too. There wasn't even a single trace of dust anywhere.

In the center of the chamber was a pedestal with a metal coffin on top. The coffin was made of a silver-like material and also looked expensive as hell. It was undoubtedly a treasure or item worth a lot, if not as a coffin, but for the raw materials alone.

Ever so slowly, the coffin opened. Jake stayed at the entrance to the chamber as he saw a figure rise out. He couldn't help but hold back a frown as he saw it. It was a... human? Or at least it looked exactly like one. He had expected the Count to look more like the recorded projection. But this? This was just a black-haired middle-aged man. He had to use Identify to confirm.

[Count of Blood – lvl 155]

Sure enough, it was the Count.

Just after he Identified the vampire, the Count's eyes opened. They were red and beast-like. A bit similar to his own yellow ones, actually. Naturally, the vampire was also fully

aware of Jake with his eyes open, and the hunter had already prepared himself. He didn't want to attack right away because these vampires weren't just stupid beasts but humanoids like him from everything he had learned.

"How long?" Jake heard a pained voice say. It sounded like someone with an incredibly sore throat.

"No idea, to be honest. A while," Jake honestly answered as he tried something else fun. "You're now part of a system event in the 93rd Universe, and you're pretty much just a quest monster."

"93rd era!? How is that possible? It was barely the... the..." the vampire said as he looked confused for a moment before looking back up. "Who are you, and what are you doing here? Who is your master?"

Well, ain't that interesting, completely ignored the part about it being a system event, Jake thought. It lent some more credence to his whole constructed scenario theory. Yet, the vampire was also clearly sapient.

"Well, I am a hunter, I came here to take a key off your hands, and my master is myself," he answered.

"A hunter!? A vampire hunter has entered my chambers!? That isn't pos-"

“No, no, just a regular hunter. I hunt pretty much everything; I don’t discriminate. Actually, in this scenario, calling me a vampire hunter isn’t entirely inaccurate? Though I guess that depends on you. The key, hand it over,” Jake said with a shrug.

The vampire looked at Jake for a moment, still standing atop his coffin. “How dare mere livestock demand anything of a noble!? I-“

“Hey, I’m an Earl! Pretty sure Earl is over Count in the rankings. Or maybe they’re equal? Not sure, to be honest,” Jake again shrugged, thoroughly enjoying just fucking with the Count. He had a solid feeling the Count wouldn’t give him any valuable info at all, and in the end, it would result in a fight. Better get the show on the road... after he had his fun.

“Are you mocking me?” the Count said, the intensity of his glowing eyes increasing.

“Not necessarily. Tell me, why didn’t you guys and gals ever use the stuff left by that creator? You had the keys, right? Maybe with the stuff he got from that True Ancestor Sanguine, you could have made it out of here or traded it with a faction for protection or something. On a side note, who was Sanguine? I assume he is dead.”

“YOU DARE SPEAK THE NAME OF THE TRUE ANCESTOR IN VAIN!?” the Count of Blood yelled, as the entire room shook, and Jake sighed as he took out his bow. “TO BECOME MY FIRST MEAL UPON AWAKENING IS AN HONOR!”

Without any delay, the vampire waved his hand as a black sword appeared in it. His clothes were replaced with a suit of chainmail armor, and a helmet covered the Count’s head, except for an opening where the mouth was and two eye-holes.

Jake, in return, summoned a few dozen stable arcane arrows in his hand instantly and tossed them in the quiver on his back along with the contents of a bottle of uncommon-rarity Necrotic Poison. One thing he had learned was that despite being vampires, they didn't really have anything to do with the undead. Quite the opposite, actually, as they seemed full of vitality.

He nocked an arrow, but he wasn't the one to make the first move.

The Count suddenly exploded into red mist, and a fraction of a second later appeared beside Jake with yet another poof of mist. Jake had to think fast and quickly took a step forward as he used One Step Mile just in time to avoid the sword slash.

Fast

.

Jake turned on a dime as he fired the arrow after the vampire. The Count dodged the hastily fired arrow as he turned into mist again and pressed the attack. Seeing it coming this time, Jake had already jumped away, and this time had far more time to take aim.

While flying back, he shot it and froze the Count with Gaze of the Apex Hunter. Jake felt the strain from doing so and noted that the Count had quite the resistance. Still... he had faced worse, and the Count failed to move in time as he was hit in the chest by an arrow.

The vampire recoiled but swiftly ripped the arrow out and turned to mist again. Sadly for it... his poison was in his system, and even if he became incorporeal, he was still affected. But... Jake did notice one thing through his Sense of the Malefic Viper.

Innate resistance? he asked himself as he tried to create some more distance. He was lucky that the Count's chamber was freaking massive, easily over a hundred meters from one end to the other. Still, a bit confined, but manageable.

Anyway, the vampire had *something* that made his poison less effective. He felt the toxic energies quickly be broken down and eliminated, and what was in the Count's system didn't do the expected damage. It was like he had some kind of skill similar to Jake's Palate of the Malefic Viper.

"Fighting is meaningless. You are merely livestock, accept your fate," the Count said as he stopped up. His body began glowing redder than before, and he opened his hands wide as the blade disappeared.

"Grasping Claws of the Blood Feast."

The red aura around the vampire behind shifting and changing as it intensified many times and became almost tangible, as the red light soon took the shape of four red arms ending in sharp claws hands. Jake saw all this happen, but that didn't mean he wasted his time.

Energy burned around him as he stood there with the string pulled back and arcane energy revolving around him.

When the four claws began flying towards him, he released the string to a mighty explosion of arcane energy. The four arms headed for him moved to defend, and while they managed to drain some of the shot's power, they failed to stop it.

All four arms lost their shape as they exploded, and the Arcane Powershot flew for the vampire. He didn't even dodge but instead held out a hand to block it as the red aura around him moved to form a shield. The more Jake looked at the red aura, the more it looked like a red liquid.

A red liquid that couldn't stop his blow either, as the Arcane Powershot obliterated the arm of the Count, sending him flying back into the wall at the far end of the hall. Jake followed up with a quickly fired Splitting Arrow of the five-arrow-explosions variant.

The Count sneered as the four arms rapidly reformed and, together with the rest of the aura, managed to block the explosions.

"Fool, do you truly believe that mere livestock can stand against a Count of the vampiric race!?" the vampire yelled as he flew towards Jake, the red aura around him growing even more intense.

I fucking hope those lines are due to system-fuckery... Jake thought as he fired another barrage of explosive arrows, burning away at the aura.

Well, at least he had taken an arm... or so he thought.

Jake saw flesh slowly form in real-time as a new arm grew out, giving him bad Deepdweller flashbacks. Except he soon noticed this was an active skill and not passive. At least not all of it was passive as Jake saw the aura be more focused around the growing arm.

Either way, the vampire was damn durable, and Jake knew he was in for the long haul.

A long haul... filled with horrible boss dialogue.