

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 291: Treasure Hunt: Annoying Boss Fight

The vampire Count was truly a peculiar creature. He moved and acted like a fully intelligent and relatively competent fighter. It nearly fooled Jake into believing that he was fighting a smart enemy and not an absolute moron. However, the illusion was dispelled every time the Count opened his mouth.

"This is the part where you fall down and bleed to death!" the vampire yelled as he fired out a crimson wave of energy. Jake dodged it easily, taking far more mental damage than physical from the exchange. The red glowing aura was still there, with the four clawed hands constantly trying to get hold of him. All in all, Jake would call the current attack pattern of the vampire more annoying than dangerous.

And yes, he would call the way the vampire attacked an attack pattern, as he could easily predict the next moves. He didn't even need his sphere or Bloodline.

Teleport, Jake stepped away as he dodged the blade that appeared from the red mist as the Count of Blood teleported to attack him.

Claws. The four clawed hands chased after Jake's fleeing figure as he nocked and fired another barrage of explosive arcane arrows, burning away at the aura but failing to actually injure the vampire. It did stop the attack, though.

Ranged blade waves of energy. In response to being pushed back, the vampire sent out more crimson waves of blood that would for sure tear up the nice room. The fight had been going for a few minutes now, and Jake had switched his tactic a little bit by incorporating an important element: stealing shit.

Jake leaped back and touched two very comfortable-looking chairs, making them disappear into his inventory just before the sword waves came. To save all the furniture was impossible, but he would do his best to take what looked the nicest.

His next target was a bookshelf filled with old tomes as he summoned bolts of arcane mana to blow up the grasping claws. This bought him enough time to make a hastily charged Arcane Powershot. The aura around the vampire was resilient but not resilient enough to block even his fastest-charged Arcane Powershot using a stable arcane arrow.

Once more, the vampire was blasted back, an arrow embedded in his shoulder seeping out poison. Said vampire ripped it out and chased after Jake. It was predictable to the level of boredom, but at least it bought Jake enough time to swoop up the bookshelf and even a nice dining table and accompanying chairs.

He didn't bother with the paintings, though. Too gaudy even for his taste, and all of them depicted the damn Count of Blood in different obnoxious poses anyway. Most of them were him leaning against the sword, trying to look cool. Some would perhaps argue he did... but Jake wasn't one of those people, though he was somewhat biased.

That is when the Count once more used his most powerful ability.

"I shall paint the carpet red with your blood!" the vampire boss yelled, making Jake cringe back.

"The carpet is already fucking red, you absolute moron!" Jake yelled back.

Balancing his desire just to kill the Count and actually looting stuff in the chamber before it all got destroyed by their fighting was a difficult challenge. Sadly, Pride of the Malefic Viper's defense against mental attacks didn't work against the bullshit spewed by the Count.

"Then I shall deepen it as I slit you open like the livestock you are!" the Count rebutted, making Jake groan. *Don't entertain his stupidity... just clean out his room and finish him off... don't let him get to you...*

Before today, Jake had fought only one being that was higher level than the Count. The Heartwarden in the Undergrowth dungeon had been 162, seven levels above this vampire. If Jake were honest, he would say they were about even. Both were a bit strong... but not truly powerful for their level. The Altmar Census Golem was level 150 only, but it was far stronger despite its lower level compared to both the Heartwarden and this Count of Blood. Of course, one had to remember this was from Jake's perspective. Match-ups mattered a lot too.

Considering how much stronger Jake was now than when he fought the Census Golem, his victory against the Count of Blood was pretty much assured. This was why he had the leeway just to dodge attacks and take potshots while looting everything of value he could.

He had already tried to take the coffin, but that was clearly bound to the Count in some way, so that would have to wait. Besides that, there was only furniture and other

knickknacks like chandeliers, candle holders, plates of different metals, a statue here and there, and even a few nice-looking blades that were more for show than combat.

Ten minutes later, Jake felt like he couldn't find anything more to perfectly legally acquire, as all the valuables that caught his eye were already nicely tucked away in the Hunter Mark storage. With all that settled, it was time to actually finish the battle. The current standstill only continued because, to be honest, Jake hadn't dealt any significant damage to the vampire but had instead just slowly been emptying out his opponent's resources.

Jake dodged a final blow as he cracked his neck. *Time to get serious.*

The carpet below him was ripped up as his body exploded with power upon activating Limit Break at 10%. Energy swirled around him even further as he infused his presence with mana. In a split second, the entire mood of the fight changed.

He stepped back with One Step Mile, appearing on a platform in mid-air. The vampire followed as it appeared to his side, but Jake was ready with an extended palm.

BOOM!

His hand exploded with arcane mana as he sent out a shockwave to push the still only half-appeared vampire away. Before even seeing if he had hit – he knew he would – Jake drew his bow and fired off a quick Arcane Powershot.

The vampire that was already flying backward was hit square in the chest and was blasted back even more, with a large gaping hole blasted through his mid-section. When the Count hit the wall, five explosive arcane arrows also struck, exploding a large section of the chamber.

All throughout, Jake focused his presence on suppressing the Count and possibly make the vampire feel a sense of despair at the obvious difference in power. Instead, he got...

"Foolish human, to force me to go this far is an honor!" the Count of Blood said as he dodged an arrow by teleporting, appearing atop the silver coffin he had woken up from. "Now behold! The true power of a superior being!"

Jake had never seen a more obvious transition to phase two of a boss fight.

The entire silver coffin began glowing as deep red as runes covered it. Like a current of blood, each of them spat out energy that entered the vampire, and the Count himself waved his hand as a bottle that looked a lot like a health potion appeared.

His opponent gulped it down, and Jake saw the entire body of the vampire bulk up as the Count's entire body began changing. He grew nearly half a meter, all his hair fell out, and his clothes tore as two leathery white wings sprung on his back along with his muscles growing and becoming far more pronounced. A more powerful aura than before spread throughout the room, and Jake also saw the extended aura retract back into the body of the Count.

The sword was now gone, and instead, both hands had grown in size and had large beastly claws that Jake could see and feel excreted some kind of venom. The head looked almost to have been cut in two as a slit went up between his eyes. A slit that Jake soon came to

learn was its damn mouth as the entire front of the face split open to reveal several rows of teeth.

"To lay eyes upon the true form of a Balnar Vampire... you can now die with dignity!"

Sadly, even with a fucked up mouth, the Count could still talk. It was now clear mental attacks would have no effect on the moronic vampire, so he would just have to finish him the old-fashioned way.

Jake fired another barrage of arrows, waiting to see what tricks the Count now had.

The Count saw the attack and swiftly dodged to the side with a flap of his wings before beginning to charge him. Jake swiftly adjusted and fired another arrow. The Count tried to dodge again, but Jake used Gaze as it penetrated his chest.

It failed to slow down the now roided up vampire that just continued his assault. He swung his claws while flying, sending out waves of red energy. Jake repeated his tactic of dodging around the room with One Step Mile to great success as he avoided the charge.

He turned and fired a Splitting Arrow with stable arrows. The vampire once more tried to dodge and again found himself frozen as he got hit by all five. This caused him to fall to the ground as he crashed down and tore up the carpet. The Count quickly got back up with an odd groaning noise and didn't simply charge this time.

"I tire of your running... **Chains of the Underworld!**"

For the first time in the battle, Jake was truly taken by surprise. Without even getting any chance to dodge, he suddenly felt himself be weighed down, and he felt like heavy chains were attached to his body. There was nothing visible, but when Jake focused on the mana in the room, he could detect the incorporeal chains now trapping him

"Escape is impossible!" the vampire yelled as he flew over. Jake tried to use One Step Mile but found it impossible. He could still move but slower than before. He began charging up a disruptive wave of arcane mana, but it was obvious it wouldn't be ready in time for the vampire's attack.

Fine.

Jake deposited his bow in his inventory and took out his two other weapons, also quickly splurting some of his blood on them. The Nanoblade appeared in his left hand and the Scimitar of Cursed Hunger in the right one.

Have it your way.

If the Count wanted a good old melee squabble, Jake was down. Raising his blade, he crashed with the claws of the vampire and found himself slightly outmatched strength-wise. But when it came to speed...

The Nanoblade swept up and left a long thin cut across the chest of the vampire as the Count barely even tried to defend himself. In turn, the vampire clawed at Jake's shoulder, but he moved in closer to dodge the blow as his disruptive mana wave was ready.

His entire body exploded with arcane mana, blowing back the Count of Blood and leaving light wounds on his chest. Jake pressed his advantage and moved in to leave a few more shallow cuts before being forced to block again and was knocked back.

He landed on his feet and had to instantly block again as the vampire let out a loud shrill shriek. For a fraction of a second, his entire body tensed up, and he failed to block as he was clawed across his left shoulder, sending blood flying into the air.

The shriek wasn't some mental attack but pure sound. Jake smirked as he didn't even react to his wound but returned the damage in kind as he cut the vampire. The two of them continued exchanging blows, Jake landing ten for every wound he took.

Perhaps the Count believed its venom would do the work, but sadly for him, Jake barely noticed it. The toxins simply weren't potent enough to overcome the legendary-rarity Palate of the Malefic Viper. Meanwhile, Jake kept inflicting the Count with poison, and clearly, vampiric resistance didn't beat out viperic resistance. Bad puns aside, the vampire was clearly slowly losing, and they both knew it.

In an act of desperation, the Count shrieked again, and his claw began glowing red as he tried to land a possibly lethal blow. Jake responded by freezing the large monster with Gaze simultaneously, completely ruining his opponent's momentum. Seeing his chance, Jake kicked the Count hard in the chest the moment he could move again, all the while releasing an arcane explosion to blast the Count away.

Both his blades disappeared the same moment he did this, and he drew his bow and fired another fast Arcane Powershot at the transformed vampire. The huge winged bulky monster didn't even need to be frozen this time but was forced to block without Jake using Gaze.

Jake shot again, sending out a wave of explosive arcane arrows. He rapid-fired after the vampire as he was forced back, the chamber now more or less completely destroyed from their fighting as explosions repeatedly blasted apart the environment.

His Mark of the Avaricious Hunter made him aware of where the Count was, and he had to admit, the charge had gotten big by now. Big enough for him to trigger it.

The entire chamber flashed up as Jake drew his bow to continue his attack. The vampire wasn't dead... but he sure wasn't feeling good either. Jake placed another Mark on his foe as he fired another arrow, aiming to finish off the damn thing already.

"I... ENOUGH!"

Jake heard the voice echo through the hall as a giant wave of red energy crashed towards him like a tsunami of blood. He put away his bow and held up a hand to summon a barrier of arcane energy to block it before-

With wide eyes, he stared as the Count of Blood didn't fly to attack him but instead zoomed past him close to the wall. The vampire wasn't headed for Jake or even the coffin, but instead somewhere entire else:

The exit.

That's right, the damn monster was running away.

Jason scoured the room as he checked for anything hidden in what he and his party guessed had once been a meeting hall or something.

"Found anything?" he yelled over to his party member at the other side of the hall.

"Got a carving knife or something; it's uncommon-rarity, so not bad," the warrior yelled back.

"I think that's all we're gonna find here. Let's regroup with the others," a third party member chimed in.

They were a party not affiliated with any large faction but had joined as free agents. They had talked about joining a city or faction simply due to the conveniences it offered, but so far, they hadn't found a place to settle down.

Half an hour earlier, they met a group from Saya and the Noboru clan who were heading out of the tower in a hurry but still found time to help Jason and his friends. Unfortunately, they didn't have a healer, so it was more than welcome when the other party's healer came and offered to top them all up. Maybe they should head to Saya after the Treasure Hunt? He liked that idea.

Jason and his two comrades left the hall and returned to the center, making sure to avoid the Blackguards. Those were nasty, and they had already lost a party member to one.

"Yo, any trouble?" their party leader, an ice mage, asked once they met up at the balcony, overlooking the huge atrium with the top and bottom both visible.

"Nah, this area seems pretty clean already; I think we should move on up a few floors," Jason answered with a shrug.

"Hmm, I guess you're right, we shou-

SWOOSH!

Jason barely had time to react as a figure swooped down and crashed through the balcony. He swiftly turned his head and saw a large hulking winged figure kneeling down over his party leader. Jason steeled himself as he drew his sword, and the warrior to his side was already charging the creature. He himself was a bit more reserved and used Identify first instead.

The creature got up, and Jason saw his party leader... or what was left of him. A dried-up husk remained as the creature turned around, a large open maw where a face should be. The warrior he was with swung his sword, and Jason saw it be embedded barely a centimeter into the thick chest muscles of the monster as it didn't even attempt to block. Its body was already covered in wounds all over for some reason, but Jason saw them all slowly begin healing.

With a single swipe, the warrior was smashed away by a huge claw. Jason stood wide-eyed as he turned to run. He had barely taken a step as he felt a shadow looming over

him, and the final thing he saw was the result of his Identify as the maw of teeth closed around his head.

[Count of Blood - ???]

Chapter 292: Treasure Hunt: Count Down for the Count

Fucking shitty bullshit boss, Jake thought as he chased after the damn vampire Count. It had been barely a second ahead of him, but that second meant that when he reached the entrance to the trap room, the damn barrier was back, blocking his way. It had a slight red glow now, and there was no illusionary barrier trying to conceal it either... in other words, it was just there to slow him down.

Jake fired explosive arrows to blow it up, and while that process only took about ten seconds... ten seconds could be a lot. He rushed through the broken barrier and down the hall as he made it to the atrium. While he couldn't see the Count, he could still pinpoint the direction of his foe with Mark and feel the poison running through the vampire's body.

But... he could also feel the poison weakening significantly by the second. It was like the vampire was just chugging down healing potions or something as his body kept getting infused with vital energy again and again.

Rushing even more than before, Jake soared down past the countless terraces towards his target, both blades at the ready as he just wanted to stop the Count from doing whatever he was doing to heal himself as fast as possible, and he didn't have a line of sight to shoot an arrow.

He saw what the Count was doing just a few moments later as the scene entered his sphere. Five dead dried-up husks that Jake barely recognized as humans were on the floor, a sixth person was in the grasp of the Count being rapidly drained, and a seventh person was lying on the floor with both legs crushed under the vampire's feet. Likely the next meal.

Luckily, that would never come to pass.

Jake crashed in from the side and swung his scimitar that was now surrounded by a mix of arcane and dark mana. The guy the Count was holding was already dead, but the woman under his feet was still alive and even struggling to get free.

The Count tossed the nearly fully drained corpse away and moved to block Jake's blow. The blade extended and cut across the room, even cutting the flying corpse in two just before it struck the vampire. His opponent was blasted away with two nasty cuts on his palms from Descending Dark Arcane Fang, the wounds infected with the dark and arcane mana.

Jake quickly checked the woman with the crushed legs and tossed her a healing potion before he charged the vampire again. She looked confused but still managed to catch the potion by instinct – Jake already gone before she managed to open her mouth and say anything.

To say that he was pissed was an understatement. While it was doubtful Jake could have stopped the Count from running away; he was still mad that other people had to get involved in their fight. He was equally mad at the Count for running away like that. Was it a good tactic by the vampire to go and consume the life energy of others to revitalize himself? Sure was.

It didn't make Jake any less mad, though.

He pushed Limit Break even further as it jumped to 20%, and his aura intensified. His presence was infused with even more power as four arcane bolts condensed around him during his charge. The vampire got up from being blasted away and yelled loudly.

"Mere livestock dare interrupt my meal! I shall-"

"Just shut the fuck up," Jake answered as he pressed the attack. The four arcane bolts were fired first, making the vampire dodge to the side. Jake responded by nudging them to follow the hulking monster using his presence-empowered mana control. At the same time, he reached melee range.

With the first swing, he broke his opponent's guard, and with the second, he left a deep cut. This was also the time the four bolts reached them, and the Count was struck in the side, leaving Jake another great opening as he stabbed the vampire through the chest with the long Nanoblade.

"I SHALL NOT FALL!"

Jake was pushed back by another red wave of energy, but this time he didn't even bother using an arcane barrier as he knew this attack wasn't meant to damage but only force him back. His scales were good enough.

The Count of Blood didn't attack Jake but flew past him again towards the woman on the floor that had just consumed a health potion.

Oh no, you fucking don't.

Just as the vampire was about to grab hold of the woman, he himself was taken hold of as Jake used One Step Mile into the air, and with a flap of his wings, dragged the vampire out over the balcony and into the open space of the atrium.

Jake held one of the Count's wings with his right hand, and using the left, he cleaved down at the wing's base.

The Count shrieked as Jake cut off the entire wing and, with a spinning kick, sent the vampire flying downwards. He had also seen that the bottom of the tower was cleared of any activity as people who had entered to explore had begun moving up the many floors... and he really wanted to keep the damn bloodsucker away from anyone else right now. Other people were just walking health potions for the vampire.

Jake took out his bow and fired off a quick Arcane Powershot. The vampire failed to stabilize himself properly and was hit by the arrow and sent crashing down into the ground. Jake began charging his Arcane Powershot right away as power began swirling around him.

Before this, the fight had happened in the confined space of the Count's chambers. No one had been aware that someone had already rushed to the top of one of the towers,

somehow obtained a Rune of Blood and unlocked a boss in this short time, and was now fighting it. No one before now.

Only a few dozen seconds had passed since the Count entered the atrium and even less since Jake's arrival, yet the balconies were fast being filled by humans. The fight had sent mana and shockwaves echoing through the tower, making anyone not deep within a room aware of the battle taking place.

Under usual circumstances, Jake wouldn't be a fan of so many people staring at him, and he was even less so now. All of them were just prey for the vampire. This meant Jake would have to finish off the boss before he got a chance to feed.

The Count below got up from the ground, a nasty wound on his chest. Jake stared down at it as his Arcane Powershot charged. His opponent had been hit by this specific attack of his many times and was prepared to dodge.

Prepared being the keyword here, as it still stood in the middle, getting ready to dodge. Jake needed to stop it, but Gaze wouldn't have enough duration... so he decided to take a card out of the Count's playbook.

His presence intensified as he prepared to land a mental attack. He opened his mouth and spoke in a taunting voice as he infused it with his will. Even a bit of his heretic side joined in.

"That True Ancestor Sanguine was a coward and a weakling. Worse than livestock. Just. Like. You."

The words echoed through the entire atrium as the Count froze. He looked at Jake for a moment, his red vampiric eyes wide as suddenly the slits on both narrowed and began glowing an even deeper red color. Jake had found his opening, and he felt his presence infused by Pride of the Malefic Viper strike right at the Count's mind as he had hit where it hurt.

In response, the Count didn't even yell back. He didn't make a snide remark or cringy comment. He just shrieked as the mouth opened wide. A new wing instantly sprung out, fully regenerated, and he flew up towards Jake, now filled with pure rage.

So filled with rage, he didn't dodge when Jake released the arrow but instead refused to back down as the Count swung his claws and sent out an absolutely massive wave of blood energy. It was powerful for sure, likely the strongest blow the vampire had made this entire fight... but compared to a nearly fully charged Arcane Powershot?

The wave of blood was blown apart as the onlookers from the balconies had to take cover from the explosion. The Count of Blood was struck by the stable arcane arrow just after and had a huge hole blasted through his body as he was sent smashing into the ground below, leaving a crater.

Still filled with rage, the vampire tried to get up again but was hit by five explosive arrows.

Jake stared down at the scrambling vampire as he drew the bow once more. This time another kind of arrow emerged. A large one, looking almost like a spear and made of dense, arcane mana. It was the ability of his bow, and has about to scorch the damn vampire into dust.

"I would take cover," Jake warned, infusing his voice with willpower. He felt over a hundred eyes on him, and the warning was to them. He knew the destructive power of this blow, and luckily, there were no people on any of the lower floors.

Power swirled around him and the arrow as he released it and sent it flying straight down towards the vampire, the gemstones on his bow dimming. The Count seemed to have finally come more to his senses and tried to avoid the massive energy-filled arcane arrow.

He failed as Gaze of the Apex Hunter stopped him.

In a last-ditch effort, the vampire sent out a wave of blood-red energy that crashed with the arrow as the entire tower became bathed in pink-purple light. Jake even focused his presence to attempt to control all the arcane energy and nudge it towards spreading out less and focusing more on the center of the explosion.

BOOM!

The ground shook, and Jake heard several yells as barriers and shields sprung up on all the balconies with observers as the people moved to defend themselves.

Arcane energy scorched the entire bottom floor as the destruction wormed its way across the ground, leaving everything destroyed and pulsing with pink-purple cracks of arcane energy. Yet, despite the devastation done by the attack, Jake didn't let up his guard.

He threw a look in the direction of the closest party of humans to the bottom of the atrium and, in concert, the vampire. Jake began flying down and just in time.

A figure flew out of the cloud of dust and debris, headed straight for the unsuspecting party. The Count was bleeding from everywhere as his skin was cracked and broken. One of the wings was once more ripped off, while the other one was filled with holes. Even one of the arms was gone, as the vampire had clearly tried to block. The only pretty much fully intact part was the head.

Due to his preparedness, what the Count encountered in his path wasn't a party of living health potions but a blade covered in arcane mana. The vampire moved to block the blow and ended up with a long gash on his one remaining arm.

The vampire was truly desperate now and went for the only source of vitality nearby:

Jake.

The Count of Blood rushed him and ignored it as Jake stabbed two blades into his chest. A large gaping maw opened up right in front of Jake's face as he ripped out only the Nanoblade and then did three things at once.

First, he triggered the Mark of the Avaricious Arcane Hunter, making the Count light up out of every opening in his body, dealing catastrophic damage to the vampire.

Secondly, he froze him with Gaze of the Apex Hunter, buying him enough time for the next part.

The third move was a horizontal swipe of the arcane-covered blade with both his hands. The head of one of the nine Counts of Blood was sent flying through the air, the mouth still wide open as the red glow in his eyes dimmed until it fully disappeared.

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

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 130 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 130 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

The moment the light fully dimmed, the vampire's entire body turned to dust, leaving only a few items floating in the air. A blade – well, two, counting Jake's scimitar that had been stabbed in the Count's body – a black key and a large red gem.

Without any hesitation, Jake scooped them all up, with the intent of checking them out later. Unfortunately, now wasn't a good time for several reasons – more than a hundred reasons, in fact.

People were staring at him from all around. Most of them with wide eyes, some with abject fear, and others just seemed unsure how they should react. One thing was certain, though... they all looked at him with some level of respect, even if more than a few seemed to hold some doubt. The party that the vampire had been headed for didn't look doubtful, though. They were on a balcony only a hundred meters from where Jake had finished off the vampire and looked at him with clear gratitude.

"What was that thing?" one of the people on another balcony yelled.

"Who are you? Are you a part of the Treasure Hunt?" another chimed in.

"What city are you from?" a third yelled from far above.

"That's Lord Thayne, the leader of Haven," someone answered two of the people asking before.

Jake just closed his eyes briefly. He thought about if he should say something considering he was the center of attention. A part of him felt like he should, and another made him believe it was expected of him to say or do *something*. The thing is... Jake didn't really want to, so he just said a single sentence as he flew upwards, back towards the Count's chamber.

"Take care people, sorry for getting you all involved in my hunt."

Neveah stood shaking on one of the balconies overlooking the atrium. She was surrounded by her party members, all of them still alive and well. Looking to her side, she saw her party member just shake his head.

How fucking stupid had they been when they first came to Haven? They had heard rumors of Lord Thayne, but those were just rumors, after all. Then they met him during the meeting with the City Lord, and he had seemed absolutely terrifying... but afterward, they had talked.

Clearly, the man had used some kind of skill or something to make himself appear more intimidating. This made them unsure if he was truly that powerful or just incredibly good at fronting. Was he just all bark and no bite?

Well, today, they saw the bite, and it was absolutely terrifying. When Neveah saw the Count of Blood for the first time, the only thought in her head was to run. It was an absolute monster, and she saw it tear apart an entire party roughly equally as strong as theirs in a matter of seconds. The only way to survive the wrath of such a being was to get lucky while running the fuck away.

And then... then an even bigger monster had entered the scene. The explosions of that odd energy, the sheer physical strength, and speed, the magic... everything Lord Thayne did was just utterly overwhelming.

So... she asked not only herself but the entire party the same question she kept asking herself. A question likely every single person who had ever doubted the rumors asked themselves right now.

"How fucking stupid were we when we said Haven was weak?"

Because why the hell would you need an army when you had a single individual that could rip one apart?

Chapter 293: Treasure Hunt: Thief!

Jake was in a hurry to get back to the Count's chamber, as he had a bad feeling in his gut. And no, it wasn't from just being the center of attention and feeling like that time when he was a kid and was in a school play, with all the parents staring at him. Instead, this kind of bad feeling was the kind he got when someone was about to steal his shit.

Okay, it was only was like that in retrospect. Because when Jake made it through the trap-room and into the chamber, he saw the state of the room. The silver coffin and altar were gone. He had only been gone for a few minutes to hunt down the Count down, and someone had taken that opportunity to rob him of his rightful loot?

Yeah, that didn't fly with him.

His senses spread in the room as Jake focused on Sense of the Malefic Viper and Hunter's Tracking both. There was no fucking way he was going to let the damn thief get away with it. Jake smelled the air and felt the mana and soon picked up on something.

There were three traces of beings in the chamber. The most powerful were the Count's, then Jake's, and finally one far fainter. No doubt the thief. He tried to sense the mana type used, and it felt faintly familiar... it was... shadow mana?

Jake suddenly remembered someone. He had seen a member of the Court of Shadows steal that Hunter Insignia when someone was forced to teleport out less than an hour ago at the lowest level of the tower. His intuition told him he was right, which gave Jake an excellent starting point.

He knew assassins were good at hiding, but Jake had a secret weapon: an obscene amount of perception.

Focusing on his Hunter's Tracking, Jake felt a faint trace leading out of the chamber. The thief had just run in, took the coffin and altar, and then run out again. Jake knelt down and saw a faint footprint that still had a bit of energy around it and took a good whiff.

I'm coming for you.

He turned and followed the scent and the traces of mana still in the air. Every living thing left faint traces in their wake. Their presences passively soaked the environment, energy was burned and expunged as they moved, and of course, all the good old physiological clues, such as smell, were also left behind.

Of course, there were also ways to hide these trails. Any kind of stealth skill made one give off fewer traces and masked your presence. However, ultimately, this was done through magic, and through magic, one could still uncover these traces. This is to say, it came down to a contest between the tracker and the one being tracked. If the one being

chased was more powerful and had better stealth capabilities than the one tracking them had tracking capabilities, they would escape.

Jake didn't really have exceptional tracking skills. He had his Sense of the Malefic Viper, but that wasn't really a tracking skill. His only real skill was Hunter's Tracking at uncommon-rarity. He didn't have any experience with tracking things before the system either, so he couldn't really track anything without magic.

However, all of this didn't matter when one could just brute force the entire thing with a perception stat so much higher than reasonable at his level and a thief that was simply far too weak in comparison.

Jake ran through the trap room and stopped as he reached the crossroad. He knelt down and sensed his environment once more. *He went straight.*

For several reasons, he was also now confident his target was male. While he couldn't identify the figure he had seen steal the Insignia earlier as either male or female, he was sure it was a man now. Faint traces of a footprint were left on the floor, indicating a man due to their size, and the smell also told him it was more likely to be a male.

Rushing forward, he weaved through the halls, and the further he got from the chamber, the more obvious the traces got. One had to remember it was only a handful of minutes since Jake had killed the Count and the thief even became able to steal the coffin, so the person didn't have that long of a headstart.

Jake eventually reached the atrium again. It quickly became apparent the thief had fled down to a lower floor and hidden, likely among the crowd. This meant it became a bit

harder for Jake to track as the traces became mixed with those of others, but by now, he was confident that he could recognize the thief's presence if he saw them.

He went three floors down by jumping off the balcony and felt the trail continued from there and down another two flights of stairs. The thief had clearly been in a hurry, and detecting the traces was easier than ever.

Storming down, he followed them until he heard people in the distance. Quite a lot of them. Through his sphere, he spotted a room through a few walls with around fifteen people in it. Some of them he recognized as observers of his battle earlier. In fact, he recognized all of them but three.

This crowd was gathered in front of a large magic circle on another gate, and through the gate, Jake spotted what looked like a display room. Or, as the recorded projection earlier had called it, a hidden treasury. Though calling it a hidden treasury was kind of wrong, considering the huge door with glowing runes on it and the magic circle.

He is in that room.

There was no doubt about it. Knowing the target was cornered, Jake just casually walked into the large room with the metal gate in it as the people discussed.

"I think you need to focus more on the leftmost quadrant and open up the mana pathway to there."

“Hm, but won’t that trigger that thing above it?”

“Will it? Hm, what if you...”

Jake listened in as he checked the gate and saw the message with floating magical letters in front of it.

Solve the magic puzzle to open up the treasury and obtain what lies within. But, be warned that failed attempts will have adverse effects.

It was at that moment someone suddenly screamed out in pain as red runes appeared all over her body, burning with a familiar kind of magic: it was a curse.

The ones in the room looked at her but only shook their head. The only ones in distress were her party members who tried to help her, but in the end, the woman triggered her Insignia and disappeared, leaving the large coin floating behind. Someone from her party took it with no one even attempting to steal it. Which was interesting....

Because the thief was standing right behind that party, a young man in a red robe, wielding a staff with a red gem embedded in the head, giving off faint traces of fire-affinity mana, stood there, staring at the gate, not seeming to mind the ruckus from the curse earlier. Everything about him screamed fire mage. Clearly, he had changed his clothes and hidden among the crowd. Or maybe he was genuinely trying to solve the puzzle, just like everyone else, and was there for that, but that didn’t change the fact that he had stolen from someone he shouldn’t have.

Subtlety was often the name of the game, but not right now.

No one had noticed Jake yet as he stood all the way at the back of the room, Expert Stealth active as he hadn't wanted to attract unnecessary attention while tracking down his target. But now that he had found him?

Jake stopped trying to be stealthy but did quite the opposite as he infused his presence with mana.

One also had to remember something else... Jake still had Limit Break active at 20%. He hadn't deactivated yet to avoid the period of weakness and considered how he had killed the Count not long ago, and the stat boost had helped him track his target faster; he was good. Also... honestly... Jake was beginning to have enough resources to keep it active near-permanently as long as he wasn't in combat and used many skills. Shit, if he began lacking stamina, he still had the potion cooldown ready and could chug one.

All this meant that when Jake made himself known, everyone noticed and turned around in shock. Most of them had seen him before and instantly backed away. The ones who hadn't seen him before backed away even more than the others due to the fear of an unknown powerful person.

Jake's eyes were trained on the thief as he used One Step Mile and appeared in the middle of the crowd. Before anyone could react, Jake grasped the guy by his robe and hoisted him up, so his feet no longer touched the ground, and he even made sure to wrap a few strings of arcane mana around the man, as Jake knew he was the slippery sort.

"You stole from me. Hand it back," Jake said, looking into the eyes of the thief.

The thief, appearing to have some balls proclaimed his innocence. “Wha!? You have the wrong person! I’ve never stolen anything in my life!”

The man addressed the next words, not to Jake but to the crowd. “He is trying to rob me! This is just an excuse! I haven’t done a thing, I’m-“

“5...” Jake said, staring into his eyes.

“I told you, I-“

“4...”

Looking more desperate, the thief’s eyes darted around, seemingly looking for some kind of assistance from the crowd. He got none.

Jake did notice, however, that a few from the crowd looked doubtful. It was understandable. No one had any proof, and it was just Jake’s word against the thief’s. The thing is... Jake didn’t need proof. He didn’t need a justification or a rightful cause, and deep down, they all knew it.

“3...”

“This is simply ridiculous! Is this really what the world has turned to? Do we really allow such-“

“2..”

Yeah, his attempt at riling up the crowd hadn’t worked, though Jake did see some people begin to move away. No one went for their weapons. Being a D-grade of Earth this ‘early’ after the integration meant you weren’t a complete idiot without survival instincts.

“How can you just-“

“1...”

As Jake reached the end of his countdown, the thief seemed to realize the game was over. Only two things could happen from there. Jake would either kill him, or the thief would be forced to activate the Insignia and leave the Treasure Hunt. Both were bad options for him, and what did it matter if he had support from the public if he was dead or had lost all his gains.

So, he stopped fucking around. The thief’s eyes changed as he looked at Jake.

“Is a few knick-knacks really worth making an enemy of the Court of Shadows? I was under the assumption we had a good working relationship,” the thief said, his voice no longer the same shrill one from before that sounded full of fear but now confident and self-assured.

“I don’t remember ever giving any of you permission to steal from me,” Jake answered, not taking any of that shit. He also noted the confusion by the crowd they had gathered.

“Oh, come on, is it even stealing? I just got there and took a few things you had missed. Besides, aren’t we practically family? I fought both against and together with the Judge – your brother – and all of this is done under his instructions, so shouldn’t we just leave it at this, Jake?” the man said, not seeming scared in the slightest anymore.

The reason was clear... he was confident Jake wouldn’t do anything to him. And Jake got that. The man was a subordinate of Caleb, Jake’s brother, and the basic assumption that had spread was that Jake was practically a member or at least a close ally. Miranda had briefed Jake on this before and made him aware of this assumption. Their friendly interactions during the World Congress had spread this, and the now widespread knowledge they were brothers had cemented it.

One could argue this assumption was partially correct. Jake didn’t see the Court of Shadows as an enemy organization. But, the thing is, Jake didn’t put that much weight on what organization people came from or belonged to. He wasn’t blind to their existence and influence... but in the end, the individual was the one responsible for their actions, and Jake knew that Caleb was aware of Jake’s point of view.

Because the thing is...

“That’s funny. Caleb never stole from me, and I’m pretty sure our parents told us that was wrong. So as his big brother, let me teach his subordinate some basic fucking courtesy.”

Before anyone could react, Jake tossed the thief across the room and into a wall. The man crashed into it and coughed up blood as he bounced off it. Jake hadn’t thrown him that hard as he knew the guy likely couldn’t handle it.

Thinking this was a chance, the thief tried running, but Jake just took a single step and appeared in front of him. “I didn’t say you could leave.”

Seeing Jake appear, the thief used the good old Shadow Vault of Umbra to try and simply phase through him and away. Actually, Jake was pretty certain it was an upgraded version that allowed him to pass through humans. Anyway, his response?

Jake punched the guy in the face, knocking out a few teeth, with his glove glowing from the arcane mana infused in it. Shadow Vault still had that big flaw of being unable to phase through magical barriers, and nothing was a more rigid barrier than Jake’s arcane mana. Shaking his head, Jake thought about how fragile the thief was, seeing all the blood fly out from the man’s mouth. He had to hold himself back so much to not break him, and it was quite frankly frustrating.

The guy tried to get up again, but Jake got in front of him, and this time the thief didn’t try to run. “Are you really going to do this?” the man groaned as he held his jaw. Jake was pretty sure it was broken, so kudos to the guy for talking so clearly.

“I am. But sure, let’s be nice for my brother’s sake. Hand over everything you got, fuck off to somewhere where I never see you again, and I’ll allow you to stick around for the rest of the Hunt,” Jake answered.

“Or what? Are you gonna kill me? Damage me so much I’m forced to leave? Are you fucking serious that you would cause such a big incident for a few items? This is practically a declaration of war. I looted an empty room, and now you come and claim everything is yours. What’s next? You’re gonna kill everyone here because they’re witnesses? You’re gonna claim that everything they have belongs to you too because you came to this tower first? Is this really how the almighty Progenitor and Lord of Haven acts?” the thief said. Yet Jake didn’t detect much genuine anger in his mouth. No, this guy was a snake, and not the cool beer-drinking kind, but the lying and manipulative asshole kind.

Jake looked at him for a moment before he smiled.

“O.”

Before anyone could react, Jake slashed. Blood spurted as the thief was cut apart at his stomach, and his one hand – the one he was not holding his jaw with – also fell to the ground, cut off at the wrist.

The thief screamed, but Jake slowly raised his sword again above his head. The man looked up at him with wide eyes, for the first time showing genuine fear. The coward activated his Hunter Insignia and disappeared, leaving behind the large floating coin with the loot within.

“What an idiot,” Jake muttered as he took the coin and put it in his inventory, quickly confirming he had indeed been the thief. Well, that, or he had found another suspiciously similar silver altar and coffin.

Jake turned to the observing crowd, all of them looking hesitant. It seemed like the thief's words had gotten to them, and they feared they were his target now. Jake shook his head as he walked over towards them.

"Relax, I'm done taking out the trash, so let's all move on, okay?" he asked casually, before following up with: "Anyway, what is this thing?"

He looked up at the magic puzzle-thing on the door, finding that far more interesting now that the thief-business had been settled.

Chapter 294: Treasure Hunt: Judging Stuff

Jake stared up at the puzzle door, no one answering his inquiry right away. He could get why it could be a bit unsettling to chat with the guy who had nearly just killed someone, but in Jake's defense, the guy hadn't died. The lack of a notification confirmed that, and Jake was pretty sure people were healed when exiting.

"Uhm, it's a magic puzzle of sorts," some young man finally answered. He looked rather unassuming, and while Jake had seen him before as one of the observers, he wasn't exactly someone Jake had taken special notice of. Just another level 105 in the crowd.

"Hm, I see," Jake said, already inspecting the magic circle himself. Well, that was useless information and exactly what the message written there also said. However, it appeared that no one had really made any progress with the entire thing, so Jake decided that he wasn't in a rush as he went over to the side of the chamber.

People looked towards him, but when they saw that he just summoned a comfortable chair and sat down, they turned back to the magic circle – a few glances were still thrown his way now and then, though. Once Jake was sitting comfortably, he deactivated his Limit Break and slumped down a bit. If push came to shove, he could reactivate it and suffer a worse backlash later if anyone tried to mess with him. It proved to be completely unnecessary as it seemed to only make them relax more when Jake stopped giving off his aura.

Jake decided now was a good time to go through some of his gains before he could tackle the big puzzle gate thingie.

The first items he went through were those he had looted from the Count of Blood, starting with the black sword.

[Count's Vampiric Blade (Rare)] – A blade wielded by a Count of Blood that has been soaked in the blood of countless enemies throughout the ages. Crafted using a special type of steel, the blade can absorb the lifeforce of vitality-based lifeforms to repair itself. The Records left during this time have allowed the blade to evolve and transform even further, allowing it to steal a portion of the lifeforce of anyone injured. This blade was originally crafted in a set of nine using the unique environment of the hidden world and can absorb the weapons of other Counts of Blood to enhance itself. Note this functionality is only available within the Treasure Hunt area and will disappear once the event concludes. Enchantments: Hemoabsorbant Self-Repair. Vampiric Blade.

Requirements: lvl 125+ humanoid race.

Jake read it over a few times and reached one conclusion... it was pretty damn similar to his Scimitar of Cursed Hunger. Scarily so. Had Jake accidentally transmuted the cursed sword to make a vampire sword? Or were swords with vampiric abilities just not that rare? Thinking about it, it was a pretty basic effect to steal vital energy on each hit.

It was the kind of passive ability Jake didn't really notice while fighting. It was just there and nice to have, much like many of his other passive effects. Now, the sword was good, but Jake didn't really feel like using it. He liked the Nanoblade due to its longer length and insane sharpness, and he felt like the scimitar was still better as a vampiric sword. However, that wouldn't necessarily last forever.

The ability to upgrade the sword by absorbing the other weapons was super interesting and, once again, pretty game-like. It did mean that Jake would have to hunt down all nine Counts himself or possibly trade with someone to get all the weapons. Well... he would have to do those things anyway due to the other item he had gained: the infamous key.

[Key of Blood (Unique)] – One of nine keys held by the Counts of Blood within the Treasure Hunt area. When combined with the eight others, this key will grant you the potential to earn bonus rewards. Holding any of the keys, even if unused, will contribute greatly to your final reward.

While the sword being able to absorb other weapons was 'pretty game-like,' having a set of nine keys one had to collect to open some secret place was super-gamelike. Or maybe movie-like? A plot about collecting MacGuffins was a prevalent trope, after all. Not that Jake was particularly complaining about it, he liked collecting stuff and unlocking bonus events.

Additionally, even if he failed to get all nine keys, he would still get bonus rewards. What this bonus reward entailed, Jake didn't know, as he felt like all the loot he gathered was enough rewards in itself.

Moving on, he got to the red crystal the Count had transformed into. It turned out to not be a crystal at all, but a heart.

[Starved Balnar Vampire Heart (Epic)] – The heart of a severely starved Balnar Vampire. This type of vampire is a rare variant with high physical strength and incredible durability. The rarity has been downgraded due to the starved state of the vampire the heart has been claimed from. Has many alchemical uses.

Jake frowned as he read the description. Starved vampire? What? To him, the Count hadn't seemed in any way starved or weakened. Wouldn't the boss that loved exposition begin talking about how "even in my weakened state, I am still superior" or something like that?

In retrospect, though, it did seem to make sense. The vampire had been sleeping for a long-ass time, and while Jake wasn't a vampire expert, he could see how one that hadn't fed for many years could be weakened. Also... it was true the Count wasn't exactly a top-tier foe in Jake's mind. It was inferior to the Altmar Census Golem but superior to something like the Monkey Prima. Now, this did make him consider how powerful a non-starved Balnar Vampire would be, especially with how the system recognized them as a rare variant.

Either way, figuring out what to do with it was for later. Chances are he would learn more about it as the Treasure Hunt progressed, and if he didn't, he could just research it once outside in the real world.

Now that he was done with the loot gained from the Count of Blood, he moved on to what had been in the Count's chamber. It was the items the thief had stolen, and upon checking them out... he suddenly understood the illogical actions of the thief a bit better.

The altar and the coffin were two separate items, both of the ancient-rarity.

[Yalsten Altar of the Damned (Ancient)] – An altar created by an extremely skilled crafter from the long-perished world of Yalsten, using a single unbroken piece of an unknown metal. The metal of the altar itself makes it near-indestructible for any being below A-grade. This altar has absorbed vast amounts of blood to empower it further, as countless sacrifices have been made upon it. It has been enchanted further to increase the effectiveness of all rituals made using it as a catalyst. The effect of all sacrificial rituals increased further. Faint Records and echoes of old rituals remain imprinted upon the altar, making it passively infuse anyone lying upon it with the life energy of those once sacrificed upon it.

Requirements: N/A

Jake wasn't certain if he really had any uses for this altar, but he was damn certain Villy was going to make a joke about it if he knew about it. However, one had to remember that even if Jake didn't know what to use it for, its value was unquestionable, and it would surely count towards giving a good final reward.

Also, after the Treasure Hunt, there would be a big auction, and there was sure to be someone in attendance who could use it. Shit, couldn't Miranda use it? She was a witch and made rituals and stuff.

With the altar was also the accompanying coffin that Jake checked over next.

[Yalsten Coffin of Eternal Slumber (Ancient)] – A coffin created by an extremely skilled crafter from the long-perished world of Yalsten from an unknown metal that has been left untouched by the ages, slowly soaking in the Records of history and the concept of time. The metal of the coffin itself makes it near-indestructible for any being below A-grade. The runes on the coffin allow any who slumber within to be preserved longer, as time is distorted while inside the coffin. Once inside, enter a special type of meditation that will keep all resources fully replenished and allow you to enter deep sleep, making time pass unnoticed while lessening aging significantly. All effects are amplified for vampires, especially when used with Vampiric Slumber.

Requirements: N/A

This one was, in Jake's opinion, a fair bit more interesting. First of all, it was a coffin in a vampire tower, so it was already great thematically, and he also saw how well it worked with the altar. The altar would constantly infuse the vampire with vital energy as he or she slept in the coffin placed atop the altar.

The entire time magic part was also interesting, though not that relevant to Jake at all, as he didn't have any plans to enter some eternal slumber anytime soon. These two items were probably the worst ancient-rarity items Jake had ever obtained. At least for him. Oh well, if he ever made a vampire friend, he had some cool stuff for them, and if not, he could always have someone melt all the stuff down and make something else. Because no, Jake was not going to sleep in the coffin. Ever. Fuck that.

Being done fully inspecting the two ancient-rarity items, Jake once more considered how the thief's actions made a lot more sense. He had likely banked on Jake not knowing the true value of the items and attempted to make Jake not think getting rid of the thief was worth the potential issues it could cause.

It was stupid to think the Court of Shadows would actually make an enemy out of Jake just because of one idiotic thief, but it did make sense he could think Jake would hesitate. The thief knew nothing about Jake. He had only seen Jake in this tower in person, and what had he done? He had fought a monster terrorizing others, helped many people, and even given out a healing potion to the woman with the stomped legs. This made Jake consider if the thief had somehow concluded that Jake was some kind of good guy with a hero complex who wouldn't just kill someone for a 'petty crime.'

Again, in some ways, this was a sound conclusion. Capital punishment for thievery wasn't exactly commonplace, so maybe the stupid thief had hoped for Jake just to file an official complaint and start a diplomatic conflict or something. The thing is, Jake wasn't big on politics, and hey, he had handled the problem just fine. What was the thief going to do? Go to Caleb and say: "Hey, so I tried to rob your big brother, the leader of another faction, and he got mad and made me leave the Treasure Hunt. Can we please declare war or something? A strongly worded letter at least?"

Yeah, no.

Jake sat back in the chair he was in and relaxed. People had turned away from him again after he had just been sitting there and going through the items, slowly having the period of weakness disappear. Still not in peak condition, Jake looked up towards the magic circle puzzle as he began inspecting it more closely. *Seems interesting.*

"Four signals have disappeared within the last half an hour," the man said as he kept track of hundreds of floating wisps all around him.

He was standing within a cleared house in the central Mistless Plains, hidden by enchantments and a barrier.

“Could be better, could be worse,” Caleb shrugged. “Any particularly noteworthy disappearances?”

“Hm, JN, the Shadow Thief who went towards one of the towers disappeared less than fifteen minutes after he reported back about getting a big score. Apparently, someone managed to fight quite the powerful monster and left the boss room unattended for him to loot,” the Solicitor said, as he kept control of his ritual.

Solicitor was a unique role of the Court of Shadows dealing with getting jobs, but also assigning them. More often than not, they took the role of handler for many assassins too and kept track of their successes, failures, and potential deaths. While the Judge was the highest-ranking member in any individual Court, the Solicitors handled the day-to-day leadership.

“JN? That kleptomaniac? He probably got found out and refused to hand over what he stole. I am a bit interested in who was able to catch him; he was quite the sneaky one if I recall correctly,” Caleb said with a wondering tone.

“I am not certain... let me check if there have been any other reports,” the Solicitor answered as he began going through the wisps. Each of them corresponded to a person, and each of them was linked to their respective member of the Court. They would send information through them, though it was only simple messages.

Additionally, only the Solicitor could understand these messages. The number of people who could snoop in on such long-range communication wasn't small, after all, so it was all encrypted by the individual Solicitor who received it.

Caleb reentered meditation as he worked to steady the storm brewing within him. The reason why he wasn't out and about with all the others was simple... they needed protection at their main headquarters. Caleb was fully aware he wasn't an outstanding fighter in longer battles, but in short bursts, he was undoubtedly one of the strongest people on the planet. Quite fitting for an assassin, though Caleb didn't exactly view himself as one.

He had to admit, he found himself in a bit of an odd position. Caleb wasn't comfortable being some cold-hearted assassin killing people for money, yet he now found himself as the leader of an organization doing exactly that. So far, he hadn't needed to do many things that compromised his own moral compass, but he constantly found himself challenged. It was lucky that 'killing' in the Treasure Hunt didn't necessarily mean to actually kill someone. One just had to make them leave, and that was enough. Heck, killing people during the Hunt was extremely difficult, as unless killed instantly, one could exit with a simple mental command.

It was a bit lucky that as the Judge, he wasn't generally expected actually to be an assassin himself and go around killing people. And from the few conversations he had with both Umbra and a few higher-ranking individuals from the Court, it was actually preferable the Judge had some kind of moral compass and wasn't just a mindless killer. Mindless killing was neither profitable nor sustainable and would only lead to the Court finding it more difficult to have a presence in the multiverse. The Court preferred to remain in co-existence with the existing establishments and be viewed as a necessary evil. The devil you know and all that.

In the end, this meant Caleb was actually more of a protector and guide to the Court. Someone who would decide what to do and make the important decisions based on his own judgment. So... yeah, a Judge. That was also why he was remaining behind right now. He was there in case the Solicitor needed to ask for feedback on anything and, of course, as a protector.

There was also the fact that choosing to run around to loot things himself quite yet didn't make much sense, as the primary objective of all the Court members was to gather

information for now and only obtain treasures when opportune. Ultimately, they weren't treasure hunters... they didn't need to obtain the treasures themselves.

They just had to take it from those who had before the event ended.

"Uhm, sir?" the Solicitor said, sounding more unsure than Caleb had ever heard him before.

"What's the issue?" Caleb asked, wondering if there was trouble.

"I got information from someone in the same tower as JN... apparently a Count of Blood was slain there... JN looted the boss room and was tracked down by the killer of the Count and was made to leave the Treasure Hunt..."

Caleb sighed as he facepalmed. *What a goddamn idiot.*

"Let me guess; it was Jake?"

"Yeah..."

"Whelp. Shit happens, I guess. Just write off the loss and put a note on JN's file."

“Yes, Judge!” the Solicitor said as he returned to work, relieved at Caleb’s response.

Caleb just shook his head. Jake had always been a quite possessive person... to steal from him and expect to get away with it...

Yeah, he would have to have a nice long talk with that moron JN after the Treasure Hunt.

Chapter 295: Treasure Hunt: Puzzle

This wasn’t Jake’s first time engaging with a magic puzzle, but it was his first time encountering this type. Before returning to Earth, the practice cauldron Villy had given him during his alchemy training session deployed similar methods to this gate’s magic puzzle. However, the cauldron had been focused on alchemy, while this gate was more of a regular and more general mana-puzzle.

Except... you couldn’t really call it a regular puzzle. It was like those weird puzzle games with ropes and rings you could buy as a gift to a friend to piss them off because you knew they sucked at those kinds of things, and that was totally not something Jake had ever done.

This brain puzzle did differentiate itself from even that by one huge thing: you couldn’t test things. One could also compare it to having to do a puzzle, and while you could see all the puzzle pieces, you weren’t allowed to misplace a single piece on the board. Doing that would result in being infected with a curse... in other words, every move had to be accurate from the beginning to the end.

Finally getting a proper understanding of the puzzle, Jake suddenly understood why so little progress had been made. It also had to be mentioned that this wasn't an individual puzzle, but the board was visible to everyone. Therefore, any progress made on the puzzle benefitted everyone present. This had ultimately resulted in no one daring to try and make the next move in case it was a mistake, and they would be punished for it, possibly having to leave.

Now, Jake didn't actually think it would mark the end of the Treasure Hunt for him if he fucked up and got cursed here. He had seen that woman be cursed when he first entered, and while it was potent, it wasn't something he couldn't handle. He didn't want to do it, though, as curses were damn annoying and took so long to get rid of.

Jake observed the circle first from a distance as he furrowed his brows. *They have made a bit of progress*, he concluded. A few basic steps had been taken. About one-twentieth of the puzzle was solved already by the crowd.

The first part did seem relatively simple. Like most puzzles of this kind, it got harder the further you got. At least partly. In some ways, it also got more manageable as you began to understand the logic behind the puzzle and how it all fit together to create a whole.

He had to admit... he liked that things like this puzzle door existed in the Treasure Hunt. He liked that it wasn't all about fighting but also that things like the trap room he had trivialized had been there. It made it all feel less like just another murder fest. Well... it was still a murder fest. Which was good for Jake. Jake was good at murder, after all. But he felt like he was also usually pretty good at puzzles, so he wanted to solve this one.

It scratched that same itch alchemy did. Would Jake possibly be able to obtain more rewards if he decided to just leave and hunt down more foes or scour the rest of the tower

for other hidden treasures? Probably... but now he wanted to solve this puzzle, so he would solve the puzzle.

With all that in mind, Jake got up from his chair as he walked closer to get a better look at the whole puzzle in all its glory. He got a bit of attention, but most were either focused on the puzzle or had gotten used to his presence now. Or maybe they just realized gawking wouldn't lead to anything and ignored him consciously. Either way, Jake was left alone as he got closer and stared deeply at the gate.

What if you direct the mana through... no, false pathway. That way, then? Hm... no, another dead-end. Ah, but if you move it through, wait, no, that would trigger that thing.

Jake ended up closing his eyes as he entered Thoughtful Meditation, the entire gate and magic circle still prominently displayed within his head, courtesy of the Sphere of Perception.

He began going through possibilities in his mind as he cradled his hands and made a miniature version of parts of the puzzle as he experimented. The small construct broke apart time and time again, but it slowly expanded as well.

More and more people began entering the room, and more and more began doing their own small experiments. There were even groups forming. Many also left during this time, primarily those who were less magic focused, likely believing their time was better spent searching the tower for treasures while leaving their party members behind. Hours passed by like this, and soon the large chamber had over a hundred people, nearly all of them mages or people with very mana-focused professions like Jake.

Jake was alone, but a few people did notice his construct and how his was larger and more elaborate than anyone else's. Yet, he wasn't happy as he felt quite a few kinks in this method. He felt like he was missing a piece of the puzzle somewhere, as he had been stuck at the same point for nearly ten minutes.

"I got it! The top-left channel and the center-left channel are entangled based on their identical oscillation when probed," he suddenly heard an excited voice say, cutting through his meditation. Jake frowned, and without thinking, he checked it out and found it to be true as he infused both simultaneously with equal amounts of mana and saw that his construct didn't break apart.

He opened his eyes and saw the one speaking to be a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties with two older men behind her. She had long black hair and two dark eyes looking down at him as he sat in meditation. She didn't look at him in a condescending way but just looked happy she had figured out the magic puzzle thing. Jake looked back through the holes in his mask as he tilted his head and answered.

"Good catch," he replied, as he Identified all three of them. Jake assumed they had also tried to Identify him earlier, but he had kind of begun filtering out the sensation of being Identified as people tried – and failed – to all the time. The two men with her were totally sizing him up, by the way.

[Human – lvl 113]

[Human – lvl 115]

[Human – lvl 116]

The woman was only 113 with the two men behind her higher level, but he didn't for a second doubt she was the strongest person in the group of three. Jake wondered why he hadn't heard of or met her before.

He stared deeply up at her as he also sized her up, neither speaking as she looked down at him. Slowly her smile faded as she broke out of her excitement. She instead took on a pensive look as she seemed to be deep in thought as Jake also wondered who she was.

A few hours earlier, Reika had been exploring the hidden small crypts found spread on the plains as she got a report from one of her two followers who wore a communication bracelet. They weren't truly guardians even if they were a higher level, but more her supports. Needless to say, they were elites of the clan, but neither had gone for the Perfect Evolution. Instead, they had chosen to prioritize some immediate power for the clan over their own personal future growth. It was a decision she disagreed with but could see the necessity of.

"Miss Reika, a group of classers affiliated with the clan have made contact with Lord Thayne after he assisted them within a tower. The tower should not be far from here," the man said respectfully.

"I see," she answered. She had told him to relay any information regarding Lord Thayne. Her great grandfather was still set on having her be the leader of the diplomatic entourage heading for Haven, and she didn't wish to go against the Patriarch, even if she didn't agree.

If she was honest, she didn't like the person so respectfully called Lord Thayne by everyone, but she was also aware of it primarily being because she didn't understand him. The Noboru clan had looked into him and his background to see who he was before the

system, and it was just a whole pile of... nothing. He was no one. A middle-tier office drone who worked in finance. Granted, his grades during university were great, but he hadn't precisely attended a university she would put much stock in. He had also done a bit of archery, but she had at least three family members who were better than he had ever gotten.

Then there was his family. He had no heritage worth mentioning. No close family outside of his parents and brother. No long lineage or famous ancestors... not even a single known noble anywhere in his family tree. There was *nothing* that made him special. And somehow, not only was the Lord of Haven an outstanding individual, but the little brother had become the Judge of the Court of Shadows. Somehow two Lord Thaynes had emerged from nothing. He had been a damn teacher, and while that was a profession she held much respect for, it wasn't exactly one that lends itself to the position he was in now.

To Reika... none of that made sense. They had researched so many other capable individuals. Carmen of Valhal had been an extremely talented if unstable, and violent boxer who had been hardened through incarceration. Eron was a savant-level surgeon with one of the best track records on the planet. The Augur of Sanctdomo came from a long line of successful businessmen and women and had been a young prodigy and genius from birth. His bodyguard was former special forces before he retired to become a private bodyguard. Even the one known as William made sense in that he was a young diagnosed psychopath who just happened to be talented in magic and got lucky with being blessed by a god.

This pattern repeated itself with all they investigated. All of them had been prominent figures, either infamous or famous. One could simply not hide heaven-sent talent like what was required to truly stand out in this new world. There *had to be* traces and evidence. Reika didn't believe in coincidences. So she surmised something did exist that made Lord Thayne special... something that just hadn't been visible in the old world.

To make it even more confusing... this *special* thing also spread to others around him. Matteo of the Court of Shadows, formerly known simply as M, was a top-ranked assassin in the world.. and he had somehow been beaten by the school teacher Caleb Thayne. Even that Casper of the undead faction only seemed to be who he was due to his relation to Jake

Thayne. He had been a tutorial with both the Augur and William... making her sure he was the one common denominator of these odd occurrences. There was something about him, and she wanted to figure out what it was.

But... she wasn't going to upturn her life to do that. She had her own goals and objectives in this Treasure Hunt, and learning more about Lord Thayne was just one of them. Hence why she didn't interrupt their current task.

"We continue and finish off this crypt first. Have someone else return to the tower and see if he is still there, and if not, have them explore it," Reika commanded as she drew her blade and continued down the hallway.

Hours later, they had wrapped things up and were headed up from the crypt again as the man in charge of communication gave an update.

"We have confirmation that Lord Thayne has slain a Count of Blood within the tower and is now working on some kind of magic puzzle to open-"

"Wait, he has slain one of the Counts?" Reika stopped him as she asked. Her great grandfather had sent back information that a Mark of Blood had to be used to gain access to the chamber of a Count, and you needed one such Mark from a Viscount... how the hell had the man managed to slay a Viscount and then a Count within such a short period, and could now just be relaxing and solving a magic puzzle...

Wait, a magic puzzle?

"Yes, he defeated it and-"

"Tell me more about this magic puzzle. Also, we're heading there now," Reika interrupted. Details about how he had slain the Count were just secondhand information, and from what little she had heard of his earlier exploits, it was just a mix of teleportation, bow and arrows, magic, and dual-wielding blades. Explanations were a waste of time, and she was certain she would have to see it herself to comprehend his power.

"It appears to be a complex puzzle to open a hidden treasury. A collaborative project, it appears," the man explained as he continued. "Current attempts seem to have..."

He continued explaining what they knew of the puzzle so far and even went back over some of the happenings regarding Lord Thayne. Apparently, some absolute idiot of a thief had tried to rob him or something. She didn't put much weight on it but instead focused on the information regarding the puzzle.

While she was a competent combatant with her sword, she viewed her true talents as alchemy and magic in general. She had chosen to pick up the blade due to prior experience before the system, but that didn't mean she only used that. Her great grandfather had encouraged her to pursue her own unique path, and so she would.

Entering the tower was simple as there were several entrances at the base of the mountain. Once inside, a member of the Noboru clan stood ready and led her to the puzzle room where she, for the first time, laid eyes upon the so-often talked about Lord Thayne.

She looked at him... and she didn't get it. He just looked weird. He didn't give off any particular presence to her even though people had talked so much about it. Contrarily, he

just looked tired as he sat in meditation with some glowing magic circle in his hands... *huh?*

Reika looked up at the magic circle on the gate and compared it to the version in his hand... *how did he replicate so much of it? He hasn't been here for that long... what?*

Continuing to look at him for the next half an hour, she saw him make fast progress, but suddenly he stopped. She had inadvertently walked closer at this point to get a closer look at his mana construct. She compared it to the version on the wall and frowned. They were completely identical, and he had come so far, yet he was now stumped? What part was it? She could see that he repeatedly attempted to cause a change in a particular pathway. She activated a skill to better see the mana movement and another to analyze it. Getting lucky, she caught the issue and couldn't hold herself back.

"I got it! The top-left channel and the center-left channel are entangled based on their identical oscillation when probed!" Reika splurged out, a huge smile on her face as she figured it out. She only realized afterward she had done it as she inadvertently got the attention of the man – but not before he confirmed her theory to be true.

"Good catch," he answered, looking up at her. She met his eyes by instinct and peered into them.

Reika had been around elites for all of her life. Hardened military men, CEOs of some of the largest companies in the world, generals, and what many would argue was the best humanity had to offer. But compared to the eyes of the man in front of her...

He wasn't like any of them. All of them had an air of superiority - one of assumed influence, status, and confidence that seemed to invite respect. But Lord Thayne.. he

didn't invite respect. He didn't assume power or confidence. He demanded all of those. Not because he was a leader... but because he was powerful. It was a fact, not an assumption.

The only other person she had ever met that made her feel that way was the Patriarch, a man who gave off an aura that made one feel like he could slice you apart at a moment's notice yet could also explain to you the profound secrets of the world.

She didn't know how the man named Jake Thayne had suddenly appeared on Earth out of nowhere. She didn't understand how that could happen. But she wanted to find out. She always loved finding puzzles and understanding things she didn't understand... and something told her the man in front of her was possibly the most interesting and challenging puzzle she had ever encountered.

Chapter 296: Treasure Hunt: Collaborative Project

Jake stared up at the woman as she seemed to be deep in thought. Considering she had helped him, he started up the conversation.

"You have experience with these kinds of puzzles?" he asked her.

She seemed to exit her stupor as she collected her thoughts and answered. "Yes, I have some experience from the tutorial, and through some practice objects I acquired."

"Practice objects?" Jake asked, his eyes lighting up. Had she managed to get something like the practice cauldron Villy had lent him? He still missed that cauldron every single day, but sadly he couldn't bring it back to Earth.

"From the tutorial store, I got an evolving puzzle box to keep practicing magic theory," she explained courteously if still a bit tensely.

Why the fuck did I not think of that? he asked himself. He had so many damn points, and yet he had chosen to buy that damn Omnitool as the fifth item. Why hadn't he gotten a practice cauldron? Man, did Jake want a practice cauldron.

"Very neat," he nodded, thinking it would be too rude to ask to see it. "Name's Jake, by the way. Nice to meet you."

He got up from the ground, as talking to her while sitting down was a bit awkward. Jake was just about to extend his hand for a handshake, but luckily, before he had a chance to do so, she introduced herself with a bow, sparing him the embarrassment.

"Reika of the Noboru clan, it's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Thayne," she said, keeping up her courteous yet guarded attitude. The two men behind her also bowed but didn't offer up any names. *The silent types, eh?*

"Pleasure is all mine. Real good catch on those entangled pathways; it wasn't something I had encountered before, so thanks. Did you come here to solve the puzzle door too?" Jake asked.

Jake had been aware of her presence but not really noted her. Sure, she had looked at his construct, but so had dozens of other people. However, in such a short time, she had managed to analyze his framework, understand the puzzle on the door, and find a solution. In conclusion? She was good at these kinds of things, hence why he asked if she had experience.

“In part, yes,” she answered, not looking like she wanted to elaborate.

He just shrugged in response. “Either way, thanks for the help, and best of luck.”

“If we both aim to solve this puzzle, would it not make more sense to collaborate and solve it together?” she quickly cut in.

“Hm,” Jake said, a bit embarrassed to admit the thought hadn’t even crossed his mind. But then again... yeah, she was totally there to probe him or something. Well, he saw no reason not to give it a go. “I guess we could.”

He wasn’t really against it. On the contrary, it seemed like an interesting experience, and Reika seemed competent. He hadn’t really worked with anyone else besides birds since... well, pretty much ever, and it was a novel experience and seemed like fun. Also, Miranda would get super happy if Jake made friends with the Noboru clan, and the woman in front of him seemed to be quite the influential figure considering her two followers.

“Great, should we move elsewhere and do so in private?” she asked her attitude still as tense and annoyingly courteous as before. She sounded like she was at work and interacting with a customer she had to talk to but would really prefer just to avoid.

Jake nodded in agreement as standing surrounded by people and talking with someone wasn't an optimal working environment. He moved to the side of the chamber and saw Reika tell her two followers to take off elsewhere. Jake wholeheartedly supported that decision as having two large men staring at him while talking to her wasn't exactly comfortable.

Once they had moved to the side, she waved her hand as a magic circle appeared and created a barrier around them. It was a basic isolation barrier, and Jake had seen Miranda and others use similar before. He should really learn how to make those. Anyway, being isolated and all, he decided to make his mask invisible as it did seem a bit too impolite to keep his face covered. It should also be good practice for him, and besides, it would be easier to talk to her if she could see his face if a bit risky as she would be able to read his facial expressions.

"Just to know, what got you interested in these kinds of magic puzzles and general magic theory?" Jake asked his temporary partner. Once the barrier was fully active, he felt like it was okay to ask some more semi-personal questions, and besides, it would give him an idea of why and how she had her magic knowledge.

"Would it not be a better question to ask why I wouldn't be interested in magic theory? It's a fundamental power that opens numerous paths and possibilities. Is it not natural to want to solve the mysteries of this new world and discover the truth, especially when learning this truth can lead to tangible benefits?" Reika countered.

So, she likes magic theory but doesn't want to outright admit she finds it fun. Got it. It was an easy conclusion as she talked about it with such fervor, and her demeanor completely changed. It reminded him a bit of Arnold in some ways, though Arnold was far weirder, and Jake found the dude hard to get a solid grasp on.

“True. You’re a mage, I guess?” Jake asked Reika. He felt her aura, and she did give him the feeling of a spellcaster over a melee fighter. She gave off a magical presence more than a physical one.

“Once more, only partly. I primarily began learning about mana and its application through alchemy, and I then expanded upon that knowledge and applied it to other areas. Spellcasting is certainly an ability of mine, but I am uncertain if that makes me classified as a mage. To my knowledge, you also make liberal use of magic in combat scenarios, and does that make you a mage?” Reika once more answered while countering with a question herself.

Jake had chosen to bite onto something in the first part of what she had said. Alchemy. That did explain some things as alchemy was a profession all about mana control and mana theory, but even more so... this was Jake’s first time meeting and talking to another alchemist. Okay, maybe he had seen others, but he felt that the woman in front of him had achieved the Perfect Evolution title and was an alchemist to boot. To rephrase, she was the only talented alchemist he had met.

“Alchemy? Awesome. What kind? What do you specialize in? I myself mainly do poison, but I also got quite a knack for potions and a bit of off-brand transmutation here and there,” Jake said, quite excited to meet and talk to another alchemist. Especially one around his own level.

Sure, the Viper and Duskleaf were also alchemists, but they were so far ahead of him that they weren’t even fun talking to about alchemy. Shit, he was certain he still sucked too much to fully comprehend how much better they were than him.

“I primarily create compounds and catalysts for magic rituals and other auxiliary items, but I have also dabbled in more classical alchemical works such as potions. Recently I have worked on making performance-enhancing consumables, also known as flasks. I take heavy inspiration from the chemistry of before the system, and I have also begun to apply

some pharmaceutical methodologies recently,” Reika answered, pretty much saying: ‘I mainly do catalyst-things, potions and flask,’ in a roundabout way.

By now, Jake didn’t need to be told what kind of person she was. He had met so damn many a lot like her before. She was the kind that had been practically living within the educational world for her entire life. This did make Jake think she was a bit younger than him. Physical appearances weren’t always a good indicator of age anymore, so he couldn’t exactly use that. As an example, Miranda and Reika looked about equally old, and Miranda was older than Jake by a few years. But her way of talking was just like so many of those driven people in university. He had to confirm, though.

“Let me guess, you were in Uni before the initiation?” he asked with a smirk.

Reika looked a bit embarrassed for a fraction of a second but quickly waved it off as she got a bit defensive. “I was working on my dissertation when the system arrived. What of it?”

“Oh, nothing at all,” Jake said, putting up his hands as he shook his head.

“What?”

“It’s nothing. Everything’s fine. Anyway, the puzzle?”

“No, what? Are you looking down on me just because I-“

“Hm, this next part seems a bit tricky. See those two pathways? Yeah, they’re freaking moving,” Jake said as he kept smiling and appeared to focus entirely on the puzzle.

“Seriously?” she said, glaring at him.

“Yep, pretty weird to have moving mana pathways, eh? Two at the same time even!” Jake replied.

By now, she had, of course, realized he was fucking with her, and Jake had committed to the tomfoolery. The reason was that he found her entire manner of speech and behavior from the start oddly uptight but also defensive. From the start, he had a feeling she had an odd interpretation of who he was. It wasn’t Jake’s first time either experiencing something like this, and it was totally his fault such interpretations existed out there. He had acted like some kind of mysterious powerhouse who didn’t put others in his eyes, mainly because that was honestly the easiest way to operate. Well, he didn’t think his reputation was bad as he hadn’t done anything outrageous yet, but he couldn’t say he was viewed positively either.

It all just made Jake feel weird. To suddenly have some status and position tossed your way when honestly, Jake just wanted to do his own thing and enjoy himself. He was childish and liked having fun and fucking with people. Especially those straight out of university or those still studying. They always acted so awkwardly, even by his standards, when they finally got out into the ‘real world,’ so to say. Reika gave him those same vibes. To break down those barriers around her that made her so uptight and annoying was something he would gladly do by going against her expectations and forcing her to reevaluate him. And it seemed to work.

At least partly, because she was pretty quick to shoot him down as she completely ignored his antics and just focused on the task at hand... not knowing this was partly Jake's plan all along to get through the small talk and onto the real task at hand, and for her to act a bit annoyed at him was far better than her acting fake. He also believed he would ultimately learn more about her through this puzzle-solving session than he would by talking to her with her guard up.

"It isn't that out of the ordinary and is triggered by the stabilized flux of mana from the previous step," she finally answered, getting the show on the road.

Jake expanded his construct of mana as he made a particular section light up more. "Firstly, we will have to block this part not to break the equilibrium."

"Naturally, and then we need to open up that pathway," Reika said, pointing at a specific part of the puzzle, "or the pathway will be mana-starved and contract and lead to collapse."

"Hm, only that one? To keep the equilibrium intact, we need to also stabilize the other side of the section, or the entire thing will go out of balance and break apart," Jake said, not really asking but simply concluding.

"That's... true... yeah, that's right," she answered while Jake smirked.

They continued to one-up each other and continually challenged each other. Reika truly did have a different mindset than his own, and their methodologies were entirely different. Jake was the type of person who relied way too much on his gut and would often make impulsive moves and rather than 100% plan out the process from start to end,

only go in with a rough draft and then micro-adjust and wing it, as he knew that more often than not, plans fuck up.

Reika was the type to have a solid method behind her actions and thoroughly plan the process from start to finish. A true academic that didn't simply try to understand an issue and solve it but also comprehend the underlying causes and theory behind why things worked as they did. Jake also liked figuring out how things worked, but he preferred to do so through testing and practical experience. Reika struck him as the type that would rather read all the research on the topic than half-arse an experiment. This was probably a good idea, in retrospect. Jake's approach did lead to his cauldron blowing up in his face quite a few times. He doubted that ever really happened to her, and being a chemist before the system, it did seem like good work ethic not just to mix chemicals and hope everything works out.

If Jake fucked up something in his work before the system, it would just be a broken excel sheet, or he would lose a bit of money in the short term for the company. Now, after the system, Jake was just durable enough not to take severe damage even if he fucked up during his concoctions due to *Palate*, *Scales of the Malefic Viper*, and of course, his overall high stats.

Ultimately, this difference in basic mindset meant that Reika wasn't taking any risks and being slow and methodical, while Jake was fast and experimental. As they constantly challenged each other and played off each other, the puzzle construct got solved faster and faster.

Jake would get a clear view of the entire challenge very fast, and Reika would spot potential blind spots and flaws. She also eventually made her own floating magic circle that wasn't a copy of the puzzle but instead an attempt to figure out the puzzle's internal logic. Like a predictive algorithm to spot where the most likely issues would be, she kept feeding it information with every step they passed, and towards the end, it came in handy as it functioned as a great guiding tool.

Only two hours after entering their isolation barrier, they stood there, staring up at the puzzle in front of them. Every pathway was cleared. Every pocket filled with mana. To bring it back to the metaphor with a regular puzzle... all the pieces had now been placed, and the picture was complete.

They both just looked at it, both trying to spot any flaws. None of them saw any, and they turned to each other as Jake raised his hand in her direction.

“Up top!”

She looked at his open palm for a while before finally catching on and giving him an awkward high-five. Jake didn’t mind it; he just smiled happily.

“Nice one all around. Should we flex on the populace?” Jake asked cheekily.

The puzzle outside had been visible to them this entire time, and the people present had made some progress during this time, but not much. There seemed to be an agreement that people were trying to solve the entire thing alone or in groups before opening the real thing. The reason? Because how the hell would they divide the loot if they had to split it between everyone?

What did this mean? That meant he and Reika were about to flex on the entire room and take all the loot for themselves while being showered in envy and resignation by everyone present. Now, Jake didn’t really feel bad about it because puzzles like these were, in his opinion, a reward in themselves. It had only been a few hours of puzzle-solving, and Jake had already gotten a lot of nice ideas on how to improve some things – most of them courtesy of Reika.

Reika looked over at him and asked with a smile, clearly elated at their success: “Are you ready to let down the barrier?”

Jake nodded as the mask appeared on his face again. A second later, the barrier fell away, and instantly attention was directed their way. The majority of the room was aware that he – the leader of Haven – and someone from the Noboru clan had gone in there, and he even saw a few looks of resignation when they noticed Reika being in a good mood.

“Will you do the honors?” he asked her.

She looked a bit surprised at him as her smile grew. “With pleasure.”

Jake just watched on as she extended what looked like a beam of mana into the puzzle and the entire thing began moving. Section after section was unlocked, and the whole room was silent for the minute it took for her to do the entire puzzle. Not a single mistake was made as she simply replicated the construct Jake had perfectly copied.

Finally, the last part was solved, and the entire gate lit up as it began opening.

Sighs sounded out throughout the room, with a few muted “congratulations” and “good jobs” coming their way. Not a single person seemed to have any thoughts of stealing from them, as they all backed away from the gate, letting Jake and Reika be the first to enter.

For all this time, Jake had consciously held himself back from peeking inside to see what was behind the gate with his Sphere of Perception, but now he finally let loose as he took it all in, and... well, there was a lot.

What was hidden behind the gate wasn't a treasury.

It was an armory.

Chapter 297: Treasure Hunt: Pure Ones

Jake wasn't the only one staring at what lied beyond the gate. Reika seemed a bit surprised too, and the many others who had attempted the puzzle also seemed highly interested in figuring out the big prize for solving it was.

Yet, he doubted many of them noticed the uniqueness of the room. Jake felt an odd aura in the room, different from anything he had encountered prior, yet also slightly familiar. He sensed curses within. Not just one but many. Yet even these curses felt different. They somehow felt less insidious, like they didn't carry any hatred towards him. Usually, curses seemed to just want to destroy anyone and everything, lashing out at whoever came into contact with it.. but not these ones.

He walked inside with Reika, none of the observers daring to follow.

“It’s an armory of some kind... but these items,” Reika said as she frowned and inspected a common-rarity sword that looked to be made of silver. Jake also threw it a look, and the conclusion was obvious.

“These are anti-vampire weapons.”

He identified a random one placed on a racket.

[Sword of the Pure Ones (Common)] – A shortsword made of an unknown metal created by the Pure Ones, enlightened inhabitants of the Yalsten world who had not turned vampire and were hunted down and made into food as the hunger of the vampires grew. The enchantment placed on the sword is specifically made to hunt down vampires and will deal extra damage. All attacks against vampiric foes will deal extra damage to their vital energy.

Requirements: lvl 100+ in any humanoid race.

“Quite the lore,” Jake noted after he read over the item.

Reika looked his way as she asked. “Just to make sure there is no disparity in information, what have you learned of this world so far? To my knowledge, it was inhabited by some humanoid race that eventually chose to become vampires, and some catastrophe happened, and their civilization devolved and fractured, especially after the dimension became isolated.”

Jake proceeded to give the information he had gained from the projection and also came to learn that the other factions had found a lot of similar things. Small crystals with recordings on them located in the plains, written messages or even projections in the abandoned houses in the Mistless Plains, and of course also information from other towers. However, Jake also came to learn that the information didn't precisely match up everywhere.

The projection had told Jake some people either didn't choose to or weren't judged worthy of being vampires... but the existence of this room and some information Reika had learned made him believe it wasn't quite that simple. No, there was an entirely other faction in this world who opposed the vampires, known as the Pure Ones. People who refused to become vampires and opposed the establishment.

How they hadn't just been slaughtered by the Kings or something like that he wasn't sure about. Maybe they were deemed a necessary evil? Good fighting practice? Or perhaps they did co-exist until shit hit the fan down the line and the vampires began hunting down anything they could.

Or maybe, just maybe, this entire world was just fake as fuck, and set up as a scenario by the system for the Treasure Hunt, and everything was just background lore to make it all more interesting. Either way, it didn't matter. What mattered was that they had just found an entire armory of anti-vampire weapons.

"There are hundreds of weapons here," Reika noted as she checked the weapon-lined walls. The armory was cross-shaped, with a long hallway at the start and a path to each side. Weapons lined the walls, including swords, spears, knives, crossbows and bolts, scimitars, glaive-like weapons, and overall just a lot of stabby things. Interestingly enough, no blunt weapons, making Jake think blunt damage probably wasn't very good against vampires. He would have to try hitting one with the Pillar next time.

"That there is," Jake agreed before adding on. "But let's get to the good stuff."

He could see that she also wanted to check out the central room, where a large cube of non-transparent glass was placed that gave off an aura making it obvious valuables were within. The glass had a magical opening where it seemed to almost be made of water. In fact, the entire cube seemed more like a mix between a magical barrier and a physical one.

“I’ll head inside first,” Jake said as they stood in front of it. He decided to be the first to enter in case it was a trap. He was confident he could escape due to his danger sense if things went south, or probably just tank the damage.

Upon entering, he finally discovered where all that curse energy came from... it had been leaking from that cube. Jake saw a total of five items within. Four weapons, all surrounding a central pedestal with a floating... wooden... stake.

Is the system actually fucking with us?

Jake motioned for Reika to enter after him, and when she did, she also saw the wooden stake and stopped up.

“Isn’t that a wooden stake?” she asked pensively.

“Sure is,” he answered in a deadpan tone.

“Made by vampire hunters.”

“Yep.”

“I... why... is the system messing with us or what?” she asked in exasperation, mimicking Jake’s own thoughts.

“It appears to be completely serious,” Jake answered back with a smirk as he identified the stake.

[Stake of the Pure Ones (Unique)] – A cursed wooden stake created by the Pure Ones, enlightened inhabitants of the Yalsten world who had not turned vampire and were hunted down and made into food as the hunger of the vampires grew. The stake gives off an aura that hides the wielder from a Count of Blood, and it will deal substantial damage if impaled into any vampire. The curse will inhibit the regeneration of the impaled vampire. Only works on Counts and below. Holding this item will contribute significantly to your final reward.

Requirement: N/A

It was indeed a real item with very real effects. In addition... it was a damn quest item, 100%. The item also made something else clear... Jake had really done this entire Treasure Hunt in the wrong order. Likely the plan was to first collect information, get to know of the vampires and the Pure Ones, discover this armory and get a Mark of Blood, and then go for the Count.

Jake had identified the stake as similar to the quest items during the tutorial he had used to fight the King of the Forest, though those back then were far stronger. In retrospect, it was actually quite insane. That shadow bead and the tusk both held curses and energies more powerful than even this stake...

“This wooden stake appears to be the primary reward of this puzzle, and considering you were the primary contributor to solving it, I believe you should take it,” Reika said.

“Oh?” Jake exclaimed, a bit surprised. He was sure she would have wanted it. There was just one thing. “Nah, I don’t want it.”

“Excuse me? What? Why not” she asked with a perplexed expression.

“Why would I? The purpose of it is clearly to weaken a Count of Blood to fight them more easily. Why would I ever do that?” Jake just answered with a shrug.

“I...” she looked at him for a moment before she just paused and nodded. “Thank you then. I believe it only fair then that you take the rest of the weapons here.”

“Sure thing,” Jake agreed. They could figure out what to do with the rest of the armory later, but clearly, this room was where the good shit was at.

Jake looked at one of the four weapons – a spear – and Identified it.

[Spear of the Pure Ones (Rare)] – A long metal spear with a wooden spearhead created by the Pure Ones, enlightened inhabitants of the Yalsten world who had not turned vampire and were hunted down and made into food as the hunger of the vampires grew. The enchantment placed on the spear is specifically made to hunt down vampires and will deal extra damage to their vitality and injects them with a unique type of venom specifically concocted to kill vampires. Enchantments: Venom of the Pure Ones.

Requirements: lvl 110+ in any humanoid race

Yep, it was a potent vampire hunting weapon that even had venom that worked especially well against vampires. The other three weapons were a sword, a halberd, and a dagger. All of them rare-rarity, and all of them with the same venom enchantment.

Jake tossed them all in his inventory as Reika put the stake in hers. As they moved out of the room, Jake took out the dagger again and casually stabbed it into his shoulder, not even stopping his walk.

“What the hell!?” Reika yelled as Jake made sure not to drip any blood on the floor.

“What? Just getting a taste of this venom,” Jake shrugged. Part of it was to fuck with her, but the main reason was to actually get a feeling of the toxin and analyze it with Palate of the Malefic Viper. He didn’t plan on replicating it, but just having experienced it would allow him to maybe use some of the concepts of the venom with Touch of the Malefic Viper.

“... How does that even work?” Reika asked, her voice a mix of resignation and genuine curiosity.

“I have a skill that allows me to learn about anything alchemy-related I consume and absorb. That includes poison that has inflicted me. Very handy to have, but it does have its downsides... such as being forced to eat copious amounts of mushrooms,” Jake answered, bringing back some bad memories.

“Is that seriously a skill?”

“Yep, a great one. Anyway, let’s move down the next corridor,” Jake said as he walked towards one of the wings of the armory. Reika followed him silently as she seemed deep in thought. She looked internally conflicted between staying cordial and being incredibly curious.

Entering the left wing of the armory, they found a smithy and a bookshelf filled with books. Jake swiftly pulled one of the books off the shelf and checked it out. He saw it was recipes and blueprints for making anti-vampire weapons.

Reika also went over and pulled a book off the shelf and quickly scanned through a few pages.

“This stuff seems great for the Treasure Hunt itself, but I’m unsure about its usefulness outside. Unless the Noboru clan has some vampire problem, I don’t know about?” Jake commented on the books, not very interested in them himself.

His puzzle partner just threw him a glance. “This Treasure Hunt is my first time encountering one.”

“Damn, and here I was hoping Earth secretly had hidden vampires trying to meld in with humanity,” he joked as he skimmed a few more of the books. They were truly all about smithing, and there weren’t even any mentions of the venom.

“Pretty sure we would have found any Earth vampires already as they would surely be glinting under sunlight.”

Jake stopped up as he looked at Reika, and she looked back at him, clearly a bit embarrassed. *Did she just make a joke?*

He smiled as he nodded and went along. “Yeah, but I doubt they would even be an issue, as they would all be too busy stalking teenage girls and spending all their time creepily watching them sleep.”

“Or battle werewolves who have the magical abilities to somehow preserve their pants when exiting their transformations,” Reika doubled down with a smile.

“System-fuckery for sure,” Jake nodded, faking seriousness. During all this time, both were skimming over all the books in the smithy, and eventually, they had to return to actually doing work. “Anyway, do you have any interest in the things within this smithy? There doesn’t seem to be any materials to use, but considering there are still nearly one and a half weeks left of the Treasure Hunt, I could see some smiths who would have time to make something useful.”

“I do believe the Noboru clan would have interest in this smithy, yes. Are you certain Haven doesn’t want to acquire it?” she responded, also back in professional mode.

“No idea, really, but we barely entered with any people, so as long as you guys are fine with letting in one or two people from Haven, it should be fine. It would be a bit of a dickmove to just claim the entire smithy for the potential that someone may want to come here,” Jake just shrugged.

“Thanks,” she said with a smile. “Let’s check out the other wing?”

“Sure.”

They quickly went over to the other wing, and on the way, he saw that people were still gathered outside the gate. None had dared take a step inside but kept their distance. It was a bit weird, and he couldn’t help but ask Reika as they walked.

“Does your clan want all of those common-rarity weapons? I just considered if we should maybe just hand them to the people who tried to open the gate,” he asked.

Jake himself didn’t need them, and he didn’t really think they would contribute much to any kind of final reward. He would rather just hand them over to the people who had spent a good while trying to solve the puzzle to make sure they at least got something out of it. Also, he was pretty certain most of them could use them to fight the vampires. From what he had seen, while many had okay gear, all of the weapons in this armory were D-grade anti-vampire weapons. So they were bound to be useful.

“Hm, while the clan could use them, I believe that handing out the common-rarity ones and keeping the uncommon-rarity and above weapons shouldn’t lead to any issues,” Reika agreed after thinking for a second.

“Great, let’s tell them when we’re done. Let’s check out the alchemy lab ahead first.”

Yeah, he had taken a sneak-peek with his sphere, earning a surprised look from Reika, but she didn’t say anything. They quickly got to the right wing of the armory and opened the door, leading into an alchemy lab, just as Jake had said.

It quickly became clear this was where the venom used on the weapons had been made, and here too was a bookshelf on alchemical anti-vampire creations. Jake and Reika split the books, Jake taking all of those related to poison – which was the majority – and Reika taking those related to creating anti-vampire materials and catalysts. Such as some way of transmuting wood to make it better against vampires. It was a fair split, in Jake’s opinion.

Reika told Jake that everything else was his as she had been given the smithy, and Jake gladly stole everything in the entire lab. All the tables, a few common and uncommon-rarity cauldrons that still worked, a slew of other tools, and even the bookshelf the books had been on. While he was looting, Reika went and took all the uncommon-rarity weapons from outside, also splitting those fifty-fifty with him. When Jake was done in the alchemy lab, the room was bare, and Reika looked at him weirdly.

“Do you really need *all* of it?”

“Would it not be a better question to ask, how I could know I wouldn’t need all of it? Why would one not claim all one can in the event it becomes useful down the line?” Jake countered, making a throwback to their first interaction. She was just jealous that most of the things in the smithy couldn’t be easily moved but were built into the room.

She looked at him, a bit embarrassed as her ears turned red, but swiftly changed the subject. “We’re done here, right? Let’s get out of here and tell those waiting outside they can take the weapons they want.”

Jake resisted the urge to shake his head and just nodded in approval instead. He had to admit, all of this was a nice intermission between vampire hunting. Because he would go hunting soon again... and the stake earlier had also revealed one other thing that Reika didn’t seem to have taken notice of.

The stake said it worked on Counts of Blood and below.

That meant there had to be vampires higher in the food chain than the Counts still present in the Treasure Hunt.

Chapter 298: Treasure Hunt: Blood

Jake considered what his next step would be as Reika was hard at work.

After dividing all the loot and telling the people outside they could enter, Reika called her followers to keep watch over the smithy as her followers also called some smiths while

making their way there. They only took a few minutes to arrive, and Jake saw they looked a bit more haggard than before, and he sensed the remnants of curse energy on their bodies. It was easy to see they had been fighting those cursed armor golems.

The two followers stood guard at the smithy as they waited for members of the Noboru clan to arrive. A few had already been in the gallery of observers before, and now, more were coming from a basecamp in the central plains.

Reika and Jake walked out of the armory, and the room with the puzzle in was now near-empty.

“Something has been on my mind for a while,” Reika suddenly said. “Why would one hide an armory in the middle of enemy territory like this? It doesn’t make any logical sense, much less to ensure it with some magical puzzle and not a key or something like that.”

“I actually think it makes a lot of sense. Especially to make it a magic puzzle. That meant one had to have some level of power and experience to open it, and you couldn’t just take a random unturned human and have that person open it with just a bit of mana,” Jake chimed in.

“What stops a vampire from just solving the puzzle?” she asked him, genuinely confused.

“Vampires don’t have mana. At least not the same kind as you and I or really anything else I have met do. Instead, they seem to have some kind of unique energy that serves many of the same functions but is fundamentally different. I think this energy may have also been the cause of their downfall,” Jake answered.

He had fought the Count and noticed this difference in energy pretty much right away. He just called their energy, blood energy in his head because it was red and looked like blood, and knowing the system's naming sense, he was probably right on the money.

"They don't? That... I didn't even consider that." Reika looked to be deep in thought as she considered the implications of that.

As Reika stood there, Jake noticed one of her followers come out of the armory towards them. It was the communications guy, as far as Jake could tell.

"Mr. Thayne, I bring a message from the Patriarch," the man said, confirming he was the communications guy. Reika also perked up at the mention of the head of the Noboru clan, and Jake raised an eyebrow – hidden under his mask, of course.

"Do tell," he answered.

"The Patriarch relays the message that you should have your meeting in the center of the Mistless Plains at the hidden tower once all keys are gathered, and he would like to propose a bet. There are nine keys... so the one to bring five will get priority in exploring the hidden tower," the man said, adding. "He also expresses his hopes that you and his great-granddaughter are getting along and that you treat her kindly."

Jake bit onto that first part. "Oh, so he's out there hunting Counts too, huh? Better tell him to hurry up. Also... I don't mean to be an ass, but let's not assume it's only he and I who are capable of matching those vampires. Especially not after what we just found."

The man smiled almost triumphantly as he added: “He knows you are one key ahead and that others are also capable of defeating these Counts... but he still stands by his words to bring five. Because if you don’t, he will.”

I’ll take that as a challenge, Jake thought as he just heard the Noboru clan make it clear they were willing to challenge any other faction who managed to obtain a key. Which meant either Jake would have to do the same... or just get those five keys by himself.

“Well then, tell him the game is on,” Jake smiled as he turned to Reika. “Oh, and do remember to make use of the wooden stake. Maybe give it to him. Perhaps he will need it to help him make up the difference.”

Reika had been looking a bit embarrassed since the conversation began, no doubt due to the whole thing about treating her well. Jake got it. It was always awkward when a grandparent said something like that in front of others, making him smile a bit internally. Jake also had a good relationship with his grandparents before they passed, and it was only good that Reika seemed to have a positive one with her great grandfather.

She looked up at him before she steeled her look. “Don’t think he will be the only one from the clan hunting down Counts.”

Jake looked at her and smiled. “Good luck to you. But be warned they aren’t that easily taken down, and I would advise you against trying to beat one with numbers, as weaker humans are little more than walking health potions to a vampire as far as I can tell. Of course, you also have the stake, so yeah, happy hunting!”

“Thanks, and you too,” Reika replied, giving Jake a bow. It was a tacit understanding that they would naturally split up after the puzzle was done and the loot distributed. Besides they didn’t really have any reason to stay grouped up.

Jake did add on one more line as he left with a wave over his shoulder while walking. “Cya around Reika, it’s been fun.”

“You too... Jake. Take care and stay safe,” she half-yelled as Jake smiled under his mask.

Well, he didn’t know about that last part. Jake wasn’t known as the type to take care of himself nor stay safe. He was more the type that would head straight for danger. Sadly, he could not go to the next tower right away but had to find a Mark of Blood first. He did throw a mental message towards Sylphie, and she sent back something about having fun, but that the next floating Mark thing wasn’t Sylphie’s but her friends. So he would have to get one himself.

Jake knew there were likely other treasures still in the tower; in fact, he was certain there were. He hadn’t called the structure a mega-structure for no reason, after all. Even just sprinting down the stairs, he felt mana in the distance and a response from his boots that there were treasures. However, he also felt the mana of other people, and he didn’t have any inclinations of coming in and stealing any loot. He was confident that what had been in the chamber of the Count and the puzzle room was the best there was.

It didn’t take him long to get out of the tower, and when he reached the bottom, he saw many other entrances. So yeah, no need to enter from some balcony.

People made way for him as he exited out into the plains, and Jake had to hold back the impulse to steal the gates. It would be a bit too much for even him to spend half an hour

slowly burning off a gate with people passing by and looking weirdly at him all the meanwhile. No... he would have to play it smarter and find isolated gates to steal.

Because he was 100% still going to steal some gates.

The Viscount of Blood stumbled as she landed another slash using her long claws on the human in front of her.

Her claws cut through the man and sent blood splashing everywhere as his entire body was ripped apart. The severed arm hit the wall, and his guts spilled all over the floor.

The man's body was fully healed the next moment, and he stood in the same position as before the Viscount attacked as if nothing had ever happened - the only sign remaining the newly made splatter of blood and some more guts on the floor. He stood the exact same place he had been standing from the moment she awakened. Where he had been standing for the last five hours, just staring at her.

Exhaustion was apparent in the movements of the vampire. Her attacks and steps were sluggish and slow, the red glow in her eyes dimming. Meanwhile, the man only moved to comb back his hair and continue staring at her, never allowing her to leave his sight.

Even when his head was severed, the eyes of the severed head stayed on her body. Even when the entire head was squashed, it returned a moment later to observe her.

The vampire tried to drink his blood but found itself poisoned by the vitality she consumed, dealing even more damage. It was not the first time she had tried, but she was desperate. Finally, the vampire just slumped back and sat on the ground, heaving. The tomb was completely locked, just the man and the Viscount inside.

Once the vampire was done fighting... unable to go on... the man made a sad smile as he nodded towards her.

“Thank you.”

He went forward and lovingly placed his hand on the top of her head as he comfortingly spoke at the vampire. “Your sacrifice will not be in vain.”

The vampire looked up at him, her eyes dimming as her life came to an end, with not a single wound on her body. She turned to ash and left behind the Mark of Blood while a side room with treasures opened up.

At the same time, the door to the tomb opened, and a dozen or so people stood right outside it. They all looked at the man, complicated emotions in their eyes, as none said anything but just looked on as he slowly went over and claimed all the loot before walking out of the tomb, all of them making way.

Once outside, a man and a woman were ready to receive him. “How did it go?” the woman asked with genuine concern.

The man, still dirty from the happenings before this, sighed. “The sparks are corrupted... broken... yet whole. I know more now, but still not enough. Come, let's us continue as we seek out one of these Counts.”

Back at the tomb, one of the people who had been waiting took a look inside and stared wide-eyed. It was pure carnage inside. Guts everywhere, severed limbs by the hundreds, and the smell was absolutely horrific. Everything was just red, even the walls and ceiling. Yet the worst was the floor.

The floor looked like that of a flooded cellar. The liquid on the floor wasn't water but blood—thousands upon thousands of liters of it.

All of it human.

Jake ran through the dense mist headed towards a hill far away from the tower. He was headed towards one he was certain no one had been to before due to the long distance and how it was slightly hidden behind two other hills and several actual towers. Not mountain towers, but buildings made to look like buildings. He decided to check those out first and sprinted along the plains, scanning them with his sphere all the meanwhile. He noticed everything was cleaned up already and considered who it could be until he saw faint movement ahead.

Something small was flying through the air silently, barely visible in the mist as it was camouflaged and nearly invisible, a lot like the vampire's invisibility. But, as he saw it, he also spotted a common-rarity staff of sorts embedded in the ground, seemingly just left there when someone went “fuck it” and stuck it into the ground before leaving.

Jake went closer to get a better look and saw this small flying thing descend towards the staff. He wondered what it was but saw that the moment it flew down and made contact with the staff, several metal wires were sent out, wrapping themselves around the weapon before pulling it from the ground.

The second the staff stopped touching the ground, it just disappeared.

Now he was really curious and used One Step Mile to get over there quickly, and in a snap, he was before the flying thing that he now recognized.

“Arnold?” he asked out loud at the drone in front of him as it promptly dispelled its camouflage. It was about the size of a basketball in diameter was nearly entire circular with one large, completely silent rotator at the bottom.

“What?” Jake heard from the drone, the voice completely unrecognizable. In fact, there was nothing about the drone to even indicate someone controlled it.

“How the hell did you put the staff inside the storage?” he asked. Probably not the question most would have asked, but it was what Jake was wondering the most.

“It’s done through touch, and I touched it,” Arnold answered through the drone.

“Okay... and how does the mist affect the drones, by the way?”

“The mist is based on a curse. Curses target living entities. Drones and robots don’t count as living; curses don’t work, at least not this variant,” he answered promptly again, Jake getting the hint that the dude really didn’t want to chat but just get on with it.

“Cool stuff. See you around.”

With that, the drone became invisible again and flew away without a single more word spoken. Jake was pretty darn confident Arnold had found a loophole or something. He wasn’t entirely sure how he had managed to loot stuff through the drones... but then again, he and Sylphie shared an inventory somehow due to the peculiar way the Hunter Insignia worked.

It was good to see that people from Haven were doing well, though. He was sure the others were managing too. They were all competent in their own rights, and even if they got in trouble, he was certain they could get out using the Insignia.

Jake continued on his journey as he made his way to the towers. When he got close, he could see they were made of a mix of wood and stone, with each of them having a metal gate. Sadly, it wasn’t the awesome super metal like at the mountain towers, but just some boring metal.

He opened the gate and got inside. The entire tower was only about fifty meters tall, and while that was a lot by old-world standards, it was just a small building in this new world. It was pretty wide, though, and inside, Jake found that this one had clearly been a living space of some kind.

The primary clue for this was the bones. Yes, bones. Which meant this place had not been inhabited by vampires but more regular enlightened species. Jake saw several kinds of bones, ones he clearly recognized as humans, but many were also slightly different. Some bones looked somewhat different in shape, while some of the skeletons were just too small.

Small, but still robust. *Dwarves?*

Another kind of skeletons was thinner than humans, and their shape reminded him a bit of the projection he had seen during the Undergrowth dungeon. So, elves. He also saw some that were bigger and some even smaller, and some that were just weird, including those with tails.

Jake quickly went through the entire tower and found only a few minor items and a few pieces of furniture. He also noticed that while the tower's first floor was a living space, the ones above were certainly not. It was cells.

"I guess I just found out where they kept the livestock..." Jake muttered as he left the tower again.

He didn't even bother checking any of the other towers but headed straight for the hill ahead. Considering none had entered any of the towers, he was certain he was the first to be there.

Time to speedrun this vampire hunt!

Chapter 299: Treasure Hunt: Broken Tower

The Viscount tried to close his mouth but was unable to as it encountered material far too tough for his razor-sharp teeth to get through. To make matters worse for the vampire, he was repeatedly stabbed in the chest with an envenomed anti-vampire weapon while it struggled as the merciless human finished him off.

Jake only lifted his foot that he had stomped inside the vampire's mouth when he got the notification, also quickly checking that the vampire hadn't even managed to make a single mark on the boots. To be honest, he felt genuinely bad about this kill. Nevertheless, he had gone in and stuck with his desire to test out the anti-vampire weapon... and he had done so.

The hills were all actually grave hills and were entirely filled with ghouls. The doors to keep them closed weren't completely able to keep out the mist entirely, making the halls filled with it. He had stormed through and easily located the tomb of the Viscount. There, he found one of the great metal gates with a magic circle to stop him from getting in. Well, he broke that one with some arcane energy, and the moment he did so, the vampire awakened... and what was before him looked like a damn kid.

Mind you, it wasn't a kid, but what Jake guessed was a dwarf, but Jake still felt bad about the entire ordeal. The vampire dwarf could at least have had a beard to make it all less awkward as Jake borderline curb-stomped the much smaller enemy.

Am I racist? Jake asked himself as he looted the Mark of Blood and went over to a newly opened side-room and also swiped that empty. *Is it considered racist to feel bad about fighting certain races?*

He began burning off the gate with Alchemical Flame as the thoughts kept coming. *I remember it being a common trope that men refuse to fight women, which is often called sexist. Now, that would be incredibly dumb with the system making physical differences not matter... and size doesn't really matter too... but... why the fuck did the dwarf have to look like a kid?*

Seriously, it felt like a mental attack struck him every time he hit the dwarven vampire. To make it worse, even the voice sounded childish. If at least that had been overly manly, he could have looked past it, but come on... shit, he still held doubt that maybe it was a kid considering the trope about vampire children never growing up.

No, Jake, your murder of little people was fully justified.

Jake committed himself to hunt down enemies without any prejudice and bigotry. He would be an equal opportunity hunter.

After finishing burning off the door, he did a final check of the room. Surprisingly enough, the wooden coffin the vampire had been in wasn't an item at all. But upon closer inspection... he had a feeling it had been. Maybe it had run out of energy or stopped working, or maybe it was just a cheap one-time thing with the Counts having the good coffins.

Leaving the tomb, he swiftly moved on as he stormed towards the next tower. The issue was that there were more than nine of the large mega-structure mountains, but only nine Counts as far as he could tell. Or maybe there were more than nine, and they only had a chance to drop a key? Wait, perhaps it was just the first nine that dropped one?

Either way, he would have to find a mountain that wasn't already being attacked by another powerful faction. He didn't really feel like getting into some big fight with the Holy Church or that Valhal place or anything like that. Not quite yet, at least.

So, he headed towards a mountain tower even further away from the Mistless Plains. The plains were the center of this Treasure Hunt, and the further you got away from there, the fewer people. So, he went deeper within the dense mist than he had been before and deeper than he had seen anyone go.

While he ran, he inspected the weapon in his hand. It was the sword from the Pure Ones' armory, and it was now pristine and clean once more as the vampire blood on it had evaporated. He had absorbed a bit of the venom on it and gotten a basic understanding earlier but now understood it even better after a live test.

As the name said, it was anti-vampire venom that had the primary function of stopping healing. It was actually a bit like his hemotoxin, except this venom only worked on vampires. And it truly did only work on vampires.

Jake hadn't taken any damage from the venom he had inflicted himself with, at least not from the venom directly. Of course, it had still taken a small number of health points to dispel the inherently antagonistic energy, but he would compare it to the time he used poison arrows on the Cloud Elementals. Sure, the poison did technically do a bit of damage simply due to it being foreign energy, but the anti-vampire properties of the venom didn't actually do anything to a human like him.

If he compared it to his own uncommon-rarity necrotic poison, Jake's was far superior when it came to dealing damage, even to the vampires. The venom from the weapons was better at stopping them from healing themselves, though. From the Viscount, it also seemed to make it harder for the vampires to use their magic, at least somewhat.

Determining what was better was difficult, but only if taken in isolation. Because using the venom meant Jake had to use the Pure Ones' weapons. And among those weapons was no bow or arrows, and while the melee weapons were fine, he preferred the Nanoblade and the scimitar. Also, no, he couldn't use his regular poison with the fancy anti-vampire weapons. Toxins just didn't play well together like that.

With the way the venom worked, he also had to compound it by dealing constant damage. Which meant less time spent shooting with his bow. Also, while he now had a lot of recipe books to make a poison to counter the vampires, it really wouldn't be worth his time to sit down and do alchemy here and now.

Exiting his thoughts, Jake entered another mountain building. This one was much like the other one, but once he got inside, he did notice some differences. More accurately, one major damn difference. The mist hadn't been kept out.

It filled the halls as he sprinted through them, Jake making a mental note to steal the gate on his way out.

The further inside Jake got, the more apparent the difference between this mountain and the other one became. While the other mountain had been a mess, he wouldn't exactly have called it a ruin. The walls were whole, all the stone furniture was still there, and overall it didn't look like a tornado had torn through – this one being exactly that.

Walls had been broken somehow, the rooms were unrecognizable, and the entire thing looked absolutely ruined. Jake frowned at first but soon felt something from beneath his feet. A faint pulse that he instantly recognized as the response his boots had to a natural treasure.

It came from far above. Jake chose to head towards where he expected the atrium to be to get a faster way up than looking for a stairway that wasn't completely broken. He had seen a total of two former elevators too, but both of those were blocked, making them unfeasible too.

However, just as he crossed a corner, four signs of movement entered his sphere. Judging by their reactions, it was obvious they were aware of his position too.

How? Jake wondered as he recognized their forms. The four of them turned a corner not long after, entering his line of sight.

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 113]

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 111]

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 109]

[Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 111]

Jake stared at them as they charged him with abandon, and Jake just sighed as he raised his hand and fired out a blast of arcane energy, stopping them in their tracks. He then took out his bow and fired down the hallway. While it was around ten meters in width

and six meters in height, making it a large as hell hallway by Earth standards, it was still considered a narrow space by D-grade standards. Much more so when one got bombarded by exploding arrows.

It took him only a few minutes to finish them off as he promptly continued on his journey. Yet, he had barely managed to get down a single hall before another group of those Blackguards appeared. Only three this time.

A few more explosions later, and they were dead. If living armor could even die. Well, the system said Jake had "slain" them, so he counted it as killing. Too bad they didn't give any experience, but then again, they were weak as hell. Their only really dangerous attack was their self-destruction upon death, but Jake used this awesome technique called not being close to avoid that.

Jake moved down another corridor with even more golems coming. This repeated over and over again as Jake left a trail of carnage behind him before he finally made it to the atrium. When he got there, he saw that the destruction wasn't only limited to the entry area.

What looked like a grand indoor space in the other tower now looked like an absolute ruin. Several of the balconies were broken, pretty much every railing torn apart. To make it worse, Jake saw golems. Not just a few, either.

Standing in that open space, Jake felt the attention of hundreds of beings upon him. *Well, that's something, ain't it?*

Now, the usual and reasonable response to being seen by hundreds of foes between level 105 to 140 would be to run or maybe try and find a better position to fight them from. But,

what Jake did wasn't reasonable at all. He stayed in place as he welcomed them. If he wanted to explore the tower... he would have to clean it out first. That much was certain.

Like a horde of rampaging zombies, they stormed him. By now, it was clear... this tower would not hold secrets as the last one. That didn't mean it would hold no secrets, just not the same ones, and he also severely doubted a Count still resided within. When he looked up the atrium, he saw the dark mist hang above, including around the floors where he would expect a Count to be.

I'll go check in a while, Jake thought as he cracked his neck as the hundreds of golems approached.

To describe what transpired next as a fight would be facetious. It was simply a desperate struggle from an unfeeling army of golems trying to slay one person. Jake felt them all close in, and with his bow in hand, he moved.

Arrows flew and exploded, arcane bolts blasted everything away, blades appeared and cut and tore apart his foes as he moved in between them, teleporting away whenever necessary. Jake was bombarded with attacks himself, including some golems with bows, but none even got close to hitting him.

A hundred golems died within the first half an hour, Jake barely with sweat on his brows.

Two hundred and fifty died within an hour as he began to get the hang of it.

Five hundred were dead after two hours, Jake getting a bit sweaty and taking a few minor wounds.

Seven hundred golems and two and a half hours after the battle began, they stopped coming. The mist turned silent once more, as the only thing that moved was a single human sitting and breathing heavily in the middle of the atrium, the ground around him entirely scorched from the Scorched Plains attack from the bow. He had seen the result versus the Count and had repeated it again, this time to kill nearly forty grouped up golems at once to finish the fight.

As he closed his eyes and entered meditation to relax, he went through the notifications, but only the ones that gave experience as he just filtered all the other ones out.

****You have slain [Reanimated Blackguard Golem – lvl 134] – 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****

Besides the Blackguards, there were also five Knights springled in for good measure towards the end as they had descended from the upper floors.

****You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 136] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

...

****You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 140] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

It sounded like a lot... seven hundred or so golems... but only twenty-three had actually granted him any experience, including all five Knights. In fact, he had a feeling those five gave more experience than the eighteen Blackguards put together.

To his surprise, when he was done with spring cleaning, he had actually gotten a level.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 131 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

It shouldn't be a surprise to get a level after so much killing... but his class drawbacks weren't there for nothing. He knew that any other class would have gotten a lot more experience overall. At least he thought so, but now he wasn't entirely sure.

Jake knew it couldn't be simply due to those twenty-three golems he killed that he leveled up. Unless he was damn close to a level after the Count, he didn't see it happening. So... maybe it was due to the presence of all the other golems? Due to the added difficulty? Jake knew experience gain wasn't just black and white, where an enemy at X-level gave Y-

amount of experience when killed. It depended on an endless amount of variables that even Villy wasn't sure about.

Jake was also acutely aware that his skills like Mark of the Avaricious Hunter and hidden buffs to experience gain from higher-leveled enemies muddled the water. This is why he ultimately decided trying to figure out some grand formula was a waste of time. Him knowing wouldn't change his level-up speed, and he already knew the most optimal way to level up was to fight foes many levels above himself.

During the fight, Jake had been smart enough to drink potions to limit his downtime once done, so he would soon be ready to go again. More than resources, he needed to relax his mind after the fight as he sat in meditation for a good fifteen minutes while thinking over all of those experience-related things and going through notifications. He was still relatively low on mana, around forty percent, but he would manage. Also, it was mana potion time in twenty minutes.

Also, while the bow wouldn't empower his arrows while it recharged itself, he was okay with that and would manage without.

He continued up the tower, and soon, he was forced to do something he hoped he could avoid. He stopped flying just before he reached the black mist as his body became covered in dark green scales, and with his hands, he formed a barrier of arcane mana around him as he entered the mist.

The layout of the topmost floor was identical to the one with the Count on it, besides a few minor changes.

Jake got to a large gate that wasn't there in the last tower, right at the entrance to the web of halls that would eventually lead to the Count's chambers. And behind the gate, he saw the movement of black living armors wandering aimlessly as he sighed internally. *Well, these ones are at least all Knights.*

He went closer to the gate, and it instantly responded merely to his arcane barrier touching it as it began opening by itself. As it opened, the entire gate cracked and slowly fell apart into hundreds of fractured chunks of metal, thick black mist giving off a strong sense of danger thrown everywhere, forcing Jake to quickly retreat.

As he did so, the golems behind the door reacted too. Nearly fifty empty helmets turned his way. Even more of them deeper within. Jake did the only thing reasonable and turned around and began running back through the halls he had come from to get a better position to fight them from. In other words, somewhere, he wasn't surrounded by cursed black mist, such as the atrium down below. Mind you, Jake hadn't actually planned to pull them right away... but what's done was done, and now he would have to fight.

He needed to clear these Knights out anyway, not just for experience, but because Jake was certain of one thing... the natural treasure was located where the Count's chamber would usually be. By now, he was also beginning to believe his original assessment of there not being a Count's chamber was wrong.

Jake just seriously doubted he would find any Count within... which made him think what else could now dwell within.

Chapter 300: Treasure Hunt: Root of Resentment

The difference between Knights and Blackguards was slight and primarily laid in the level difference. They even looked the same, with the Knights being slightly slicker and a bit faster and more agile, but that also came with the knights being slightly less tanky.

Now, slightly less tanky didn't mean they weren't tanky. In fact, due to their levels, they were tankier than nearly all Blackguards. The only good thing about them was that they were what Jake would classify as trash mobs. Filler enemies that individually would rarely be a challenge to anyone of equal level, who didn't really possess any interesting skills or dangerous abilities. The only thing the Knights could do was to blow up when they died, just like the Blackguards.

However, what they did have were numbers and their durability. Enough numbers and durability to make Jake pretty much run out of mana after he had killed thirty of them. Luckily, he had a mana potion at the ready and consumed one to keep fighting with close to optimal power.

Even during the previous fight, he used Limit Break at 10% throughout, and now he pushed it a bit further to 20% to finish it off as quickly as possible. He could afford to lose the stamina as his mana expenditure was far larger.

In the end, while the Knights were stronger, Jake was far stronger than even that. One had to remember that these Knights were enemies that could be taken down by the regular parties of humanity, by groups often more than twenty levels below them.

His only struggle was with his resources, but he could kind of keep up by using potions and switching to a more low-maintenance fighting style. He stopped using Splitting Arrow and One Step Mile whenever possible. He limited his use of magic attacks and pretty much returned to an older style of just swiftly switching weapons between melee and ranged. The only active skill he used was his arcane arrows.

Yet to his dismay, they kept coming. The gate that fell apart when he touched it had housed an army of those Knights. He had believed there was perhaps a hundred total with an average level around 135. After killing that number and seeing how more came, he had to reevaluate and realize he had severely lowballed it.

They just kept fucking coming. Jake's low-maintenance style could keep him going for a while. Still, he did have to make some sacrifices in the form of willingly taking less dangerous hits to avoid wasting stamina or mana on teleporting or making a barrier.

But another, perhaps even larger issue than his resources was just how tiring it was. More so mentally than physically. He had to constantly dodge and filter information from his sphere, constantly consider when to attack and find openings, and even a second of inattentiveness would result in him taking severe damage.

Jake kept retreating inside the mountain, going down hallways as he fired arrows after those who chased him or cut them with his blades. Sadly their self-destruction did nothing to harm their comrades but only cursed Jake whenever he was hit. And he did get hit by the remnants of some explosions, as it simply became unavoidable.

The entire ordeal began taking far longer than it should, as he was forced to constantly flee and wait for the moment he could chug down another mana potion to get another period of serious damage output. His brain ended up going on half-auto pilot as he dodged sword swing after sword swing, narrowly avoiding black waves of dark mist sent his way by spear-thrusts and ducked under arrows surrounded by black mist.

He cut another golem and kicked another as he finally used a mana potion. He also used the oft-forgotten enchantment on his pants - Life Burst - as he was flooded with both vital energy and mana at the same time, giving him a second wind.

Jake pressed the attack as he fired off explosive arrows, cut down golems, and tore them apart one by one. The curse in his body did accumulate, but the scales still on his body took the brunt of it, even if it was yet another source of mana expenditure.

This continued as he killed Knight after Knight. Jake was little more than a machine churning through golem after golem. Hundreds of hallways had been left scarred. The atrium had been passed a dozen times as he circled the building, with clear signs of their battle. Then, finally, he kicked away a golem, it exploding a moment later as he drew his bow and prepared an arrow. Yet he stopped up, a flash of confusion passing his otherwise tired blank eyes.

There was no movement in the hallway.

Jake just stood there with an arrow nocked for five or so seconds as nothing happened. Realization finally struck him as he lowed his bow and dispelled the arcane arrow. He exited his battle haze and only had the energy to summon the same comfy lounge chair he had used in the puzzle room.

He fell back in it as he breathed loudly, not caring about the blood he dirtied it with or the bow that fell on the floor beside him. Jake closed his eyes as he slowly slipped into meditation, which quickly became him just taking a nap.

Hours later, he reawakened, his body still sore from the incredible overuse of Limit Break and from having his pools so strained during the fight. “Fuck those tin can fucks,” Jake muttered. They weren’t even fun to fight; it was just god damn tedious.

Looking at the timer, Jake saw the Treasure Hunt had now officially entered the second day, and by quite a few hours even. He had spent far longer killing those damn Knights and Blackguards than expected, just because he felt a natural treasure somewhere above.

Sadly, he couldn't just go up right away, as he was still low on resources and felt sore. So he chugged a stamina potion and entered meditation again as he went through all the notifications.

****You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 131]****

...

****You have slain [Reanimated Black Knight Golem – lvl 142] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 132 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 131 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 133 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 134 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 132 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

Jake had killed... a lot. Three hundred and eleven Knights in total, two hundred and ninety-two of which gave him any experience points. That had resulted in three whole levels... which meant that in the day since Jake entered this Treasure Hunt, he had already gotten five total class levels. He had to admit that he didn't think it would lead to this much experience when he entered the Treasure Hunt. However... it wasn't all great.

While the levels were good, there was one negative aspect... he had just spent nearly a full day without getting a single piece of loot. The damn reanimated armors blew themselves up upon death, and whatever metal was left behind was rusted and broken like the metal gate that broke apart. It also only fell into smaller pieces and tried to curse him when he touched it. In addition, Jake had killed so many, but none of them dropped an orb or a fragment or a shard or anything like that.

At least he still had more than eight and a half days left to get something, as he could well and truly say that his idea of speedrunning the Counts had been utterly ruined.

Hours passed as Jake healed up and consumed potions whenever he could. He was a bit surprised not a single person had come to the tower during all this time... but maybe it was because it looked abandoned and the constant mist within? Or they chose to focus on towers closer to the Mistless Plains and their basecamps? According to Reika, all the large factions had made temporary camps on the plains, after all, so it made sense if they wanted to stay close.

When he felt up to snuff, he picked up his bow with a string of mana, and got up off the comfortable lounge chair, and put it back in his inventory, hoping he hadn't lowered its value too much by getting it bloody. He had also discovered that the reason it was so tiring to recover was that damn curse again. He was really getting fed up with these curses.

So, of course, his next course of action was to dive straight into the cursed mist again, scales and arcane barriers at the ready. He had slaughtered a damn army of Knights, so he sure as hell wanted to see what they were hiding.

He flew up and began walking through the now empty walls as he tried to keep the curse at bay, heading straight for where his boots told him the natural treasure was. His Sense of the Malefic Viper or any of his other senses didn't give him any information about the treasure at all; it was only his boots. He reckoned it was due to the curse that his Sense didn't work. As for why the boots worked? Because they were awesome, that's why.

Jake finally made it to the final corner-turn, and by now, he could only see a dozen meters ahead of him even with his insane perception. He reckoned most more normal D-grades would barely be able to see their outstretched hands.

With the Sphere of Perception, he could naturally see far further, and soon the gate into what he presumed was the Count's chambers appeared. To his utter surprise, the gate was there, good as new, with the same magic circle as the one he encountered last time that required the Mark of Blood to open.

The chamber is still intact? What?

He was genuinely confused. Everything else was broken and completely eroded by the curse, yet the gate leading into the chamber didn't look any different. The magic circle seemed utterly unaffected by the curse, and as it protected the gate, no signs were left on that either.

Jake pushed onward through the cursed energy, walking up to the gate. Behind it, he saw destruction, yet it was all a bit vague. It was like how he hadn't been able to see in the dark-affinity dungeon the Forgotten Sewers before he got used to the dark-affinity. In other words, it wasn't that he couldn't see anything. It was that there was too much to see. The fact that it was only like that behind this gate meant one thing... the curse was magnitudes more powerful on the other side. Far more than even what it had been when he tried to fly up along the side of the mountain.

At the same time, his danger sense didn't respond. It was an odd dichotomy... his logic told him what was behind the gate was more dangerous than anything he had ever met in this Treasure Hunt, yet his instincts told him there was no enemy. He looked up and saw the same words on the gate as the last tower, and Jake promptly summoned the Mark of Blood as it resonated with the gate, dispelling the magic circle and making it open.

A flood of pure darkness washed out of the chamber, yet Jake stood in his place as the mist oddly enough just skirted around him. It only went a few dozen meters down the hallway behind him, mingling with the existing black mist before it stopped spreading. By now, it was apparent – this mist wasn't natural but controlled.

Within his sphere, he saw something. A shape appeared, looking oddly human, yet not entirely. It was made up entirely of the cursed mist, and the moment it appeared, an aura spread that was even more powerful than the Count.

Jake narrowed his eyes, and simply by using Identify on the black mist before him, he got a response.

[Yalsten Shade of Eternal Resentment – lvl 160]

”Hello there,” Jake greeted into the darkness. It squirmed and changed, evermoving, as suddenly the voice of a man sounded out.

”How do you carry the Mark of Blood yet remain unturned? Who do you serve?”

Before Jake could answer, another voice came... followed by a god damn choir.

”It’s a human.”

”How did he come here?”

”He is with the vampires, is he not?”

”A traitor to the Pure Ones.”

"Perhaps he is with the Pure Ones?"

"I wanna go home..."

"Silence, child."

"Are you with the Pure ones?"

"Who do you serve?"

"Who are you?"

"What are you?"

"Identify yourself."

Jake stood there, being bombarded by voices, many of them echoing and hard to discern, talking over each other and interrupting in the middle. These were only what could be construed as sentences too... for in total, hundreds if not thousands spoke. Thank Villy for high perception once again.

"I'm a hunter, squarely not on the side of the vampires, and I'm here to hunt down the Counts and kill all the vampires in this place. I have already killed one Count of Blood, and as for who I work for? Well, I would self-identify as more freelance than working for anyone," Jake said, leaving out the part about stealing all their stuff or the Pure Ones being all dead.

A moment of silence followed before the voices came back with a vengeance.

"Enemy of the vampires?"

"A paladin? A holy warrior?"

"Slayer of the unclean."

"Kill them all?"

"Ally?"

"He has a free lance?"

"He said hunter... a vampire hunter?"

"But does he lie?"

"A liar?"

"Lies?"

"He may work for the Counts."

"He said he killed one."

"He lied."

"Traitor."

"We demand proof."

"Evidence."

"Show us proof."

"Proof."

"Proof."

"Proof."

Rather than words, Jake responded simply by summoning the key and the heart of the Count. He held them both high before speaking towards the intangible form before him:

"I told you, I'm a hunter here to slay all the vampires. Will you get in my way, or what's the deal?"

The last words were spoken after he unleashed his mana-infused presence. He hadn't been speaking only for the fun of it but to try and understand what kind of creature he stood before, and he soon found what it was. Behind the pitch-black form of mist was an item that connected to it. Right where the altar had been in the last chamber. It was also this item that gave off the response of a natural treasure.

Once more, the Shade was silent for a few seconds, just taking in his presence. Jake had infused it with his desire to kill the vampires. A genuine emotion that he believed the personalities dwelling within the Shade understood.

"Truth."

"He has slain one."

"But can he slay them all?"

"Counts he can."

"But what of?"

"No..."

"Impossible."

"But what if we help?"

"Help."

"We help."

"If you swear to slay them."

"Slay them all."

"Slaughter them."

"Kill them."

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill."

"Kill"

"Yeah, I'll kill the vampires; that's the damn point, I promise," Jake said. He was beginning to get a damn headache from the many voices echoing throughout the hall simultaneously and the constant infusion of will trying to inflict him. While the curse didn't try to harm him, it did try to make him into a bloodthirsty vampire slayer.

Just as he was considering if this entire ordeal was worth it or if he should risk a fight, the Shade once more responded.

The dark mist in the area began swirling and gathering towards the natural treasure like a black hole. Jake was entirely unaffected, and only a second later, he noticed how he could already see a bit farther ahead as the density of mist decreased.

Jake observed the natural treasure for the first time as it gathered energy and saw what it was. It truly had been the chamber of a Count, and he saw the coffin and altar just like in the previous tower. Or what was left of them.

The altar was cracked into many pieces and the coffin shattered as a root descended straight down from the ceiling and penetrated the coffin and broken altar. Within the coffin lay only ash, and Jake saw that the entire root that descended was entirely rotten and hollow beside the sharp tip of the root and a meter or so up its length.

He used Identify on the root, and at the same time, he felt the presence of the Shade disperse as the intensity of the curse in the room returned to normal. Except the curse energies didn't hurt him... for no black mist got within five meters of the black root.

[Root of Yalsten's Eternal Resentment (Unique)] – A wooden root from an unknown tree that has absorbed the curse energies of the black mist that has hung over Yalsten for unnumerable years. The deep and eternal resentment towards the vampires that permeates the curse has now been absorbed and concentrated. Will cause disastrous damage and curse any vampire it comes into contact with; however, it can only be used once. While in possession of this root, the cursed mist will not see you as an enemy. Be warned that while the curse will not seek to damage you, it will still influence you. This effect grows as it absorbs the curse energy of any cursed vessels related to the curse in Yalsten.

Jake stared at the description as he walked up to it, and with an easy pull, he got it out of the coffin. The rest of the root that extended towards the ceiling also turned to dust the moment he claimed the item.

He saw that the mist still didn't get close to him but that he now had a five-meter area around him completely cleared of black mist.

I'm sure this will come in handy.