

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 311: Treasure Hunt: Arrogant Young Master

Treants, oh treants. It was a creature type that was present in so many video games, fiction, and general fantasy. No doubt humans from ages past had seen trees and wondered: “what if that massive fucking tree could walk around and smash stuff?” and just let their imagination take things from there.

Yet when Jake finally got to meet them, he got some scuffed broken versions that were far closer to elementals than actual trees. He felt cheated and betrayed that they even kept the treant-tag. They couldn’t even do proper tree magic! No spearing roots, no long vines extending from them, or razor leaves fired after him. Just a bunch of rotting trees that blew up with a single arrow and reassembled themselves using their curse energies.

Jake did what he could as he worked to make the world right. He tore the trees apart one by one, starting with the Lord. It was the biggest of the bunch and the only one Jake hoped would at least give him a bit of entertainment.

Well, the first thing he did was to take out the Root of Eternal Resentment, hoping he could just bonk them to death and be done with it. Sadly it didn’t work, Jake assuming it was because these weren’t truly part of the Yalsten curse... just generally fucked up by curse energy. If the Yalsten curse directed them, wouldn’t they hold more hate for the vampires sitting around the edges of the valley trying to take advantage of the fight than for Jake?

No, even if cursed, they were still directed by the fake-metal-tree-that-wasn't-even-a-metal-treant tree. That damn tree was a big disappointment too. Sure, Jake got cheated out of fighting real treants, but a mech treant could still be cool, right? But noo, he just had to fight these shitty rotting things. They even smelled.

Still... not as bad as mushrooms.

As for the fight itself, it was just the usual stuff. The wannabe-treants used simple attacks, mainly just trying to smash Jake with a bit of curse magic mixed in here and there. The Treant Lord used its weird tentacles to try and grasp Jake and infuse him with its curse, which was also the reason why he targeted it first. Those damn vines were a bit too mushroomy for his liking. Cursed *and* mushroomy, even.

What he had to hand to the treants was their durability. He kept blowing them apart time and time again, yet they kept regrowing the broken wood. In the end, Jake blanketed the entire valley in toxic mist and, with his blood-soaked arrows, poisoned the fake treants one after another, whittling them down. While his poison didn't do much... it did take its toll.

Needless to say, destructive arcane energy also did plenty of damage.

For nearly an hour, the valley was a hellscape of broken and rotting pieces of wood flying everywhere, pink-purple explosions, and a constant poisonous mist blanketing everything. Occasionally the entire valley would light up for a brief moment as a Mark of the Avaricious Hunter was activated, making it quite the show from an outside perspective.

Sadly, all the vampiric observers had taken off in fright, not wanting to get involved at all. Probably a good decision on their part.

In the end, Jake stood in the middle of the valley, destruction all around him as he cleaned his cloak that looked to now be covered in mold. Cursed mold. Good thing he got it upgraded. Altmar technology sure was something, that's for sure. To his surprise, he had even gotten a level from the entire endeavor.

****You have slain [Cursed Vault Guardian Treant Lord – lvl 150] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Cursed Vault Guardian Treant – lvl 140] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

...

****You have slain [Cursed Vault Guardian Treant – lvl 140] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 136 - Stat points allocated, +10 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 133 - Stat points allocated, +15 free points****

In retrospect, it probably shouldn't surprise him. He hadn't gotten a level after he killed the last Count of Blood, and he had gotten a bit more experience since then too. Granted, the fights hadn't been the hardest, but Jake hoped he would encounter something worthwhile later on... if not, then at least that final boss should be worth something.

If he had to place these cursed fake treants on any kind of power hierarchy, he would say they were about the level of the Warlords or Fungalmancers, AKA creatures Jake could kill relatively easily dozens of levels and hundreds of elixirs ago. On the other hand, he had a feeling these enemies weren't truly designed to kill anything but just stall people more than anything. They were overly defensive, after all.

With all the fake treants dead, Jake summoned the Root of Eternal Resentment again, and this time it reacted. It began absorbing some of the energy from all the dead enemies, but only a bit of it. Once it was done absorbing the energy, he put it back in his Insignia and also stored all of the wood that remained of the fake treants. It looked like shit, but who knows? Maybe it was worth something to someone.

He walked up to the metal tree and placed his hand on it again. This time, he got an entirely different response. It felt almost like an invitation... and without further ado, he accepted it as he disappeared – teleported into the hidden space of the metal sphere.

As for how he knew he was in the metal sphere? Because he could vaguely feel the outside of the tree through his Sphere of Perception as he now found himself in a perfectly spherical room. He stood on a platform surrounded by a barrier in front of him, with the space behind him filled with furniture and other amenities, like it was a living area. The entire sphere was only about ten meters in diameter, so not exactly a huge space.

Behind the barrier, Jake saw plenty of stuff that he assumed were treasures. The issue was... he had no idea how to get through the barrier. He placed his palm on it and felt like it was utterly impenetrable with usual means... maybe he could wear it down with enough time if he used-

Before he could finish his thought, a figure suddenly appeared off to the side of the metal sphere. It was a woman in an odd uniform, and Jake instantly recognized that it was some kind of projection and not a real person.

Jake looked at her and saw the red eyes, indicative of a vampire. Her pale white skin also made him think the same, and she had an odd symbol on her forehead, reminding Jake of a third eye. Identify didn't return anything as it wasn't actually a person, but he still had the feeling that whoever left the projection hadn't been weak. Quite the contrary.

"Who are you? How dare a mere D-grade enter this place?" she said, her voice filled with venom as she made it sound like Jake had just killed her entire family.

"I'm here to claim whatever is stored in this Vault, so would you kindly lower the barrier and allow me to take it all? Yalsten has long fallen, and there will come no one else to claim it," Jake answered, looking straight into her eyes. If she was going to be an ass about it, so would he.

Weirdly enough, she took offense to his response.

The entire room became flooded with an aura Jake could only recognize as above D-grade. C-grade? Possibly even B-grade? Either way, it wasn't one with any true intent, just the aura and nothing more. While Jake knew that would often be enough of an intimidation tactic against most other D-grades, Jake just kept staring at her unfazed.

"Well?" he asked.

She looked a bit perplexed, which surprised Jake. A part of him had assumed this projection wouldn't show any real intelligence but just be like the Counts or something. That there were pre-determined responses and such... but the look of utter confusion on her face seemed very genuine. So... closer to the Altmar one?

"Who are you?" she repeated.

Jake had taken this time to properly inspect the room, as well as what was behind the barrier. While he couldn't see through it with his eyes or other magical senses, his Sphere of Perception sure could, and behind it, he saw a few interesting things. One of the items was more interesting than any others, as it had a certain motif engraved on it that he recognized... and based on its prominent position...

He decided to take a gamble.

Jake stared at her as he faked anger and related his own aura. "A better question is who you think you are to ask me that? Has Yalsten really fallen that far?"

As his aura washed over the room, he happily mixed in a bit of an aura that was normally concealed by Shroud of the Primordial – the one marking him as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

For what Jake had seen in the Vault was a medallion with the motif belonging to the Order of the Malefic Viper. Prominently displayed on a pedestal in the middle of the room for all to see.

His actions were a pure gamble... one that paid off.

The projection of the woman paled – something he was impressed that a vampire, much less the projection of one, could even do. Jake allowed her to bathe in his aura as he let it sink in who he was, gladly playing the arrogant young master to get some benefits.

After a few seconds, she seemed to come to her senses as she practically prostrated herself on the floor.

“This member of the Nalkar line greets the Malefic’s Chosen; I apologize for my disrespect and not recognizing you!”

She stared at Jake with amazement in her eyes, which made Jake feel both uncomfortable and amazed at the overdone response. However, he had to keep up his persona as he tossed around his clout.

“I don’t really care either way and didn’t I tell you to open up the damn Vault already?” Jake said, literally staring down at her.

“This... I am under strict order to only open if a member of the Nalkar line arrives or someone holding the key...” she said, her own domineering attitude utterly gone as she seemed meek.

“I wasn’t asking,” he spoke before shaking his head in fake disappointment. “And here I thought the Nalkar’s were smart... but it appears even your intelligence is merely an illusion. How disappointing.”

Considering how she had named herself a part of the Nalkar line, Jake naturally remembered that he had a heart from a Nalkar vampire. The Nalkar vampires were naturally talented in illusion and mind magic and were more casters than warriors, unlike most vampires Jake had encountered. As for the insults? Well, he was a young master, was he not?

“I...” she said as she pulled herself together and got up, still keeping her head lowered. “I shall naturally unlock it; apologies for the continued disrespect. I was simply too caught up in old customs and procedures. I hope this has not led to any bad blood between the Nalkar line and the Order.”

With that, the vampire made some motions as different runes around the room began glowing, unlocking the barrier. That is when Jake realized this was actually just another puzzle. One he had bypassed by fooling the projection into helping. But then again, perhaps that was also just another option. One he could totally see someone like Jacob exploiting.

The barrier began slowly fading away as more and more runes were activated, and Jake decided to be a bit nicer. “I shall make sure to mention it to the Malefic One that the Nalkars aren’t all that bad.”

“My eternal thanks,” she said with a bow. “It gladdens me those who fled from Yalsten made it safely to the Order... it may be overreaching, but how is the clan doing?”

Jake hadn’t expected that one as he stopped up, looking as if he was thinking. He was actually just waiting for the barrier to fully disappear, as he didn’t want to say something dumb that could make the projection change her mind.

If he said he had no idea, it would be a bit suspicious considering he clearly knew of the Nalkar vampires... or would it? He didn’t know how common they were. If they happened to only originate from Yalsten, it would be suspicious as hell if he was super knowledgeable. On the other hand, if he lied and said they were doing well, it would be a bit out of his fake arrogant master character, wouldn’t it? Mainly the part about him even bothering knowing if they were doing well.

Man, did he wish he could just ping Villy and ask him if his Order happened to have a bunch of vampires in it and if any of those were of the Nalkar variant.

Luckily, the barrier went all the way down without any issues, and Jake stepped inside past where the barrier had been before, ready to One Step Mile out if the projection became hostile as he answered:

“Are you questioning if the Malefic Order doesn’t take care of its own? That I even bother knowing of the Nalkar vampires should be answer enough about how they’re doing, shouldn’t it?”

It wasn't a perfect answer, but it seemed to be good enough as the projection looked visibly relieved. Jake totally understood that... this projection had been left in this Vault a long time ago, only to be activated at some unknown future time. If Jake's theory was correct, these projections were more or less just clones, which meant they had their own thoughts, even if they were only temporary existences. To give the projection a bit of relief wasn't too much to do... and he decided to actually check in with Villy after the Hunt to ask about them.

"Naturally," she finally answered, a smile on her lips. Considering the projection seemed satisfied, Jake began inspecting the loot. He at first wanted to start with the medallion related to the Order of the Malefic Viper but decided against it. He was the Chosen of the Malefic Viper; why would he care about some small token? Thus he went for the other stuff first. Also, there was something to be said about saving the best for last.

The first item he went for was the one giving off a rather impressive magical aura. There were three items in total giving off strong auras, which he did find a bit weird considering how this was meant to be a Vault made by powerful beings far above D-grade. No doubt, the system had curated what was handed out.

He went over to the item, and even if it was the one giving off the weakest aura... it was quite the impressive item nevertheless.

[Wand of the Mindbreaker (Epic)] – A wand created from an unknown type of wood with the ability to project a portion of the abilities of a Mindbreaker. The wand has been soaked in the blood of a dead high-tier D-grade Mindbreaker variant and been infused with the core of one, granting it some of the Mindbreaker's abilities. Allows the user to cast the spell Mindbreak, sending out a wave of pure mental force to damage the outer layers of the soul for anyone nearby. Enhances all mind magic cast using this wand. Enchantments: Empowered Mind Magic. Grants the skill: [Mindbreak (Epic)]

Requirements: lvl 120+ in any humanoid race.

It was a wooden wand that honestly didn't look that special besides its carvings and the slightly reddish-brown color that looked uneven in places. Jake considered experimenting with it a bit but decided to pick up his pace to avoid spooking the projection. Looking impressed with a measly epic-rarity wand wouldn't be something an arrogant young master would do, now was it?

So he nonchalantly tossed it in his Insignia and moved on, trying to fake utter indifference like swiping epic-rarity loot was just another day in the office for the arrogant young master of the Malefic Viper.

Chapter 312: Treasure Hunt: Test of Character

With the wand in his inventory, he moved on to some of the other stuff. The next item of interest was a white crown sitting on top of a pillow. The crown had a relatively simple design and was made out of some kind of white metal, reminding him a bit of white gold. In the center of the crown was a small red gem that looked to almost be glowing. It also gave off an impressive aura, reminding him a bit of the Nalkar vampires, and it became clear why upon identifying it.

[Nalkar Crown of the Dominant Mind (Ancient)] – A crown created by a powerful crafter from the Nalkar vampire line. The crown is made of an unknown metal and is extremely durable. A processed heart of a powerful Nalkar Vampire is embedded in it, soaking it with magical powers. The Nalkar Heart enhances all mind, illusion, and phantasmal-based magic. Passively grants resistance to all mind-affecting magic while

worn. Enchantments: +200 Willpower, +150 Wisdom, +100 Intelligence. Dominant Mind of the Nalkar.

Requirements: lvl 130+ in any humanoid race.

Well, damn, Jake thought as he looked at the stats. That was some impressive stuff. The pure stats it gave were quite insane, and with the added benefits of making mind magic better? A pure win. Especially considering the wand he obtained earlier. Jake reckoned a mage using mind magic could go far with those two together. Even if you weren't a mind mage, he reckoned most mages could make good use of those two items together. The pure stats and mental resistance granted by the crown were likely considered enough by most people.

He also wasn't going to ask about the ethicality of using the heart of a brethren to make a crown. Because honestly, that was less weird than people getting their loved ones cremated before the system and turning their ashes into jewelry. He wasn't judging, he just found it weird, and it was probably a cultural thing.

As for the question if Jake would use it... he would find that out later. He had a feeling he couldn't due to the mask on his face getting in the way, and he really didn't want to try and put it on his head there and then, potentially looking like an idiot with the projection watching.

Thus he just put it in his inventory, not showing any visible signs he was impressed.

Jake finally went over to the token with the Order of the Malefic Viper symbol on it and picked it up, the projection looking on nervously behind him. Once he did so, he used Identify on it... and was honestly taken aback.

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

First of all, legendary-rarity for a token that would grant access to the Order of the Malefic Viper? Was this just Villy and his Order flexing by having such a high rarity item do that? Or was there actually something special about it? Was that aura really enough to warrant the rarity?

He was also surprised such an item was present in this Treasure Hunt. Was it a bit like the Altmar things in the dungeon? A method to recruit people? But from what Jake had gathered from Villy, the Order wasn't really that big on recruiting and had quite high standards usually.

Maybe the Nalkar vampires were just that great? Considering the starved heart of one was epic-rarity, he assumed the regular version was ancient-rarity. With their natural magic abilities and the stats granted by the crown likely corresponding to what their race gave... he could see how they were well-dispositioned to doing alchemy.

It would be pretty funny if they had a big presence in the Order, he joked a bit to himself. He kept walking around the room, trying to look as disinterested as possible as he emptied it out.

"Sir... I may be speaking out of turn... but for what purpose do you acquire the furniture?" the projection asked with a very nervous tone.

“Are you saying this furniture is of poor quality? I just don’t believe anything, even with low value, should be wasted. That is the true path to strength, always strive for more and take anything you can. I am a man of avarice; this is simply my path,” Jake said, giving his sage advice as he stole a sofa.

The projection slowly nodded as Jake left the Vault’s interior an empty husk, taking everything and anything he came across.

The rest of the loot after the token wasn’t much to write home about. Jake was more sure than ever the system had kind of curated things and chosen what should remain. This Vault was supposed to be left behind by beings several grades above Jake, so for it to only house D-grade equipment and items a D-grade could feasibly use wouldn’t make much sense.

During his looting spree, the projection just looked on as she deeply reflected on his words. A bit useless considering she was a projection who could never leave the Vault. Jake found this entire practice of leaving projections behind a bit odd if useful. He just couldn’t imagine how a projection with sentience must feel... knowing it would cease to be in not that long, existing only with a single purpose. Or maybe they were programmed somehow? In either way, Jake felt a bit sorry for them.

Once he was all done in the room, he turned to the projection as he nodded. “While there was nothing of use to me, I still found some items of value I can give to my subordinates. I shall remember the courtesy of the Nalkar line and be sure to pass it on.”

“If... if I may ask a single more question,” the projection said, as she asked inquisitively. “Is... is the True Ancestor truly dead?”

Jake looked at her a bit, suppressing himself from giving any reaction. He should have known this one was coming, shouldn't he? The True Ancestor, Sanguine, was without a doubt a powerful god. As a Chosen of a Primordial, it probably made sense he would know.

If he said: "yeah, he dead," it could possibly have some bad effects, but so could lying and saying the guy was still alive. Heck, if it was even a guy. Was Jake even sure of it being a man? Sanguine wasn't really a name Jake could place gender on. Wait, maybe the Ancestor was some genderless monstrosity?

Jake tried to look calm as he considering his answer and just settled on a non-committal one.

"What do you believe?" he asked her. Considering he didn't know, he preferred to try and stay mysterious. Any answer could backfire, though, at this point, he had a feeling he could answer anything he wanted without any negative consequences.

"If the True Ancestor remains alive... why would he have abandoned us like this? Why would he allow us to suffer and see his children be hunted and slaughtered for no reason? Why would he permit so many lines to be extinguished?" she said, having a bit more bite to her this time as Jake saw her frustration.

Oh, a great way to bait some more info out, Jake thought.

For this one, Jake actually had an answer. Perhaps not the right one, but the one he was sure Villy would give... and in many ways, the same on Jake would.

“Why not? Why would the True Ancestor care if the weak are culled? Would it not only give space for the truly powerful to rise? For the lines that remained to become more powerful than ever. Perhaps it was a cleansing. A test. All you need to know is that the Nalkar line remains... and if the True Ancestor died or not, does it really matter? If the Nalkar line was so weak as to require the help of Sanguine to remain viable, it was never worthy of existing to begin with,” Jake answered, allowing his aura to bellow out of his body to reinforce his words.

It was harsh, but in Jake’s opinion, the truth. If a race existed only by relying on some powerful god, was that truly a race that should exist? Clearly, the vampires hadn’t all ceased to be after the True Ancestor disappeared or died or whatever. Being caught up in some old geezers vanishing was just a waste of time. Jake knew the gods had probably created some races throughout the ages... but those races remained even after the god died. If a race would disappear with the death of a god, that race would just suck, in his opinion.

The vampire woman just stood looking at him for a while, her face looking a bit offended and angry, but she didn’t say anything. Jake saw this and decided just to double down.

“Don’t misunderstand; I am complimenting the Nalkar line. You have reached a stage where you don’t need the True Ancestor to be powerful. You don’t need the Order of the Malefic Viper. You can stand on your own feet and show the multiverse the Nalkars are not to be trifled with. That is true power and worthy of respect,” he said, piling on.

Jake had no idea if this would work... but the look on the projection’s face quickly changed as she was deep in thought. Jake himself was considering if now wasn’t the time he should get out of the damn Vault, considering he was done looting it, and for every sentence he spoke, he got closer and closer to saying something he really shouldn’t have.

Yet before he could say anything... the room shook as everything around him seemed to shift and move.

He looked over at the projection, and she smiled and bowed to him. "Thank you... truly. It gladdens me to know the Nalkar line remains powerful and under the umbrella of the Order of the Malefic Viper.. with your words, I believe I can rest. None will come here, and none will need to know of our fate... please take care of the Nalkars in the future."

When she was done saying this, the entire projection turned to wisps of energy and flew into a formerly hidden compartment Jake hadn't even noticed before with his sphere. He had simply thought it was part of the magical construction of the metal sphere and some power source... and in some ways, it was. It had been the source of the projection.

The compartment opened, and within, he saw a familiar red gem that still gave off an aura similar to the projection. It was a vampire heart - the projection's heart. Jake hadn't expected it to turn out like this... but when he used Identify on the heart, he was totally fine with how things ended up.

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

From this, Jake also learned the vampire he had been talking with had been C-grade. A part of him felt proud he had just managed to fool a C-grade, but another part of him felt a bit shitty about his deceptive tactics, especially considering how the projection had

made itself cease to exist by giving him the heart. Not that he believed being stuck in this sphere was much of a life... but still.

Jake didn't even have time to consider how he should get out as he felt the pull of space on him. He quickly stored the heart in his Insigna before he was pulled away from the space. He was tossed outside of the metal sphere and landed on the ground where he had killed the fake treants.

The metal tree in front of him began rusting before he had even landed, and within less than five seconds, turned into silver dust and fell to the ground.

He walked up to the dust and found it gave off no mana. He tried burning a bit of it with Alchemical Flame, discovering it wasn't even resilient either. It was just useless dust. Shaking his head, he stood up as he turned to walk towards another red pillar of light in the distance.

Jake promised himself that if the Nalkar vampires truly did exist out there and within the Order, he would do them a solid in the future. They had just given him some awesome loot, and he was likely the first to clear a Vault... so that was the least he could do.

"Patriarch... was it truly wise to antagonize the Lord of Haven like that?" Reika asked her great-grandfather a bit nervously.

This was just after they had opened the spire and caused the curse to be absorbed by the large crystalline structure. Reika was worried that this could hurt the relations between the two factions and potentially even make them enemies.

Her great-grandfather just looked at her as he smiled and shook his head. “My dear... if he chose to make us into mortal enemies over this, is he truly someone we want to ally with? If his ego is so fragile and his emotions so immature he would lash out from losing such a minor competition, then he was never worthy of admiration nor respect.”

Reika looked a bit at the Patriarch, taking the words in. She admonished herself for thinking about the situation so simply... her great-grandfather hadn't only made the competition to get some potential benefits, it was also a way to scout out Jake's character. And she had to agree. If he chose to make either them or the Holy Church outright enemies over a competition with loosely defined rules, where it could be argued neither side truly honored the spirit of the aforementioned competition... then he truly wasn't someone worth working with. If even such a minor slight turned into conflict, then working with him would be hell.

She already knew he wouldn't act out just based on her brief encounter with him. Sure, he was competitive to the extreme, but he wouldn't begin killing people for minor things. At least she didn't think so. Their time had been brief, but during that, he had never gotten angry even when she one-upped him, or he was wrong.

“Besides,” the Patriarch said, continuing. “Wasn't I the loser here? I now owe the Holy Church, and my price for victory was to be the first to enter a crystal spire that cannot be entered.”

Her great-grandfather laughed as he shook his head, clearly not caring that much. She looked up at him and couldn't help but wonder who would truly win in a duel between him and Jake. From a purely analytical standpoint, Jake was stronger. But, for some reason, she just couldn't see the Sword Saint lose either.

“Now, let us not miss out on more rewards than necessary,” he said, looking out into the horizon before turning to her with his usual relaxed smile. “I shall head south; you take the northeastern area. Remember to report in... oh, but before you go, remember to evacuate all of those under your command from the Mistless Plains.”

Reika nodded, not even questioning why. She had already seen the Holy Church packing up and retreating out of the plains. It looked like they were relocating to one of the cleared-out towers, and Reika decided to do the same.

The Sword Saint nodded to her, and with a final wave, spoke: “Happy hunting.”

Chapter 313: Treasure Hunt: Rubik's Cube

The second phase of the Treasure Hunt started out as a mad dash for the closest Vaults. The Risen had a headstart and had already located and mapped out the location of several before the phase began and had looted everything in and around these Vaults.

Other factions simply rushed for them. For most, it would be a half-a-day journey or more to the closest Vault and included much combat and challenges along the way, making it potentially take even longer. One had to remember that someone like Jake had a powerful movement skill, while a party often had at least one member – often the healers or the heavy warrior – who had difficulty traveling fast.

Due to the danger, as one moved further away from the central Mistless Plains, it wasn't viable for most people to go solo either. Only the more powerful individuals could do this, as the average rogue, caster, or archer from a party would find themselves in hard-fought battles against several Ekilmare variants.

All of this ultimately resulted in only the most powerful parties or individuals making it to the Vaults first, and while this would, in the eyes of many, look like an advantage... in many cases, it wasn't.

Jake made his way through the mist towards another Vault. The journey took him more than half an hour due to the distance, even with the constant use of One Step Mile. This one was about as close to the center of the Treasure Hunt as the one with the Nalkar vampire, just in another cardinal direction.

He had spent a good while killing fake treants and a good bit of time talking with the projection and looting. He knew it was unrealistic to be the first to reach this Vault, too, but still hoped for it. Yet as he got closer, it became clear he wasn't the first.

Flashes of light lit up in the distance, only visible through the mist due to his high perception. No doubt a fight was going on, and Jake considered if he should interfere or try and head elsewhere further in, hopefully being the first to reach that one.

Ultimately, he decided to say: "fuck it," and just headed to his current target. With around a week left of the Hunt, it was fine to begin robbing a bit if people wanted to compete. If it was a puzzle or something, he could just beat people fair and square, and it was solely a fight to unlock the Vault... well, he would deal with that situation too.

Making his way over another hill, he saw that this Vault was also in a small valley. The plains had many valleys, and the further one moved from the Mistless Plains, the more verticality got added to the terrain, with hills, valleys, and even the occasional small mountain beginning to pop up - real mountains this time, not the live-in mountains.

He had a good vantage point at the top of the hill leading into the valley and saw the situation below.

A mish-mash group of people was fighting an even larger group of vampires of the Ekilmare variant. It was the usual Nocturne version, except for one of them that was larger than any of the others. It didn't have the same sharp claws either, but something far closer to human hands. Its head was also disproportionally too large, and it had a huge belly.

Jake used Identify on them to get an idea.

[Young Nocturne Ekilmare – lvl 133]

[Young Nocturne Ekilmare – lvl 135]

[Juvenile Nocturne Ekilmare Matriarch – lvl 142]

He then turned his attention to the humans. There were eight vampires in total, while the human side had four. One of them used shadow magic and dodged around while firing bullets from a magical gun. Another was a mage alternating between fire and ice magic, the third a rogue with two swords, and the final person a mage surrounded by a massive stone armor.

From what he could see, these four weren't party members but individual fighters. They clearly weren't used to working as a team but did so nevertheless. Jake used Identify on them all, seeing they were fairly similar in level.

[Human – lvl 121]

[Human – lvl 118]

[Human – lvl 119]

[Human – lvl 124]

The rock mage was the highest-leveled one, followed by the guy with a magic gun. Jake stood on top of the hill observing and saw that he didn't need to get involved, at least not right away. While the fight wasn't easy for the group of four, they did seem to be winning. The Matriarch was more like a support variant than a true fighter as far as he could tell, and Jake saw the guy that he determined was from the Court of Shadows slowly wear it down with his shadow gun quite nicely.

Instead, he turned his attention to the thing giving off the massive pillar of red light, marking a Vault's location - the thing in question being... nothing. The pillar just fired up from the blue grass on the plains, making Jake theorize the thing was underground.

Jake was in a bit of a conundrum. Should he walk into the valley to investigate? That would undoubtedly shift some attention to him and interrupt the fight, considering they were sometimes battling even within the red pillar. He hated interfering with fights without any reason and robbing others of a good challenge... but he also hated wasting his own time by sitting around.

He tried looking from a distance and narrowed his eyes as he inspected the area with the pillar. He felt the mana given off by the area was different, probably also the reason why the vampires were there. Monsters just loved areas like this with special mana or a higher mana density. It allowed them to passively level and stay powerful while also making their resources regenerate faster. Well, Jake and other humans also got the benefit of faster mana regeneration.

As he was thinking all this, something great happened. The lowest-leveled of the bunch - the ice and fire mage - was suddenly jumped by four of the vampires at once in a coordinated attack. The Matriarch even empowered them all with some magic making their claws glow in a dark color.

Excuse!

Jake happily saw his chance to interfere when he saw the poor guy about to be ripped to shreds. If this had been an actual party and not just four random people, this situation would have never happened, but none of the others present had really considered defending their most vulnerable member.

The mage used his magic and summoned walls of ice around him as he used flame magic to launch himself into the air, but the Matriarch opened her large circular mouth and fired off a black beam that made the wall explode and throw him off-course, allowing a vampire to grasp his foot and drag him down.

Just as he was about to be torn limb from limb, Jake arrived. Or, well, his arrows did.

All four vampires froze at once, and a fraction of a second later, four arrows arrived, piercing through a vampire each, sending the bloodsuckers tumbling back. It was a hastily fired Splitting Arrow with stable arcane arrows, and it wasn't enough to truly down the vampires... but it was enough to buy Jake time.

Jake manipulated a string of mana and wrapped it around the mage's ankle. Then, he pulled with his mind just as the vampires stabilized themselves and tried to jump the caster again, only to see him be dragged across the ground away from them.

He fired off another round of arrows, this time more focused on killing and not only delaying. He rapid-fired, each of his arrows now covered in his own blood. The vampires barely had time to react as they were pierced straight through, leaving festering holes.

The Matriarch shrieked and turned her attention to Jake as she opened her mouth and fired off another beam. Jake simply looked over at her and took a single step, avoiding the beam at the very last moment, before he loosed another arrow – this one towards the Matriarch.

A good thing about the Matriarch was her isolated position... making her a perfect target for explosive arcane arrows. The arrow split at the very last moment, and she was hit by five massive explosions, blasting her backward and tumbling across the plains.

He refocussed on the regular vampires again and saw that after the initial confusion, the rogue, gun-guy, and earth mage all resumed their own assault. With Jake pre-occupying half the vampires, they swiftly made progress.

The earth mage had grasped one in his massive hands and had begun smashing it down into the ground, reinforcing said ground and making it slightly spiky all the meanwhile. The assassin with his guns was blasting a single vampire repeatedly with black bullets that exploded on impact. Finally, the rogue with the two swords was fighting two vampires as she adeptly cut them up while expertly dodging.

With the fire and ice mage out of danger, he also got back on his feet, threw Jake a grateful glance, and returned to the battle. He helped the rogue with her swords as he summoned a giant flaming ice spear, penetrating a vampire through its back.

It took them only a few minutes to finish off all the vampires, Jake likely doing most of the work despite joining so late. He wasn't entirely certain, though, as the group had worn down the vampires quite a bit, and based on the corpses of the ground, had already killed three before he got there.

Once everything had calmed down, Jake finally entered the valley. The four people looked at him, with only the earth mage and the rogue looking a bit apprehensive.

"Thanks for the help mate, I would've been fucked without ya," the elemental mage said as he laughed. Jake finally looked him over properly and saw he was a middle-aged man with a full beard. He was solidly built, and if he were smaller, Jake would have assumed him to be a dwarf.

“No problem,” Jake said, his attention already more focused on the Vault than anything else.

Clearly, the earth mage noticed this as he spoke: “It’s hidden approximately fifty meters below us.”

Jake nodded, already having walked closer to see it in his Sphere of Perception. It was a magical cube, reminding Jake a bit of a Rubik’s Cube... making him already have a feeling what they were in for.

“Can you get it up?” he asked, looking over at the earth mage.

The man looked back at Jake, not the scared type. He was still in his armor of stone, making him a five-meter tall golem-looking dude. Jake could still see him within, and Jake looked straight at the chest where the man was hidden.

“How do I know you won’t just take all the treasure from the Vault, leaving us all with nothing?” the earth mage asked with an accusing tone.

Jake looked at him as he smiled beneath his mask. “First of all, from what I have learned, these Vaults aren’t just something you instantly open and empty out. My guess is this one is a puzzle of some sort, and without solving the puzzle, there is no way to get the loot.”

He said this first part being nice and diplomatic, explaining some of the mechanics of this second phase of the Treasure Hunt. He wasn't as nice with the second thing. His aura bellowed out, infused with his presence as he looked at the earth mage.

"Secondly, you don't know if I will just take the Vault, but what the fuck makes you think you can do anything about it? If I really wanted everything, I would have put an arrow through your head before you even knew I was here, *really* taking everything from you. Would you prefer that?"

Jake felt like the guy was a moron. He had just helped them, so if he really wanted to do them harm, wouldn't he just have killed them too? Or was he so blind he thought Jake couldn't? Because then he would truly be a moron.

It ended up not being the earth mage, but the bearded man that said something in response first:

"Ay, if he wanted to fuck ya up, ya would be fucked already. Also, stop hidin' in ya little shell of a stone. It ain't gon help for shit. I know ya low on mana, so stop actin' like a dumb cunt already."

"The man has a point; let's just play nice, alright?" the shadow assassin chimed in, Jake thinking that if anyone were going to turn on anyone else in this group, it would be the guy who was an actual assassin.

The stone mage grunted as he dispelled his stone armor, allowing himself to fall to the ground. He was a young man in a brown robe, and he looked suspiciously at everyone present. *Does the dude have trust issues or something?* Jake asked himself, not really caring all that much.

What he did care about was having the mage help bring it up to the surface. While Jake could do it alone, it would be a long and time-consuming task, while he had a feeling an earth mage could handle it quite a bit easier.

“Fine... but swear that you’re not letting us all leave empty-handed,” the guy agreed, not even having to be asked as he felt the gazes of everyone present on him.

“I’m not gonna promise you shit,” Jake said, dismissing him instantly. “But I’m not gonna rob you if you manage to open the Vault first, I can promise you that. But if I end up doing it all alone, then you can take the scraps I leave you or fuck off.”

The earth mage grunted again as he just shook his head and muttered something under his breath.

“Still betta than those religious freaks,” the ice and fire mage said loudly, shrugging. The shadow assassin and woman with her two swords also stayed behind, giving their tacit approval.

Jake saw the earth mage plant both his hands on the ground as he began channeling mana into it. Then the earth began shaking as it churned and moved. The soil was being displaced, and a small hill began forming on the side of the valley as the earth mage used his magic.

At the same time, Jake saw the cube slowly be lifted up towards the ground, pushed by the soil underneath. Jake saw in his sphere that it had been anchored before, but those

anchors were now broken, likely by the system, or perhaps just the passage of time had eroded them.

Not long after, the cube got within a few meters of the surface, and once it did, it seemed to take on a life of its own. It suddenly shot out of the ground, sending up an eruption of soil and stone. A pulse of mana went through the valley, washing over them as the cube was revealed.

Yep, that's a Rubik's cube, Jake confirmed to himself.

The entire cube was more than five meters on each side and wasn't the usual sort with bright colors and only three, by three by three. It was the sort made by people who were honestly too much into Rubik's cubes. It was a fifteen by fifteen by fifteen cube.

Jake stared at it for a bit, seeing the magic sigils on the cube, making it obvious this was a puzzle.

"Yeah, fuck this," the bearded caster said as he just turned around and walked away. "Thanks, mate, but no way in fuckin hell am I doing that," he said to Jake before he exited the valley, clearly not into Rubik's cubes.

Chapter 314: Treasure Hunt: Valuable Asset

Four people stood starring at the massive cube. The bearded man had truly just taken off, not bothering to stay and try to solve it. The earth mage, the rogue, the gunman, and Jake

were the only ones left, and from the looks of it, the gunman and rogue were also close to leaving. Jake wasn't sure if the earth mage actually had a clue about the puzzle or if he was just staying out of pride.

The puzzle itself was very much a Rubik's Cube, but not the kind with colors or easy symbols. There weren't only six types of symbols but instead hundreds, and from Jake's initial assessment, he believed that before one could figure out how to solve the Rubik's Cube part of the puzzle, one had to first determine what each of the six sides should look like.

Compared to the puzzle he had solved with Reika, this one was far harder.

"Could we just try all the combination and solve it like that?" the guy from the Court of Shadows asked.

"Sounds like a great way to waste the rest of the Treasure Hunt," the rogue woman said, speaking for the first time.

Jake nodded. While he had never been that much into Rubik's Cubes, he had watched online videos on them while bored. A simply 3x3x3 cube already had possible combinations in the quintillions. He doubted he would manage to brute-force a 15x15x15 cube even if he spent the remainder of his entire D-grade lifespan.

He considered if even trying to solve it was worth it. It would no doubt take a while, and he could clear more Vaults if he found some he could open just by killing stuff. Well... he could try if moving the rube around incorrectly would trigger some combat mechanism like the tree.

"I'm going to try and manipulate the cube. It may cause enemies to appear, so be on guard," Jake said as he extended a string of mana. The cube happily responded as Jake moved one of the rows, making it turn, and-

"-oody waste of- wait, what the fuck?"

Just as Jake manipulated the cube, the bearded man suddenly appeared. Jake looked confused at him as he looked back at them with a confused expression. "Did you drag me back or what the actual fuck just happened?" the bearded man asked.

"We just moved the cube," the shadow assassin explained.

"Oh."

Jake ignored their conversation as he sensed the area. Faint traces of space-affinity mana surrounded the spot where the bearded man had appeared, and when Jake really focused on himself, he noticed something. A small mark, not dissimilar to his own Mark of the Avaricious Hunter was on his body, or more accurately, his soul.

"Someone try to leave the valley," Jake said, needing a guinea pig.

"Here we go again," the bearded man said, not even asking twice as he took flight and began flying away. Meanwhile, Jake turned the cube repeatedly. The moment the fire and ice mage was a few hundred meters away, he got teleported back where he had originally been, still firing flames out of his feet.

"Okay, fuck this," he complained. "Ya messin' with me, or we actually stuck?"

"Seems like it," the shadow assassin said, looking quite worried. The others did so too, especially the fire and ice mage and the rogue looked very bothered. The earth mage didn't visibly display any signs of being annoyed or put off, though Jake theorized that had more to do with honor than his actual feelings.

Jake sighed internally. That pulse earlier had likely been the source of the mark, and when Jake inspected it more closely, he had no idea how to remove it. He did feel like it would disappear within a day or so, though. He guessed the lower duration was the trade away for it being hard to remove... or maybe it was just far above his level.

So, solve the puzzle or be stuck here for a day doing nothing... I guess this is the system's way of not just letting people run between the most straightforward challenges, Jake concluded.

"What's the game plan?" the rogue woman asked, looking up at the cube. "I don't know anything about these magic things."

"I know a bit," the shadow assassin chimed in, seeming truthful.

"I fucking hate shit like this," the ice and fire mage said, making it obvious he was quite knowledgeable on the subject.

"I am quite well-versed in magic circles," the earth mage said, making it clear he wasn't very good at it.

They all looked at Jake. He just shrugged. "I don't really know much."

It was the truth. Jake really didn't have any solid grasp on these kinds of magic circles or runes or anything like that. He was just a fast learner and generally good at magic, which he leveraged when it came to solving puzzles. During the puzzle in the tower, Reika had been the one with the knowledge of magical runes, not him.

"So, we're basically fucked," the shadow assassin sighed.

"The mark keeping us trapped will be gone in around a day," Jake informed the others. "Also, the teleportation only triggers when the cube is moved."

Jake only stated these things as he stood there observing the cube. He hadn't realized the way his words could be interpreted before he saw three of them back away from him slightly. The three – all except the elemental mage – looked warily at him.

"What?" he asked, throwing them a glance, making them only back off more.

"They think ya gonna kill us all to make sure no one moves the damn cube," the elemental mage answered.

"Oh," Jake said with a nod. "I guess that works, but it also seems risky. Someone else could just come around and move the cube and teleport me back. Imagine if that happened during a fight..."

"Sounds like a get outta jail free card," the fire and ice mage answered with a laugh.

"Yeah, no thanks... let's just solve this crap," Jake said, turning to the three wary people. "The best way to not tempt me into believing going full murderhobo is the best option would be to actually prove yourselves useful and help solve the damn puzzle."

"Way ahead of those morons," the elemental mage snickered as he took out a small notebook and began writing stuff down.

The tentative onlookers seemed to realize the best choice was to actually try and solve the puzzle, as they all got to work.

But not before Jake tried firing an arrow at the cube.

That didn't work either.

Relying on the natives had always been a good tactic when it came to finding and exploiting the resources of the local land. It was why settlers and explorers always tried to subjugate or ally with the local forces upon landing on foreign ground.

They knew the lay of the land. They were familiar with where all the valuables were hidden. However, often these natives were not friendly. Sometimes diplomacy simply wasn't working, or, more often than not, it wasn't considered worth it to ally with them. With superior power, forced servitude was simply the easiest and most efficient solution.

Sultan was more than aware of this, as he appeared in the Treasure Hunt. He had done what few could and forcefully employed the local wildlife. The Ekilmars were in his eyes not foes to hunt down but beasts to use. They knew of the land and where the valuables were, just like a native of a conquered land.

He only had a single slave by his side going into the Hunt. It was the pathfinder named Summer whose primary skill was her ability to mark and see through the eyes of others. This ability proved extremely useful during this Treasure Hunt, especially in concert with the temporarily dominated vampires.

Sultan had a hard time deciding if keeping the woman around or not was the smart choice. He was aware of her stalker tendencies, and he was surprised that when Ms. Wells had given her the choice of being under the confinement of Haven or to stay with Sultan, she had chosen to stay.

That is until he realized that those stalker tendencies had been turned to him. She was the kind of lunatic that fixated on a single target, and her type seemed to be the man who had everything... and apparently, Sultan fit that description. He would have thought someone

like Mr. Thayne was more her type, but perhaps even she had a tinge of sanity in her mind making her not pursue him.

Sultan naturally didn't have any positive feelings towards her, but that seemed to only attract her more. This is why he found the entire situation unsettling. It had all become more complicated, and as he was no longer allowed to torture her – a rule he had followed – she had only become more servile and obsessed. Ultimately, however, he decided just to make use of her. She was in his mind an indentured servant, working with him until anything else was demanded of him or circumstances changed. He did not fear betrayal either, as she was bound by the rules in her contract... and Sultan also had certain skills he hadn't fully disclosed to Haven related to mind magic giving him assurance. Not because he didn't trust them – he trusted them as much as he would trust anyone that wasn't himself.

Haven had been good to him so far. They had some talented craftsmen and women, and he had made ample use of the System Store. However, it was more what simply being related to Haven granted him. It was like a protective shield hung over him. Once people knew where he was from, they didn't dare to strike at him out of fear of retaliation. Retaliation he doubted Lord Thayne would dish out even if people went for Sultan, but the fear of the possibility proved enough most of the time.

Not that he feared getting into a bout. He could handle himself.

Sultan had always been alone and had always needed to handle his own matters. He had learned the value of money from an early age and had resolved himself to never be poor. Not again. Wealth in the old world had been synonymous with power. Money could buy you the local police; it could make you immune to borderline any scrutiny, at least where he had been from.

His father had been wealthy, so the day he took advantage of Sultan's mother, no one dared complain, not even she. His mother had been a servant but was in all but title a

slave. She had no possibility of fleeing, no passport to travel, and was worked to the bone with only a single bed and a bit of food as payment.

So when the man who would become Sultan's father took a liking to her and began taking advantage, no one stood up or said anything. When she got pregnant, the man simply tossed her out onto the streets, not a penny to her name.

Sultan had grown up poor. Not the 'no birthday presents'-poor, but the 'barely surviving'-poor. His mother had done what she could to survive and raise her son, but he still had to do many things to survive. Out of all the people he had ever known, his own mother was still the person he respected the most. That was also why he would never take advantage of a slave in the same way his mother had been taken advantage of.

That didn't mean he would ever claim to be a good person. Quite the opposite. He had learned to find pleasure in inflicting pain upon those he believed deserved it. He still remembered the day he looked his father in the eyes as he took everything from him. The day he destroyed his own 'family' and left the formerly prestigious man in shambles, a poor beggar on the street. His wife divorced him, his children shunned him, and all his former business partners cut him off, acting as if he was dead. It was pure euphoria.

It was only beaten out by the day he saw his own father working as a servant. Sultan had believed the old man would have killed himself, but no, the old bastard had been too much of a coward to do that. Could Sultan have ended his father's life? Yes, he easily could... but the day he saw the pure misery in his eyes, he knew a life of servitude was a worse punishment than death. He had come to believe that for those in power to be dragged from their high towers into the streets to struggle with at the lowest rung of society was the best punishment. Ah, but that didn't mean there were no celebrations when he heard his father died of a heart attack from overworking himself.

Sultan was also fully aware many would view him as a hypocrite who was just as bad as those he despised, and he wasn't going to argue against it. He didn't need to be a good

person – just competent enough to make sure none could drag him from his own tower. His way of doing this? Not being the one sitting at the top.

Lord Thayne was at the top of the tower, and Sultan was perfectly fine with that. He had his own rules and his own creeds, just like Sultan himself, and as long as the merchant managed to identify those and play within the Chosen's rules, he should be fine. In the end, it was all about benefits and perception – so as long as Sultan stayed a benefit to Haven and not a liability, he would have a tower to weather all storms.

"Master, the vampires have located the closest Vault and begun fighting the guardians there," Summer said.

"Then let us move," he answered. Sultan controlled his ship – because of course he brought his ship to the Treasure Hunt, anything else would be silly – and set course for where Summer directed. He leaned back as they sailed through the air at high speeds, rivaling most individuals with powerful movement-related skills. His vessel was not cheap, after all.

It didn't take them long to reach their destination, where he found the Ekilmares fighting. Those controlled by him were clearly losing, but that was only to be expected. An unfortunate downside with domination was that often the dominated targets weren't as powerful. It wasn't due to a reduction in stats or anything like that, but simply the fact that any being not moving according to its own will wouldn't be as strong.

Sultan had many theories why this was, but none seemed quite right. Ultimately, it could simply be system-imposed rules, but alas, it was just something he would have to deal with.

He took a deep breath as he prepared himself for combat. Waving his hand, a musket appeared in it, gilded symbols of gold adorning the beautifully crafted weapon. The ship shifted and turned its side to the combat in the valley below, cannons appearing at starboard.

While his vessel was a great tool for transport, that didn't mean it couldn't be used for combat. Quite the opposite.

Summer also summoned her own bow, not even having to be told to. Sultan trusted her to simply do her job, as he raised his own weapon.

"Fire," he muttered.

A barrage of magical explosions overtook the valley with no regard for the Ekilmars he had dominated earlier. This was one of the advantages of using them – friendly fire wasn't a thing.

The vampires quickly noticed they were being assaulted and began running towards the floating ship. Sultan simply smiled as he shot one of the vampires in the front. It stumbled back from the impact, and instead of continuing to run for the ship, attacked another of the vampires beside it.

At the back of the vampires was one called a Matriarch, and it was by far the most dangerous foe present. It opened its maw and fired off a beam of energy, forcing Sultan to activate the shields on the ship while navigating it to move. Unfortunately, the ship was impacted, and the shield managed to block the blow successfully, but it still left some cracks in the barrier.

Sultan shot for the Matriarch, and she didn't even dodge as she was hit by one of his bullets. He tried to use his mental domination but felt the rebound as if something had hit him in the head. *Too much resistance.*

The more intelligent and the higher level a creature was, the harder it was to dominate. This was why sapient beings like humans were impossible to directly control, no matter their level. One could still control their movements, but not their mind. From the response the Matriarch gave him, it was either too strong or too smart to control both its mind and body. Luckily for him, he had other ways.

He took out one of the many items he had acquired from the Hunt. It was one of many anti-vampire weapons left by the Pure Ones in the form of a rare-rarity sword. He held no doubt it was an item many others would greatly value. Sultan valued it too... but he valued victory more.

With his hands on it, he channeled a certain skill from his profession. The sword began to warp and distort as it suddenly imploded into a small metal ball – the item destroyed forever. He took the metal ball and put it into his musket, and took aim once more.

It was an expensive shot and not one he planned on wasting. The skill could also not be used repeatedly, truly only giving him one chance. He directed the vampires he still had dominated to head for the Matriarch as he controlled the ship to bring it closer. Meanwhile, all the usual Ekilmars were still being bombarded by the ship and Summer, who continually used Powershots and other magical arrows.

Turning the ship, he made the front face the Matriarch as a compartment opened up, revealing a large canon. Energy began swirling as he aimed his musket. The ship fired

first, making the Matriarch dodge the blow as it was hounded by its own brethren. Her movements were predictable, giving Sultan the perfect opportunity.

BOOM!

The musket released a blast of mana as the pellet was propelled forward. The Matriarch's instincts clearly made it aware of the danger this attack represented, but it failed to dodge as it was mid-air.

What had once been a rare-rarity sword, now reduced to a single bullet, penetrated the body of the Matriarch as it screamed out in pain. Silver veins spread from where it had been hit as the attack did its job. The skill allowed him to reduce an item of rare-rarity or below to a single bullet, amplifying the power of its enchantment significantly and delivered a good portion of the power found in the item's Records at once.

The Matriarch stumbled and screamed as it took significant damage, but more importantly, the vampire became utterly unable to heal from the wounds inflicted by its brethren. Cuts and bruises soon covered its body, and Sultan kept shooting with Summer as he also repositioned the ship to keep up the assault, the canon at the front single-use.

It still ended up taking them a good while to finish the job, as the vampires were incredibly durable. The Matriarch died from accumulated wounds, as Sultan claimed the Vault.

Above all else, Sultan was a merchant. Yet, in this new world, a merchant had to be able to defend himself. He knew he could never reach the same level of power through his own efforts as others. He wasn't as naturally talented at combat or magic, so he simply did the

second-best: he bought all the power he could – his profession and class both amplifying his abilities to do so.

He always carried many weapons to turn into bullets in his inventory, some of them rarer than others. Rarity, however, wasn't always everything. For he had found that a certain set of weapons Haven had given him access to were incredibly potent. Ones he saved as trump cards.

It was the toxic scrap metal Lord Thayne had created and discarded in large quantities a while ago as he was practicing transmutation – now reformed into weapons. Unfortunately, these weapons were all impractical and impossible to use as actual weapons due to their fragility, but for Sultan?

Sultan only needed them to last for a single shot.

So one could say that Sultan didn't only leverage the Lord of Haven's strength socially, but also in many ways literally – something his Patron god had continually expressed was a path he should keep walking. Because even the strongest would require a support system, and Sultan planned to become part of that system and stay an invaluable asset.

Chapter 315: Treasure Hunt: Another Collaborative Project

The valley looked near-unrecognizable from what it had only a bit less than a day ago. Several ice cubes were spread throughout, a few models of stone were carved, and the environment changed with many symbols arranged into potential magic circles carved onto the ground.

"Ya can't fucking do that; it fucks over the fourth side," the ice and fire mage commented.

"Not if we turn it in this way, then the circle will be restored again," the shadow assassin countered as he manipulated the large cube.

"Aight, but that doesn't fix the problem with the first side still being a damn mess."

"True... but the edges look right."

Jake listened to their conversation as he himself was making symbols appear around him, manifested through his arcane mana. He arranged and re-arranged them repeatedly, trying to get the magic circle to look right. They had already 'solved' five of the six sides of the cube, and Jake was working on the last one.

When Jake said: "they," he meant primarily Jake, the elemental mage, and the guy from the Court of Shadows. It turned out the gun guy was also a talented gunsmith and knew quite a bit about enchantments and runes due to that. Magic guns were just fancy magic wands, after all.

The elemental mage was just naturally talented, as far as Jake could tell. He already made magic circles sometimes during combat and said he was actually a builder who didn't like building stuff. Instead, he was solely focused on reinforcing objects and making them more durable. He even had skills a bit like Transmute or perhaps Cultivate Toxin in that it hardened objects and could slightly change properties.

As for Jake? Well, Jake wouldn't say he knew a lot about runes and the like a day or so ago, but by now, he had become quite knowledgeable. The reason for this was simple: he had cheated.

Alright, it wasn't really cheating, though Jake still thought it kind of was. What he used wasn't truly his own knowledge, after all, but that of the Malefic Viper.

It wasn't something Jake thought a lot about. In fact, it was something he often forgot about. But he couldn't forget that he was still carrying around a drop of blood from the Villy somewhere in his body. In actuality, it was more like it resided within his soul, and more than a drop of blood, it was a fragment of Records. It was a fragment of pure knowledge that his ancient-rarity version of Sagacity of the Malefic Viper was partly designed to explore, as reflected by the description:

[Sagacity of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] – To hold just a fragment of the wisdom of a Primordial is more than most ever achieve. Much less to be personally taught that knowledge directly by the god himself. Allows the Alchemist to peek into a fragment of the Malefic Viper's Records to seek his knowledge. Grants the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper far better understanding of mana and of most affinities. Allows the Alchemist to make creations he does not have the associated crafting skill for (does not receive stat effectiveness bonuses without associated skill). Passively provides 1 Wisdom per level in Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your search for knowledge be as inexhaustible as the Malefic One.

In fact, Jake believed having the drop of blood was likely a primary contributor to him getting the Sagacity skill to begin with.

Jake had used the fragment actively a few times in the past, but it was rare. He did it while practicing transmutation and sometimes while crafting it passively gave him some insights, courtesy of the Sagacity skill, but to truly delve into it wasn't easy or simple.

After the first hour or so trapped within the puzzle area, Jake had entered deep meditation to truly explore some of the knowledge within the drop of blood. Of course, Jake was fully aware it was only a fragment of knowledge, but even that fragment proved invaluable to him. Even the tiniest of fractions of the Viper's knowledge was more than everyone in the valley combined, after all.

Magic runes and such appeared to have some basic rules or at least tendencies Jake began recognizing. While different sets of runes could vary significantly, they had to possess internal logic and consistency. Runes weren't as simple as something like letters in an alphabet but were something Jake wasn't quite certain how to define. It was like one could faintly predict how other runes would look and predict their elements based on previous runes, so maybe runes were more like sentences?

Jake's surface understanding began to deepen the more time passed, and he started making some logic of the madness on the cube. He began to see how the different runes 'fit' together and how magic circles could be formed. With the help of the ice and fire mage as well as the shadow assassin, he slowly ironed out some novice misunderstandings and quickly began surpassing the both of them in certain areas.

The runic language itself on the cube was actually rather simplistic. It was clearly one made to be learned fast, and Jake was 99% sure it had been altered or created by the system for the Treasure Hunt because it would honestly suck as a legitimate defense. Sure, for the five D-grades, it was difficult, but even for more regular D-grades with some magic knowledge, it was still something that could be done within a few days. A C-grade, even one bad at magic, could probably have opened the cube in a few hours tops.

Also, after nearly a full day, they were still only five people. After some hours, this had become odd to them, and Jake had decided to try and discover why. He found out they were isolated by a space barrier of some sort. The mark left on them by the cube didn't only teleport them back; it also allowed them access to the hidden space the cube now occupied. Others who went towards the cube would likely find themselves unknowingly passing the valley as space distorted around it.

This meant it was truly only the five of them able to do anything. Throughout it all, the earth mage and rogue with two swords had tried, but neither had proven very useful.

The earth mage seemed to just solely rely on skills and was more like a warrior than a mage. His manipulation skills and armor of stone were what he appeared to only really rely on, and he hadn't done much to learn magic outside of skills. His profession wasn't useful either. At least Jake didn't think it was. The dude didn't share what his profession was and overall seemed very defensive and annoyed by being trapped. His 'I don't care' attitude fell apart within an hour, though, and he just became an ass whose only good trait was not getting in the way. In the end, he ended up mainly just doing his own thing, using some odd device.

As for the rogue... well, Jake believed it made perfect sense she didn't know much about magic runes. She was a pure melee fighter, and Jake doubted she even had more than a skill or two that actually used mana. Her profession was blacksmithing, too, more specifically, a swordsmith. While that did include some amount of magic, the skills did all the work for her, and she had focused on improving the handiwork and not the nitty-gritty details of enchantments.

They had still helped a bit. The earth mage had resigned himself to just helping to make models of stone for the first hour before he became a downer, while the rogue worked on arranging different test-circle and just doing whatever she could here and there. While the earth mage seemed almost offended at having to do more menial tasks, the rogue seemed more embarrassed by not being able to help more. She also kept helping throughout, just doing what she could.

Anyway, back to Jake and his peeking into the drop of blood he had stolen from his best buddy snake god.

Usually, it took him more than ten minutes to really immerse himself, and that was while using Thoughtful Meditation. This led to Jake usually spending a few hours sitting in meditation while everyone else worked around him. For anyone else, this would mean they were cut off from the world, but not Jake.

His Sphere of Perception still allowed him to see the Rubik's cube. However, he did cut out everyone else and what they were doing and focused solely on the cube. During the first half a day, the ice and fire mage along with the shadow assassin were the primary contributors, with Jake a close third, but as time progressed, Jake overtook them both.

He began comprehending the circles and possible combinations. He could usually start with a small quadrant on the cube and make those fit together and then expand from there. Whenever Jake solved these parts, he would open his eyes to share his realizations and make new models for the elemental mage and assassin to work out from.

This was how they solved five of the sides of the cube within twenty-three hours. But even more importantly for Jake than solving the cube was how much he learned about magic theory and magic symbols and circles.

Jake had never been the best at learning pure theory. He was the type of guy that really needed to apply his knowledge practically to truly get it. That was why he didn't get much out of simply reading a book on alchemy without also testing out what the book said meanwhile. It wasn't that he failed to understand the theory; it just didn't 'click' for him.

A cube puzzle such as this was a perfect opportunity for Jake to learn theory and immediately try to apply it in the real world. He could see how they could potentially fit together and turn the cube and experiment all he wanted while even getting feedback and discuss with others. Jake also got the feeling from the two others that they also progressed nicely in an extremely short amount of time.

To be honest, then Jake wouldn't put it past the system to make a puzzle like this especially suitable as a training tool. While the system seemed unfeeling most of the time, Jake did view it as somewhat benevolent.

Time kept moving, and when the twenty-fourth hour passed, Jake felt the mark placed upon his soul disappear.

"The mark keeping us here is gone," Jake shared with the others. The elemental mage and shadow assassin both nodded in acknowledgment, neither showing any intentions of leaving before the task was done.

The earth mage also didn't do anything in particular except take out one of the devices he had been playing with occasionally. The rogue woman closed her eyes, and Jake guessed she tried to look inward to confirm the mark was gone. After a bit, she opened her eyes and spoke.

"I'll just be heading out then... I haven't contributed much anyway," she said with some resignation. The woman had tried to help, and Jake would honestly be fine getting her something. Well, she had gotten something as she now had some knowledge, but honestly, she lacked the foundation to properly understand much.

"Wait, why not stay? I'm certain there is enough loot for everyone," the earth mage stopped her as she was about to head out. "It would be a shame to miss out on something due to a bit of impatience. You are soon done opening the cube, are you not?"

"Aye," the elemental mage confirmed, throwing Jake a confused look. Jake returned it. It wasn't about the puzzle but the earth mage.

Why the hell did he think they were going to give *him* anything. He had just been a beacon of negativity from start to finish. In fact, Jake was surprised he didn't take off first thing as he seemed more than annoyed being stuck there.

"I'm fine sharing, I guess. It depends on Lord Thayne," the shadow assassin said, also looking at Jake.

"Let's just open it first," Jake dismissed them. It wasn't even sure solving the cube would lead to instant loot.

The rogue chose to stay after a bit more assurance from the earth mage that she would surely get something. It was all very odd, but Jake and the other three re-focussed on the puzzle.

It still ended up taking one and a half hours more before they were done. Jake had entered a single more round of delving into the drop of blood and put the last piece of the puzzle together. He summoned a construct of arcane energy showing the solved cube. They double-checked it, and once everything seemed right, they began spinning.

The cube turned tens of times a second, soon speeding up to hundreds. This part was easy enough. They had done so much to figure out the possible magic circles and how to put them together that the actual solving of the Rubik's cube was little more than a formality.

As the turned parts of the cube clicked into place one after another, all five of them stood with anticipation. When the final turn was done and the Rubik's cube solved, they all just stood there for a second. Nothing happened.

"Ya gotta be fucking kiddi-"

Suddenly a loud click sounded out, and the metal cube began shining. Then, it released a bright light, and once the brightness subsided, the entire cube was gone, leaving instead three floating items with seven more items lying on the ground.

Jake didn't even need to use Identify to know the three floating items were the most valuable. Two of them gave off impressive auras, with the final item giving off none. The one not giving off anything was the center item: a cube identical to the one they had just solved, except shrunk down the size of a regular Rubik's cube. He identified it right away.

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

He smiled and quickly also checked the two other items. One of them was a staff, and the other a metal mask.

[Staff of Elemental Confluence (Ancient)] – A wooden staff with a mounted gem at its head. The gem is a merged product of the orbs of powerful earth, air, fire, and water elementals, condensed into a single gem amplifying all elemental magic. The wood is likewise a merging of different elemental-affinity woods and is enchanted to be durable and further amplify the user's mental abilities and casting capabilities. The gem passively absorbs fire, water, earth, and air-affinity mana, and this stored mana can either be used as a supplementary mana reserve or released all at once as a quad-elemental blast. Enchantments: Elemental Confluence. Quad-element blast.

Requirements: lvl 125+ in any humanoid race.

[Mask of Shifting Faces (Epic)] – A mask created to change the wearer's appearance. Allows the user to store a set number of humanoid appearances that can be freely changed between. This is an illusionary technique and not actual morphing. Changing appearance will also hide the user's mana signature and aura. This effect can also be applied without changing appearance. The mask itself is incredibly durable. Enchantments: Appearance Change. Presence Masking.

Requirements: lvl 115+ in any humanoid race

The seven items on the ground had two rare-rarity among them, and the rest were uncommon-rarity. Before Jake had time to consider the items deeply, the elemental mage raised his fists to the air. "Fuck yeah!"

The shadow assassin also smiled. "Nice one."

Jake also couldn't help but flash a smile behind his mask. It felt good, and he wouldn't have been able to do it that fast without the two of them. "Fuck yeah indeed. Good job, guys."

The three of them stared at the items for a bit, all smiling. Next would be the distribution of loot, and Jake found it interesting how the best items were-

He stopped his train of thought. Jake felt something. Presences approaching... not just from one direction either. A realization then struck him. He and the four others had been stuck inside a valley during all this time, isolated in a bubble of space, meaning Jake couldn't see the area around him. With the still ever-present mist also hanging over the area, obscuring presences, and him being so focused on the task, he hadn't noticed them before now. The approaching people had also kept a good distance too.

Jake turned his head and saw that a single figure had appeared on the top of the hill leading into the valley, followed by many more not long after. Mana washed over the entire valley as a semi-transparent dome covered it: a barrier to lock them inside.

In his sphere, Jake saw the earth mage snicker... which is when Jake realized why he had chosen to stay. Why he hadn't wanted the rogue to leave. Because she would have seen them. It would be hard not to, considering Jake detected over a hundred people.

While everyone else had been trying to solve the puzzle, the fucking earth mage had his own plans:

Setting up a trap.

Chapter 316: Treasure Hunt: The Importance of Word Choice

While Jake was the first to notice what was happening, everyone naturally became aware when a huge magic barrier surrounded them, and people suddenly appeared on all sides.

"What the fuck?" the elemental mage asked as he readied himself.

Jake's first course of action was not to answer but took a step towards where the cube had been as he quickly swiped all the loot. This did earn him a few glances, but he was happy to see there was nothing accusatory in them from the rogue, the assassin, or the elemental. However, the earth mage did glare daggers, as the man had already begun backing away.

The shadow assassin had also realized the earth mage was in on it and turned to him: "Are you for real? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Oh please, stop acting all surprised; you're a fucking assassin and a thief," the earth mage replied in a snarky tone. "This is a Treasure Hunt, and I'm just playing by the rules."

Jake didn't bother with the earth mage but had turned his attention to someone else. It was a man who stood at the top of the hill, surrounded by others. Jake was pretty sure he recognized him and a few others of those around him. *Those are...*

That is when Jake recognized them from the World Congress. These were city leaders and people related to cities that weren't involved with any specific factions. The independent forces. He remembered Miranda talking about them making internal alliances, and that seemed to be true... he did wonder why they had chosen to attack him, though. Jake looked at the man at the helm and Identified him.

[Human – lvl 130]

He was the strongest person Jake had seen in quite a while. Nearly Jake's own level. Then again, he was a city leader, and those tended to level quickly. Looking at those standing with the man, Jake saw that nearly all those closest had levels above 120.

"Lord Thayne," he heard the man yell from atop the cliff. "I had hoped not to meet again under such strenuous circumstances, but here we are."

Jake looked up at him. "I think you accidentally activated a barrier or something."

"No, no, this is quite the purposeful act," he answered back with a smile.

The elemental mage, rogue, and assassin all scurried closer to Jake as it became clear what this was. Jake looked around him a bit more and counted one hundred and seventeen people, one hundred and eighteen counting the earth mage. All of them were naturally D-grade. Most were between 100 and 110, but a lot were also above 110.

"Are you sure you want this? I'll give you a chance to wisen up." Jake asked. This really seemed like an entire *thing*, and Jake felt like this could all turn real complicated quickly. There were many city leaders there, and he could already begin to predict the issues this would create for Miranda.

At the top of the hill, the man shook his head as he began rambling. "Do you know how screwed up the current status quo of Earth is? A large religious organization is the largest faction. A god damn assassination cult is among the most influential forces. We even have non-human monsters sitting in the high seats. This planet is slowly being claimed by outside forces. Gods and their factions from outside *our*

universe are claiming *our planet*. I, no, we, will not stand for this."

The man paced a bit back and forth as Jake was just listening to the man rant.

"The choice is either to be subservient to some higher power or get screwed over. Yet, that is something some of us won't do. We refuse to give up our world and deliver it on a silver platter to exploitative foreigners. We are here because we refuse to be ignored. We will reclaim our planet, and we will make things right. Purge the undead and return to secularism."

Jake scratched his head, not exactly sure what the guy was getting at. Wasn't this guy as extreme as everyone else?

"What has anything of this got to do with me?"

"Hah!" the man laughed. "It has *everything* to do with you. You, a chosen puppet of some god. The so-called strongest person on Earth. Do you know the reason why we're not listened to? Because people think we're weak. That we can't stand up for ourselves. That's why we have come here. To show we can, and what better demonstration than taking down the first city owner of the planet and the most prominent slave of the gods?"

"Not to mention the bounty from it. I heard he killed three Counts of Blood, and he sure as hell got a lot more besides that," the earth mage said with a huge grin, the greed in his eyes evident.

"I believe what my comrade is trying to say is to just surrender with dignity," the leader said, smiling.

One hundred and eighteen people stood surrounding four people. A barrier was sealing them all in. One side had come prepared and the other taken by surprise. All of this had been done to make Jake into an example. For the independent faction to prove that while they may have been weak individually, together they were strong.

While they were certainly aware they likely couldn't kill Jake, they were confident in forcing him to leave the Treasure Hunt. A few of them were even using magic to record the scene to have proof of what had happened. The independents would prove, once and for all, that they were not to be ignored.

Jake was fully aware that a lot of what he relied upon was reputation over actual feats of strength. He was powerful because people said he was powerful. He was a Progenitor, but most didn't know what that entailed. He had killed Counts of Blood, but the other six had

been slain by several different factions. None of the people present had seen him actually fight. While they had heard some about how he had publicly slain the first Count of Blood, that was in the end still hearsay. Also, even if he genuinely was more powerful than all of them individually, they came prepared with numbers.

Perhaps they also relied on him being mentally exhausted from solving the cube, which he partly was. He was also isolated, and the three people he had to assist him would not be able to do much. All in all, the approach of the independent forces had been calculated and well-thought through.

While their tactic wasn't entirely asinine, they had made several mistakes. The first one was to seal off the entire space, giving not only Jake and the three others issues escaping, but themselves too. The second mistake was to not attack but stop up and monologue. Perhaps even giving them a chance to trigger some powerful large-scale attack that Jake couldn't have dodged to wound him from the get-go.

The final and perhaps most egregious mistake was what the man said. Not the information he gave, but his choice of words. For while Jake could handle a lot of insults, there were some things he couldn't take. Some words and insinuations triggered him and made him have very extreme responses.

Jake really didn't like being called a puppet.

Much less a slave.

The man atop the hill was preparing to open his mouth again but didn't get the chance to.

A presence overtook the entire valley. Jake jumped, black wings and scales covering his entire body as he took on an inhuman and monstrous form in the eyes of his foes. Power swirled around him as Limit Break activated at 20% instantly. His presence infused with his mana blanketed everyone present, not only pressing down on them with sheer almost physical pressure but the full brunt of his primal rage.

Jake flew up and looked down at all the people present as they were mentally torn down. Weakened. Fragile. *Slaves* to their own fear. *Puppets* to whatever moron had convinced them to participate in this ambush.

Pathetic.

His eyes glowed yellowed with a visible sheen as he didn't bother holding back. Killing humans was something Jake tended to avoid. It was messy and led to complicated situations. It was something he only did if he felt forced to – or he really wanted to.

This was a case of the latter.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter landed on every single one of the ambushers. The fear of a predator so far superior to themselves flooded their entire beings and souls, making them shake with fear. Most were frozen, cold sweat soaking their backs.

But for some... for some, everything simply cracked.

More than forty people fell to the ground like puppets with their strings cut. Their eyes glazed over, and not a hint of life in their body. Within an instant, the force of nearly ten dozen was cut down by a third – the weaker of the group dying.

Jake stared down, red now mixed into the yellow of his eyes as two small drops of blood ran down his cheeks. It didn't stop him as the bow appeared. He aimed, and just before people were able to move again, an Arcane Powershot soared down.

It hit the man right to the left of the leader of the group, penetrating straight through his skull. The man didn't die instantly, but he became unable to act. Unable to teleport himself out of the Treasure Hunt. Jake followed up with another barrage, the people below now able to move.

Everyone except the guy with his head pierced through retreated, none of them even trying to help their downed comrade. Five arrows fell upon the man, exploding on impact as Jake had just set the scene for the 'battle' that was about to take place.

"GET IN POSITIONS! ACTIVATE THE-"

The man in charge yelled but was forced to take out a staff and summon a shield around himself as Jake fired an arrow at him. The shield cracked but didn't break, sending the man reeling back nevertheless.

A healer.

Jake quickly recognized the man's class. A rarity among the truly powerful, as more often than not, healers were more in a supportive role. Their personalities often leaned towards the dependent types and not the independents. Of course, there were exceptions. People who simply reveled in the sense of power that came from wielding the life of others in their hands... or fanatical individuals who had an unhealthy relationship with the concept of the preservation of life - Eron coming to mind there.

This man was the former. He raised his staff as a wave of light was sent out, pushing back the effect of Jake's presence. While that did stop them from continued exposure, it didn't dispel what they had already experienced. Pure dread was already ingrained in many of those present. Dread that would hamper their abilities to put up a proper fight and react adequately.

Down in the valley below, it wasn't silent either. Instead of hiding away or taking cover, the only three people not affected by Jake's initial salvo moved. The rogue, assassin, and elemental mage had been excluded from everything as they weren't the target of Jake's ire, while the earth mage standing close by had been. With him distracted, the shadow assassin was the first to move.

Before the earth mage could properly awaken from his stupor and be unfrozen from Gaze, he was shot several times in the chest and smashed into the ground by a sledgehammer of ice before his one arm was cut off by a sword. The other blade of the rogue tried to decapitate him, but a passive defensive skill activated as the armor of stone began assembling automatically.

Within five seconds of the ambushers making their intentions clear and Jake making his move, the mood was set. The formerly confident group, believing that outnumbering the group twenty-five to one would make it easy, came to a stark realization.

Teamwork was important, and in many situations, numbers did matter. The Holy Church was proof of this working. They were known for conducting grand rituals with hundreds if not thousands of people. Through the power of the collective, they could take down foes they otherwise couldn't... but the crux of it was that they were a collective.

They worked as one unified being. The individual was discarded for the sake of the whole. Meanwhile, the people attacking Jake were just a group of individuals with a few parties. They had all come to intimidate, believing they were far superior. Sure, Jake was strong, but was he stronger than a hundred people? Would he risk fighting them?

Even if he did choose to fight, could he truly kill them when they had so many people around them to assist? To put it simply... they had clearly come without fully realizing this would be a fight to the death. They honestly believed it was all just intimidation, and the 'weaker' side would back down without actually fighting.

Jake fully shattered that illusion in his opening attack. Of course, this shouldn't mean the fight was over already, but in many ways, it was. He had only wiped out a tenth or so of the enemy fighting power with Pride and Gaze, meaning that if the other side truly fought, they could likely put up quite the struggle.

But all of that was dependent on their intention to actually fight. Jake had even killed an enemy leader, showing that even the more powerful among them could die. That they could be rendered unable to exit using the Insignia and save themselves. It had become life and death.

Many of them hadn't signed up for that as they began retreating, only to be faced with their own barrier.

"Rally! Don't panic!" the leader of the enemy faction yelled.

"Activate the shields!"

"Defensive positions!"

"Bombard him!"

Others of those more willing to fight also joined in. Jake was still flying in the air and fired arrows down, only to see more and more of them be blocked. Jake realized what he had to do and began spreading poison mist with his wings, but not to attack his foes. The mist around him quickly turned black from dark-affinity mana, obscuring himself completely.

He then opened his palm and began summoning his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, all while dodging in the air. When he first got the skill, it took him quite a while to summon an arrow, but that summoning depended on many things. Summoning speed was based on how powerful Jake was, his ability to control energy, his understanding of the skill itself, but more so than anything, his familiarity with the target.

Ever since getting the skill, Jake had never summoned an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to kill a human. Yet when he did, it quickly became obvious... of any target he had ever chosen, humans were the most obvious. Of any foe, what could Jake be more familiar with than one of his own race? He was fully aware of his own weaknesses, and comprehending his own body was a necessity. He understood the way energy moved within him. He knew borderline everything.

So when he summoned an arrow to kill one of his kin, the skill responded promptly. At high speed, a simple-looking arrow grew out of his hand. It was just wooden with a metal tip. Of all the arrows Jake had summoned with the skill, this was perhaps the simplest-looking one ever. But Jake knew that was just perfect.

From start to finish, summoning the arrow took five seconds. This had barely been enough time for the ambushers to collect themselves and organize a bit. Most of them - primarily those dragged along just to push up the numbers - had all just retreated, hoping the more powerful people could handle it.

Jake would make it loud and clear they couldn't.

While being bombarded with a few attacks, Jake nocked the arrow and took aim towards the healer below. The man was rallying his troops as he was maintaining a barrier in front of himself. It was not a barrier Jake could break with only regular arrows... but he could no doubt break it.

He pulled back the string and began charging Arcane Powershot. At the same time, he focused on his surroundings that were still affected by his infused presence. With the ease of controlling mana within that area significantly increased, he did something he hadn't been able to before.

As he charged his shot, arcane bolts began condensing in the air. A dozen bolts of highly destructive arcane mana came into being in the air, some of them tens of meters from Jake, serving two functions. First of all, they became targets of range spells, and secondly, they were naturally tools to attack with.

Jake began bombarding the perimeter with arcane bolts, doing little damage but creating panic aplenty. All of these bolts were hastily constructed except three. These three bolts floated around Jake, all of them meticulously constructed.

His plan was simple... kill the leader in a single shot, and make it absolutely clear that if one chose to attack Jake and make him an enemy, then no matter how much you tried to plan or how many people you gathered, the only thing you would get out of it was death.

Oh, and also...

To never call him a fucking slave.

Chapter 317: Treasure Hunt: Not Extortion

The dark ball of mist hung above the valley with mana swirling around it in a spiral. Bolts of arcane mana were condensed by the dozen every single second, falling on the many people around the valley as they tried to attack the person hidden by the mist.

Jake, who stood within, had his aim set. Arcane Powershot had been charged to the maximum, and the three bolts hanging above him ready. He released the three bolts down towards the healer and leader of the ambush, these three far more powerful than those prior.

The healer swiftly reacted once he saw the bolts exit the mist and poured more mana into his barrier. The people around him also helped as the three bolts arrived. A massive explosion was kicked up, sending soil and dust flying everywhere but didn't do much damage to the barrier itself. Not that the blow was meant to... it was just a smokescreen.

It was simply there to make the healer feel a slight moment of relief before the true blow arrived.

BOOM!

For this second attack... the healer didn't react in time.

The entire ball of black mist exploded, the mist scattered by the sheer release of power from the Arcane Powershot. Arcane energy burned in the wake of the arrow as it tore through the air. Before anyone below could react, it reached the barrier of the healer. The man only managed to open his eyes in fright as his defenses shattered like broken glass, and the arrow pierced straight through his chest. Usually, Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter couldn't pierce magic barriers... except Jake had come far in his understanding, especially of humans. He viewed mana as simply an extension of the body, so why the hell couldn't his arrow pierce a barrier constructed of it? The skill had clearly agreed with his conclusion.

Once the arrow hit, there was no grand explosion, but simply the man being sent smashing into the ground. Yet, at that very last moment, something activated as his body began glowing. Jake recognized it as some kind of life-saving skill. Perhaps one to nullify some damage or ensure he couldn't die to one attack... Jake didn't know, but what he did know was that the healer wasn't ready for the follow-up.

Because before he even saw the arrow land, he fired the next one. This one wasn't simple either. The two orbs of power on his bow began channeling all their energy as an arrow condensed on the string as Jake prepared to make the area into a Scorched Plain.

He fired the second arrow only two seconds after the first, not leaving the healer any time to prepare. Seeing their leader suddenly be downed had already created even more panic and doubt, meaning no one reacted adequately.

Jake released the arrow and, at the same time, used One Step Mile. While Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was his most powerful attack by a fair margin and archery was his best tool of combat, his greatest damage per second didn't come from ranged attack.

It naturally came from Touch of the Malefic Viper.

The large arrow infused with all the energy from his bow landed just before Jake did. The Scorched Plains effect activated as it exploded, sending a wave of destructive arcane energy burning through the area; all the blue grass it encountered turned to nothing.

Jake landed amidst this explosion, the arcane energy washing over him. He took it unbothered as his scales blocked what little damage it could usually do to him. Out of everyone in existence, Jake was the one with the most natural resistance to his own affinity, meaning he could tank it pretty damn well. Far better than the other humans.

His target within the inferno of arcane energy was the healer. The man was still alive, but that would soon change. The guy was still thrown off and semi-conscious as Jake jumped him. The other party failed to respond as Jake smashed his face into the ground, and his hand began glowing green. Jake pressed down with all his might as power swirled around him, the arcane energy still dominating the environment.

Jake squeezed his hand tighter and tighter as he pressed down until eventually, Touch of the Malefic Viper had weakened the skull enough. With a final push, he completely squashed the head of the formerly oh-so-confident leader of the independent factions.

The already damaged man didn't survive.

****You have slain [Human - lvl 130 / Auspicious Mind Mender - lvl 108 / Pioneering City Lord of Earth - lvl 152]****

Jake stood up but didn't continue his attack. After killing the man, he felt far more relaxed than before as his rage began to subside. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, focusing on getting his emotions under control. Jake was fully aware that this had been another case of his emotions – specifically anger – going wild, no doubt due to his Bloodline. Jake just *really didn't* like being called a slave. Luckily, the guy was dead, and Jake could now relax as he didn't feel the need to murder anyone anymore. Instead, he simply assessed the situation

Everyone in the area was hit by the Scorched Plains, and the moment the destructive force that was his affinity began destroying someone, they reacted with fright, activating their Hunter Insignia to escape. In fact, while Jake's attack did do significant damage, he reckoned nearly everyone should be able to survive and many even block it as the Scorched Plains attack was more about widespread destruction than killing singular foes. However, based on everything else Jake had shown so far, those that were hit chose to react with caution, preferring to forfeit rewards over death.

It was a wise choice and one Jake would now implore them all to take. As the effect from the Scorched Plains attack subsided, everyone saw where Jake was standing and the

corpse beneath him. Once Jake felt their gazes upon him, he knew this entire ‘fight’ was truly over.

Flashes of light appeared all around the valley as Jake looked at the four people he had been solving the puzzle with. His attack earlier had hit not only his enemies but also those within the valley. In fact, the arcane energy had hit anything and everything within the barrier, with even the barrier itself having taken significant damage.

The elemental mage, rogue, and shadow assassin had all managed to handle the blow somewhat. The arcane energy had still left some wounds, but as they weren’t attacked by anything else, they had managed to put up some defensive measures. The same couldn’t be said about the earth mage, who had his armor of stone eroded halfway through and was now trying to reconstruct it and escape.

Jake stared at the man fleeing, having none of that. He raised his bow and fired a quickly charged Arcane Powershot. The arrow landed true, making the armor of stone explode and sending the man tumbling through the air with a large hole in his chest. The earth mage was already heavily injured but hadn’t chosen to leave yet for some reason.

The elemental mage moved to attack and finish off the earth mage, but the man defended himself at the very last moment as he yelled: “We will remember this!”

With those words, he activated his Insignia and disappeared.

Even more flashes appeared all around as people chose to flee. They no doubt feared they would be the next target of an arrow and have their head pierced or something similar, making them unable to flee. Jake noticed that some people did stay behind, all huddled together in a defensive position. He saw around thirty people and saw among them

several of the more powerful humans who had been around the healer. None of them had taken any significant damage but had managed to actually display some level of teamwork.

Jake looked over at them as one of the people at the front spoke: “Lord Thayne, please, I believe this is all a misunderstanding.”

Tilting his head, Jake stared at the man as he asked: “In what way am I misunderstanding you trying to trap and kill me within a barrier?”

“Sir, it was not done with the intent to kill, merely to give us grounds for negotiation, we-“

“I don’t give a shit,” Jake shot back. “If you want to negotiate or talk, come up to me like a normal fucking human being. If you want to negotiate from a position of strength, at least make sure you can actually back it up. Oh, and last of all, don’t fucking insult someone you want to negotiate with. I’m no expert, but that doesn’t seem very smart.”

The man looked at Jake as he looked troubled. He didn’t look particularly bothered by the death of the healer but more by the prospect of being forced to leave the Treasure Hunt with more than half of the time to go without any loot.

“What do we have to do to get out of here alive or without having to leave the Hunt?” the man finally asked sensibly. He seemed far less moronic than the healer but cut to the crux of it without trying to justify himself.

“That’s a really good question,” Jake answered with a nod before turning to the three people inside the valley. The elemental mage had already swiped up the loot from the earth mage and now stood with the assassin and rogue. “What do you guys think?”

Jake hadn’t been the only one under ambush. These people had been implicated too, and Jake was to admit he felt a bit bad about it. He hated getting others involved in his own matters without any reason, and this ambush was made with him as the target.

Would the earth mage have maybe done something similar even without Jake’s presence just to steal all the loot? Probably, but Jake couldn’t know for sure. In fact, he had a feeling the guy would have tried to rob it all by himself to not share with anyone, being the greedy moron he was.

“They could start out by apologizing for being such cunts,” the elemental mage yelled. “Who the fuck brings a fucking army to rob one guy? And worse yet, then fail so miserably? That’s just shameful, man.”

Jake smirked beneath his mask as the elemental mage gave him a thumbs up. “Great fucking display, by the way, but ya could have not have hit us with that damn explosion, ya know? Bloody hurt. Also, why is it that weird-ass color?”

“Hey, it is what it is. I didn’t choose the color. Also, I just trusted you guys and gals to know how to block a massive explosion. I’m sorry if my assumption of competence was incorrect,” Jake fired back. He and the elemental mage had thrown more than one dig at each other during their puzzle-solving, and Jake had happy the guy hadn’t changed. People usually started acting weird after seeing Jake fight and kill people. Odd how that works.

The guy with the group of thirty or so didn't dare interrupt, and from what Jake could detect, the man seemed happy to let the two of them talk, lightening the mood. Jake didn't doubt the guy would prefer less killing to be going on. He was lucky that Jake didn't plan on killing anyone, but there was no way he was getting off easy.

"I sincerely do apologize. I do not mean to misdirect blame, but most of us who came here didn't do so expressly with intent to cause harm but simply to back up an ally. It was ill-advised and a mistake, and I take full responsibility for that. I just want to make it clear that the words of Jakob weren't spoken for all of us, but were his personal views only," the man said, it not being certain if he was fully telling the truth or just trying to get out alive. However, Jake chose to bite into one part he probably shouldn't as it really wasn't that important.

"Wait, the guy was called Jakob?"

"Yes," the man answered, a bit uncomfortably.

"Huh. With a C or a K?"

"It was with a K, I believe." The guy now just looked a bit confused.

Jake nodded, feeling even more justified in the kill. Even if one was with a K, having two Jacob's would just be confusing for everyone involved.

"Hey, how about that compensation?" the elemental mage suddenly chimed in.

The stand-in leader of the group of independents looked a bit bewildered for a fraction of a moment before he realized what the man meant and nodded. “Naturally, we will compensate you all for this unfortunate situation,” he said, turning specifically to Jake. “We sincerely hope this will not cause a rift between Haven and the independent factions.”

Jake stared at him, not revealing his actual thoughts. *I have no fucking idea where any of you are from...*

Sure, he knew they were related to cities, but he didn’t know the city names or their locations or anything. So if these people just didn’t come to the World Congress or some other event, he would never recognize them. Well, he could understand that if these people had a lot of their time and power invested in being political leaders, them not being able to participate due to fear of Jake would be a bad thing.

With all that in mind, he gave the guy a chance. He did have to give the guy and everyone else some credit, as when he counted all the floating Insignias around the valley, not a single one was missing. That was very lucky for them because if even a single one was gone, Jake would have made them all leave. He still could, but he had a feeling that pissing off every single one of the independent forces present for a bit of loot wouldn’t be worth it.

Those who attacked him today were probably just part of some fringe group. Haven being a small city in itself, would do best with positive relations with pretty much every faction. At least Miranda had repeatedly claimed this. She insisted that staying what was effectively a neutral force was their biggest strength, and Jake really didn’t want to shatter all her plans.

“Fine. What are you offering?” Jake finally said, seeing the guy visibly sigh with relief – a bit too telegraphed, honestly. The guy clearly wanted Jake to see him be all humble and nice... and to be fair, Jake was totally fine with that.

The guy ended up giving Jake and the three people with him some good stuff. Jake even noticed some of them weren't from the Treasure Hunt but things from the outside. Primarily he gave Jake herbs he wanted, and the ones behind the other leader even handed stuff over. Jake discovered that there were a whopping four additional city leaders in the group of thirty or so. Upon discovering that, they also coughed up some extra stuff.

Throughout the negotiations that were totally not just extortion, Jake did feel a few glances of hatred and resentment, but he paid them no mind. He had undoubtedly killed comrades of some of those present, and a bit of hate for that was only to be expected. If they didn't act on it, he wouldn't fault them.

In the end, the entire ambush situation ended with Jake looting more than seventy dropped Hunter Insignias filled with loot, all of which he collected while the elemental mage and the others did their own totally-not-extortion. Most of those Jake killed or made to leave had very little, except the healer and the guy beside the healer Jake killed. Both of those had some good stuff, and he even had a theory they had hoarded the stuff of others.

After the survivors among the ambushers handed over loot to Jake, the shadow assassin, the elemental mage, and the rogue, did Jake allow them to leave. Only the elemental mage didn't look very uncomfortable during it all. When they were done, the barrier was also about to dissipate on its own.

“Jakob thought it would be smart to make a barrier that would last for a set amount of time. That would mean no one would be occupied with maintaining it, and he said that even if things took a bad turn, we could just stay defensive and escape when it went down... yeah that turned out well,” the enemy leader said, reminding Jake of how much confusion he had saved the world from with the whole Jakob-Jacob-thing.

The guy finished it all off with a bow as he prepared to lead people away. “Thank you for allowing us amnesty... and I hope we can work together again in the future. My name is Ja-“

“I don’t care,” Jake cut him off. “Talk to Miranda about all that stuff, not me. Now fuck off, we got loot to distribute.”

With those words, Jake turned back to the three people he had solved the puzzle with, ignoring the city leaders behind him. They still had the actual loot from the Rubik’s cube to distribute.

Chapter 318: Treasure Hunt: Spatial Storage & Parting

”I want the staff.”

The moment the kind people who gave them stuff were gone, the elemental mage spoke up.

”Didn’t you already swipe the loot from that asshole earlier?” the shadow assassin said with an accusatory tone, adding on. ”Also, could I perhaps see that mask one more time?”

"The guy didn't have much, man, just a big fucking rock collection. Shiny rocks, sure, but ya ain't gonna take an old man's rocks, are ya?" the elemental mage guilt-tripped the rogue. "Unless ya really want it?"

The last part was spoken towards Jake. He just shrugged. "Keep it. But... can you even use the staff?"

Jake summoned it from his inventory to check himself and saw the level requirement on the staff as well as giving it one more look-over.

[Staff of Elemental Confluence (Ancient)] – A wooden staff with a mounted gem at its head. The gem is a merged product of the orbs of powerful earth, air, fire, and water elementals, condensed into a single gem amplifying all elemental magic. The wood is likewise a merging of different elemental-affinity woods and is enchanted to be durable and further amplify the user's mental abilities and casting capabilities. The gem passively absorbs fire, water, earth, and air-affinity mana, and this stored mana can either be used as a supplementary mana reserve or released all at once as a quad-elemental blast. Enchantments: Elemental Confluence. Quad-element blast.

Requirements: lvl 125+ in any humanoid race.

Jake didn't have any need for it himself. Could he possibly find a use for it? Probably. As far he knew, every single human was bound to have at least one of the four elemental affinities, if not several of them. However, Jake had his arcane magic, and that was good enough.

He then compared the staff's level requirement to the elemental mage who was standing there and admiring it.

[Human – lvl 118]

”Dude, he’s right; you can’t even use it,” the shadow assassin very accurately pointed out.

“So? I will be able to soon. Why do you want it or what? You know what, you can have it, but only if I can shove it up your arse,” the elemental mage shot back.

“Fuck off, I’m just saying,” the assassin shrugged dismissively.

“Ya lucky I’m not as petty. I fully support giving this bastard the mask to cover up his ugly mug,” the mage said.

“Oh yeah, real mature. At least I can actually put it on. What do you plan on using the staff for? A walking stick?” the rogue fired back.

Jake had also summoned the mask and checked that again too.

[Mask of Shifting Faces (Epic)] – A mask created to change the wearer’s appearance. Allows the user to store a set number of humanoid appearances that can be freely changed between. This is an illusionary technique and not actual morphing. Changing appearance will also hide the user’s mana signature and aura. This effect can also be

applied without changing appearance. The mask itself is incredibly durable.
Enchantments: Appearance Change. Presence Masking.

Requirements: lvl 115+ in any humanoid race

Both the staff and mask were interesting, and especially the mask surely played with some interesting concepts to allow someone to change the appearance and even hide or change their presence. Not that Jake wanted it. His mask was already infinitely better, even if it did probably have a Unique Lifeform slumbering within that may or may not cause issues in the future.

Jake just stood back, ignoring the two men who kept acting rather childish as he checked out the stuff. He exchanged a glance with the rogue woman, who just sighed. The two mature men kept arguing for a while before she finally cut in.

“As I mentioned before, I didn’t contribute much, so I’m leaving now,” she said, getting the attention of the two bickering men.

“Now ya making me feel bad, lass,” the elemental mage said, scratching his beard in embarrassment.

Jake decided to finally make his own position known. “I am fine with giving the staff and mask to you two, and I assume you are fine with me keeping the cube?”

He got nods from both of them.

“Great,” Jake said as he took out an item. It was a ring he had previously held in his normal storage on his neck. Newly acquired from the healer guy and not something from the Treasure Hunt. One had to remember that while he got the stuff from the Insignia from all those who fled, he got everything from those who died.

Well, besides what he broke. Jake’s arcane-affinity liked to destroy stuff, so a lot of defensive gear was broken, and of course, all Soulbound items were lost. But he had still gained a lot, the ring one of them.

“Since I get the cube, take this,” Jake said as he tossed the woman a ring.

[Protective Spatial Ring (Rare)] – A ring created from a very durable metal by a very talented crafter from the newly initiated 93rd Universe. The ring has been affixed with a gem with powerful space-affinity mana that has been transformed into a spatial storage. All items within the storage are frozen in time. Latent space-affinity energy not consumed by the storage can be activated to create a temporary barrier of space-affinity mana around the wearer. Enchantments: Spatial Storage. Protective Barrier.

Requirements: lvl 110+ in any humanoid race.

Jake had noticed that the woman wielded her blades at her hips and didn’t appear to have any storage. She probably had a skill for her smithing-related stuff, but not for everyday one. Jake was also fully aware that spatial storage items were quite hard to get for those unaffiliated with larger cities or factions too.

Making a storage item wasn't actually that difficult. Jake had heard that even Neil could do it, despite not being very talented at creating equipment. The system was very happy offering skills specifically made to create those storages and gave it out left and right. Heck, Jake had a feeling that if he really tried, he could get it offered to become able to create spatial storage items the next time he could choose a profession-skill.

However, like elixirs, it required one to at least be D-grade to make them. Additionally, the required materials and ingredients weren't that easily acquired, and even with the System Store, the demand simply outweighed the supply by magnitudes. Who wouldn't want spatial storage, after all? Shit was just so damn convenient.

With how factions worked, they naturally prioritized themselves first. As an example, the first spatial storage Neil crafted was given to Miranda because she was the City Lord, so for the healer-guy to also have a spatial storage only made sense. Naturally, Jake didn't need it, hence why he handed it off to the rogue so she would at least get something.

"I can't take this," she said after looking it over and realizing it wasn't even from the Treasure Hunt.

"Too bad because it's yours now," Jake waved her off.

"If ya don't want it, I can take it?" the elemental mage happily offered.

It was entirely possible he didn't have a storage either. Jake had seen the man summon a staff out of thin air, but that might have been from a skill and not a storage. As for the

shadow assassin, Jake had seen him summon a chair at one point, so he had one for sure, which again only made sense as he was from the Court of Shadows, and as far as Jake could tell, not an insignificant member either.

“Fine,” the woman relented, clearly wanting it from the beginning. Seriously, who wouldn’t like a spatial storage? She bound the item and put her two swords in it, happily seeing it work. After that, they distributed the staff and mask to the elemental mage and shadow assassin, respectively. As for the seven rare items, they also distributed those evenly. Jake, the shadow assassin, and the elemental mage got two each, with the last one going to the rogue. She didn’t even try to argue that one.

Jake himself claimed the Rubik’s cube, also known as the space-magic box. He identified it again as the three others admired their own newly acquired items.

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

He had to admit he wasn’t entirely sure what to use it for personally. It was a spatial storage no doubt better than anything else he had and was nearly indestructible. The thing is, Jake’s necklace already did all he wanted... but that didn’t mean the cube would be useless because items like this did have value.

Now, one may ask, why not just use normal spatial equipment like the ring or his necklace over the cube? The reason for that was actually simple: all of those were bound to the user. The thing about spatial tools was that things always got a bit dicey when it came to sharing stuff. Personal spatial storages were incredibly hard to switch around, and often

the only way to get it off someone would be to kill them as Jake had done with the healer. Unbinding them wasn't like usual magic tools, but it often took a long time - way too long for it to be convenient.

Yet, there were many situations where one might want a shared spatial storage that didn't rely on a single person acting as a bank. The person acting as the bank had to be powerful and able to keep things safe and be easily accessible at all times if someone needed anything. To put it simply, it was highly impractical. One could say that the way Haven did things currently, with Lillian acting as the bank most of the time, they were conducting themselves in a highly insecure way. It put both her and anything she carried at risk.

That is where something like the cube came in. The cube wasn't a piece of equipment but an unbound item. It was one opened simply through a puzzle of some sort and not through owning the item. This meant several people could unlock it and use it at the same time. At the same time, Jake had a feeling the actual password one could set would be borderline impossible to solve for most anyone. Because when Jake twisted the cube in his hand, he saw that it had changed slightly.

While it was still fifteen by fifteen by fifteen as he held it, he felt that he could change it. Not just through some subtle manipulation, either. For when he poured a bit of mana in, a screen appeared before him:

Welcome to the default menu of the Safebox.

Options available:

1. Choose a compartment to access.

2. Choose cube composition.

3: Choose password layout.

4. Claim Administrator role (once an Administrator is set, only the Administrator can assign others with the role. If the Administrator dies, a new one can be assigned after (please set time) amount of time).

Jake stared at the options for a bit. It wasn't a system message, but ones directly given by the item. It was also a message only he could see based on no one else reacting. So, without further ado, he claimed the Administrator role.

After that, Jake just looked it over a bit more before tossing it into the Hunter Insignia. He knew he could play around with the box a lot but now wasn't the time or place. Also, he kind of wanted Miranda and Lillian present. Based on how the cube worked, it likely wouldn't be Jake using it much in the future. It seemed like this item could serve as Haven's vault of sorts after the Hunt.

He also saw that the others had put away their items. The rogue now stood without her swords out but everything in her new ring. The elemental mage had put away the staff somewhere, with the shadow assassin now wearing his mask. Jake looked at the guy and saw he now looked exactly like the elemental mage at first glance.

"Oh no, which of you are the right person!?" Jake exclaimed with fake confusion. He looked at the shadow assassin and squinted his eyes a bit as he saw the flaws in the

illusion, courtesy of his high perception. Well, he also had his sphere and instincts telling him the guy was faking it, so he really wasn't gonna fool Jake.

"Ya daft cunts will neva figure it out!" the assassin yelled, trying to sound like the elemental mage.

The elemental mage responded by flinging a fireball after the guy.

"Whose the daft cunt now, eh? Come in, little shadow boy, use your fire magic!"

Jake chuckled a bit beneath his mask as the assassin dropped the illusion and laughed himself. "Anyway, it works quite well, eh?"

"As long as you shut up, I guess it does," the rogue answered back.

The three of them stayed to talk a bit more before the time finally came to part. They had spent over a full day together, just chatting and solving puzzles. If there was anything those escape rooms back before the system had demonstrated well, it was that these puzzle-solving events were great bonding experiences.

"What do you guys plan on doing now?" Jake asked them.

"Heading back to the Court," the shadow assassin answered first. "I got a message the moment we solved the puzzle about a new rendezvous point, so I'm going there to check up on things and report in."

"I'll just keep exploring as before," the rogue answered with a shrug.

"Ay, me too. We should team up lass; two is better than one and all that. Also, it's way fucking easier to cast spells when things aren't chasing or hitting me," the elemental mage said.

"Sure," she agreed without hesitation.

"I'll head out too," Jake finally said. "More Vaults to open, puzzles to solve, and things to kill. You know the deal."

"Before ya go, I been wondering... that city of yours still looking for fresh meat? Ya know, recruiting?" the elemental mage ended up asking. "I usually just drift around, ya know? Figured I could stop by."

"Not sure recruiting is the best word, but sure, just stop by. Just ask for me if you ever make it," Jake agreed.

"Nice," the mage smiled. "Name's Roman, by the way."

That is when Jake noticed an oddity... throughout it all, they had never exchanged names. Jake had never volunteered his as sharing names just wasn't that usual. The shadow assassin guy hadn't either, likely out of habit, and besides that, it just never came up. They had just been too busy.

"I'm Jake," he responded. He felt close enough with these people to share his name, and he couldn't really see any harm in it. In fact, he had a feeling the shadow assassin likely already knew or could easily find out from Caleb or the Court of Shadows.

"We don't really use names much in the Court, so everyone just calls me KL," the shadow assassin called KL shared.

"Felicia," the rogue woman answered before also asking. "Would it be fine if I also came by Haven?"

"Sure," Jake once more answered. "I'm not really in charge of stuff like that, but just ask for me when you come by, and things should be all fine and dandy."

She nodded with a smile as the four of them stood there for a bit.

"Take care, people," Jake finally said in farewell.

"Don't die!" the elemental mage chuckled to them as he headed off with the rogue.

The shadow assassin stayed behind as he looked at Jake. "Want me to give any message to the Judge or something?"

He was clearly aware Caleb was his brother – again, not a secret – so Jake just answered.

"Nah, I'll see him soon anyway. See you around," Jake answered as he waved to the people in the distance and the assassin both. He got a big wave from Roman, and a more muted one from Felicia as the assassin KL nodded in acknowledgment.

With that, Jake turned around as he headed onwards to open more Vaults and get some more of that good shit – better known as loot.

Chapter 319: Treasure Hunt: Vault Run = Loot 5.0

Time passed by as the Treasure Hunt was in full swing. Everyone chased for Vaults all over the place, many finding more than they bargained for as they got trapped or were faced with foes far above what they could handle.

Jake was naturally one of these people. Not the trapped and in over his head part, but the chasing Vaults part. He went from Vault to Vault and did as any reasonable person would do: looted everything.

On his way, he encountered plenty of people who tried to argue with him or put up resistance, but none willing to actually fight. Jake himself tried to be accommodating and diplomatic but seeing a party struggle with a single level 130 vampire just made him so darn impatient. If they were that weak, how the hell did they expect to actually claim a Vault?

Word of his encounter with the independent factions hadn't really spread in the first day since he split up with Roman and the others, but on the second and especially third day, he began to realize many were more apprehensive. Some even just bolted if they noticed him.

Finding out exactly which faction people belonged to was difficult. It wasn't like everyone had matching uniforms, and many had only joined a faction partly, functioning more as temporary members. Especially the Holy Church and the Noboru clan had many of these, simply due to their sizes and influence.

However, what Jake did become relatively sure of was that the majority of humanity still wasn't associated with any of the larger and well-known factions. It was just that the large factions were always at the forefront, dominating events and the political arena, pushing the smaller ones to the side. Also, while they may not dominate in numbers, the larger factions dominated in strength.

The people who had ambushed Jake were an excellent example of this. The healer had been level 130, but the vast majority of those levels came from him being a City Lord. His class had been low, and Jake even suspected the guy hadn't gone for a Perfect Evolution either.

Yet, he had been a significant leader of the independent factions. A bit disappointing, really. Sure, he had no doubt been one of the more powerful people on Earth, maybe even in the top 1% among D-grades, but compared to the top elites of Valhal, the Noboru Clan, or the Holy Church, he wasn't worth much. In level, maybe, but not strength.

In fact, Jake was fully aware his own level wasn't that high. The same was true for many others of the top elites or even just those slightly below the top elite. Jake reckoned Neil and all of those in his party could be five to ten levels higher if they had just ignored the Perfect Evolution, if not even more. If Jake chose to neglect his profession and just grind class levels, he would also gain far more levels faster.

The problem with that was how much it would fuck one up further down the line. Villy had told Jake that while leveling fast was all fine and dandy, then it wasn't something one should actively pursue. The path to godhood wasn't a sprint, after all. Better to take it slow and steady and do everything well than just rush along. Rushing would mean missing out on many potential titles and Records. Heck, if Jake had just rushed to D-grade, he likely wouldn't have gained his arcane-affinity and the Arcane Prodigy title.

Jake was thrown out of his thoughts as he exited meditation, sitting in the midst of what could only be described as the scene of a slaughter. Piles of dead vampires littered the valley. All of them had been on the weaker side. However, once they were all dead and he tried to open the actual Vault – which was concealed within a very out-of-place pond – he ended up summoning a damn golem.

So then he had to kill that one too. It wasn't all bad, though, as Jake finally got a level.

****You have slain [Jadewater Guardian Elemental of Yalsten – Lvl 145] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 138 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 134 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points****

It had been four days since he split up with the group from the Rubik's cube puzzle, and Jake had to admit they hadn't been as eventful as he had hoped. A lot of time had been spent just running between Vaults as the space between them only widened. He even tried running towards a certain Vault for hours only to see the red pillar suddenly disappear.

This meant that Jake had only managed to clear four other Vaults besides the one he was at right now. That was only about a single Vault a day. At least he had gained two levels in his class from killing guardians and getting through defensive measures during this time.

Jake got up from his meditation as he headed towards the pond again. It was now glowing after the Guardian Elemental was dead – the elemental itself having been a water elemental. The fight with it hadn't been that interesting as it was just Jake blowing it up with arcane arrows for a few minutes before discovering he could merely shower it in toxic blood and kill it that way.

He stepped onto the lake and felt himself be teleported into another space. Not his first time either. Of the four last Vaults, three had teleported him away, while one had been like the Rubik's cube and instead sealed off the space around itself. Only one of the Vaults had been focused on combat, too, with the others just being more magic puzzles.

By now, Jake was convinced this Treasure Hunt had some agenda to teach everyone magic theory. Not that he was complaining, he had learned a lot, but he did prefer simply killing stuff. The one Vault requiring him to actually kill stuff had been the best, though, netting him a level in his class and being the fastest besides the first one where he scammed that Nalkar vampire lady.

As for what he had gotten out of these few days? Well, quite a lot. Each Vault appeared to have a legendary-rarity item, but Jake also noticed a pattern with these items. A pattern that became clear the more he got. The first Vault had been a puzzle and had transported him into what seemed like a smithy. He had to get some machine working there. He fucked it up a few times too many and ended up fighting an army of war golems. That probably only sped up the entire challenge as Jake killed them and was finally rewarded with something called a Forgestone.

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

Jake had no idea how to use it, but he reckoned a blacksmith or someone like that would really appreciate the stone. Besides that one, he didn't even get any ancient-rarity stuff, just some rare-rarity things and a single epic-rarity spear he wouldn't use.

Anyway, after that, Jake had done a Vault where he was transported to an empty space with hundreds of stars and planets all around him. He had to somehow map out the correct path of all the celestial objects, and only then did he complete the puzzle – high perception really came in handy in that one. His reward for that? A damn weird item.

[Orrery of the Godless One (Legendary)] – An orrery made by a man who refused to acknowledge any gods during his life but only viewed the celestial concept as worthy of being recognized as divine. This orrery will passively map out all nearby celestial objects and give insight into their basic properties. This effect is entirely passive and

cannot be altered by outside means, and may take a significant amount of time. This effect bypasses all attempts to hide or mask these celestial objects done by anything below divine-level skills.

This one was even odder than anything prior. Jake wasn't even going to waste his time thinking about its uses but just moved on.

The next Vault had been the one that didn't transport him to another land. Instead, the entire area around him had changed and warped into an odd illusion of how Yalsten had likely once been. There, he had to talk to illusory vampires of ages past to figure out the true path into the Vault and-

Anyway, he cheesed it with his Sphere of Perception after figuring out the goal. It still ended up taking a while as he had to figure out what the fuck to do first. In the illusion, he met several people who talked about some weird stuff until he finally figured out he just had to find a special tree. Locating the tree was probably meant to be difficult, but the moment he heard of it, it also appeared in the real world outside the illusion.

On to the loot.

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

Requirements: lvl 140+ in any humanoid race.

This one was a lot more simple than anything else. Once, he found the tree in the real world and placed his hand upon it as it transformed from a tree into a single small wooden brush along with an ancient-level bo-staff. He put them away and moved on, having little use for either.

In the fourth and final Vault, before the one he had just entered, he was faced with another kind of magic puzzle. It was one he didn't do alone. Instead, he ended up working with a bunch of random people – nearly a hundred or so. It was all about crafting and creating weapons to fulfill some quota, and there Jake noticed the system only really cared about the rarity and level requirements of weapons.

So Jake kinda cheesed that too by transmuting nearly all the crafted weapons with his arcane-affinity, making them useless quasi-Soulbound items, before feeding them to the mechanism to unlock the Vault. It had sped up the process significantly, and in the end, Jake was given – totally voluntarily, not at all because people were a bit scared of him – the best reward.

By far the best reward for him personally, too.

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

Jake had come across these kinds of items before in texts. They were incredibly valuable and the sort of things half his alchemist skills talked about when they mentioned how a Catalyst could enhance the final product. The Catalyst itself was just a small, perfectly black marble-like ball that was incredibly durable. Yet as he held it, Jake was acutely aware it would easily melt to Alchemical Flame. He wasn't sure what he would use it for, but this was the one he wanted to keep the most out of everything.

These were all the legendary-rarity items he achieved so far. He had shared some loot at other places if others had helped, and also at one point because he felt sorry for others. There had been a party trapped in the illusory space with the tree since the first day the Vaults opened, and Jake gave them some rare-rarity stuff, as he kind of came in and swept up all the loot.

As for what else he would use all these legendary items for? Well, he would have to ask Miranda, but if Haven had no use, one had to remember a tiny little detail... this Treasure Hunt wouldn't be the end of this event. It would be followed shortly by an auction. An auction to sell off all the useless stuff and extra items everyone gained during this Hunt. Jake was certain there would be many ancient-rarity items acquired by every faction, and Jake was more than looking forward to it.

In regard to the legendary-rarity items, it also quickly became obvious they all had a certain theme. Not a single one of them was a weapon or even a tool that could be directly used. The brush kind of could, but that was for a profession and even stated the effect couldn't cause direct harm to others.

These were not items to cause more war or destruction but to infuse Earth with rare and valuable Natural Treasures along with created ones from this ancient civilization. They existed to push the Earthlings further and speed up their progress on the path of creation.

Well, okay, there was some good shit too when it came to equipment made to be worn.

Of all the equipment he found, he didn't really find many worthwhile objects. Except for some fucking reason, he found three rings. The first one was a rare-rarity ring from the first of the three Vaults. He had happily taken it on, it increasing his mental stats.

Then in the next Vault, he got another rare-rarity ring, this one increasing his agility and perception. Jake was over the fucking moon at it. It was so much better than the shitty Ring of Brilliance he had gotten from Abby's body way back then, with its measly +50 Intelligence, +50 Wisdom, +35 Willpower enchantment.

Yet in that exact same Vault, he also got one more ring that he only noticed a minute after being so happy at the first one. He hadn't known what to expect, but when he had used Identify on it, he hadn't been disappointed. Far from it.

[Ring of the Starseer (Ancient)] – A ring once worn by a powerful Starseer. The Starseer sought to comprehend the celestial concept and intimately understand the stars, and this ring was made to do exactly that. Allows the wearer to use the Starseer ability inherent in the ring. The Starseer ability significantly reduces visual distortion caused by the space and celestial-affinity. This effect can also be activated to temporarily grant the wearer the ability to peer at a far-away pre-known celestial object. Enchantments: +400 Perception, +200 Wisdom. Starseer.

Requirements: lvl 130+ in any humanoid race.

Needless to say, he tossed it on and was now happy as a clam. At least he was happy.

Back in the present, Jake had just entered the water to explore his fifth Vault. The pond he entered through had been at the very edge of the world where he saw space break apart just in front of it. Jake even had to get through some spatial distortion to get there – him having chosen this Vault partly to test out the Starseeker ability.

However, the moment he appeared inside the Vault, Jake's eyes opened wide as he felt himself float.

Fuck me, he thought.

It was a fucking water level.

Chapter 320: Treasure Hunt: Submerged

Somewhere, a long time ago, a group of game developers sat in a room together. They knew they needed more content in their game to expand the playtime, but they had no idea what to add. Technology was limited, and there were only so many mechanics to add when all the controllable characters could do was to move up, down, and to the sides.

Then suddenly, one of them got an idea. "What if we make our character able to fly?"

But no, that was quickly shot down. The movements would be too fast, and it would be too hard to control. Once more, they were stumped until someone else spoke up.

”What if instead of flying, we make it swimming...”

And thus, one of the worst ideas ever was conceived.

At least that is how Jake imagined the absolute moron who thought up water levels did it. No one liked water levels. They always sucked. Jake believed this was inherently down to how water affected movement and limited how one could usually control the game.

Water had to slow down movement, and while it allowed lateral movement, this was often slow and frustrating and incredibly ‘floaty’ due to it being in the water. It also meant enemies could attack from more directions, and overall just caused a lot of issues. However, perhaps the biggest obstacle was how one often lost their usual means of combat.

Suppose you killed stuff by jumping on it, then becoming unable to jump made that difficult. If you shoot a gun, the chances are that it doesn’t work underwater. Swinging a melee weapon was also often limited. In conclusion? You didn’t only have severely inhibited movement underwater, you also can’t fight properly.

Now, how does this relate back to Jake? Quite obviously so, actually. Because Jake currently found himself submerged in water, having no idea what the fuck he was supposed to do. He was just floating there, in the middle of nothing. Yet, for the first time, he also experienced something he hadn’t in a long time...

Blindness.

Jake couldn't see anything in his surroundings. It wasn't limited to his eyes either. His Sphere of Perception was being overloaded with information, the mana inherent in the water so powerful. It filled the sphere, making it seem almost solid to his senses.

To his eyes, it was also utter darkness, which was new to him. Usually, he could see even without any light. Entirely sealed off caves weren't any issues due to his high perception, but he truly was blinded under this water.

For a brief moment, he panicked and began moving around, trying to find something to hold onto. However, he quickly found there was nothing and no one. He was utterly alone, trapped in nothingness.

Constant pressure was upon him from the water too. It didn't deal any damage to him, but he felt it. Also, while he didn't have to breathe, being unable to do so was incredibly uncomfortable for him. Jake had never had any issues with water and could swim with no problems... but this wasn't okay with him.

Calm down, he told himself as he tried to stop himself from moving sporadically. His instincts told him to get out of the water and find solid ground. He felt exposed. Jake closed his eyes as he entered meditation and attempted to do what he had done in the Forgotten Sewers dungeon with all the dark mana and acclimate himself to the environment, filtering out the mana in the water.

Yet shortly after he closed his eyes, he was thrown out of meditation by his danger sense activating. His eyes shot open, and he moved to try and defend. The blade appeared in his hand but moved incredibly slowly through the water as he wanted to raise it and block the incoming blow.

He failed.

A warm feeling and a sting of pain were felt from his one arm as something had hit him. He had been cut, Jake knew that, but he didn't know by what or who. Jake felt more and more unsettled as he felt something come by him again, not attacking this time.

The water made him feel like he was moving in slow motion. Taking out his bow was also utterly out of the question, as how the hell was he supposed to shoot an arrow while submerged? It would be an utter waste of time to try to.

By now, he also noticed something else with his wound. It kept stinging, and soon he noticed some foreign energy invade his body. It was venom. Jake frowned as he thought of what to do and summoned his wings to try and use them to move around.

He could feel something still move around in his sphere. He couldn't properly see it, only notice the mana be subtly displaced at times as something fast moved by him. Jake once more tried to filter out what he assumed was water-affinity mana, but the moment he closed his eyes, his danger sense activated again.

Jake once more tried to block, and this time he was partly successful. He released a blast of mana from his body, hitting the creature attacking him just as it came close. It was repelled for a brief moment as it began circling him again. Believing he had found a

temporary coping mechanism, Jake felt relief until he suddenly felt a sense of danger again, this time from two directions at once.

There is more than one.

Gritting his teeth, Jake released his presence and infused it with mana to try and get a better understanding of the situation. When he did so, he suddenly became able to see a bit more of his surroundings as some of the mana was displaced. However, he also felt a severe drain on his resources. The water pressed down on not only him but everywhere his presence now dominated, wearing it down and forcing Jake to choose between deactivating it or risk running out of mana within less than half an hour.

Jake felt forced to choose the former, but not before one final push. He channeled more mana into Pride of the Malefic Viper and also summoned a net of arcane mana. When the next creature came to attack him, Jake was ready.

The creature zoomed towards him, and at the final moment, Jake manipulated the net of mana to be positioned in front of him. At the same time, he angled his body, allowing his foe to penetrate his stomach with its attack. He felt like he was pierced with a sword as he was stabbed through. The net of mana was wrapped around his foe as he tried to grab hold of it with his hands.

He felt something slippery squirm, but he managed to keep hold of it with the net. The wound on his stomach got worse as it moved back and forth. Jake raised his blade and stabbed it through the creature to make it stop, but found that it only made things worse.

Finally, he managed to wrestle it into a position where he could place his hands on it without slipping. He began channeling Touch of the Malefic Viper as the creature

struggled. Yet he just kept going, the wound in his stomach growing and more and more venom being injected into him.

With a final push using Touch, he felt the creature that attacked him stop struggling as a notification appeared

****You have slain [Deepgorge Terror – lvl 127]****

Jake stared at the notification for a while. Only level 127. A being several levels below himself had caused him quite a bad wound and left him reeling from its simple attacks. It wasn't even some powerful variant. Heck, it just felt like a creature that was some weird mix between a swordfish and an eel. He knew he needed some way of fight back, and quick before-

His danger sense activated as he was forced to block a blow with his arcane barrier. The creature was repelled, but soon after, it activated again. Focusing on his surroundings, he saw signs of movement. Not just one or two either.

That is when Jake realized that he was truly in deep shit.

How exactly they had come to be in their current situation was a bit hard to understand. It all begun when they ended up at the same Vault and the nature of the Vault proved to have certain competitive elements. The Vault had opened up a large maze all around itself as the geography changed, and everyone had been teleported and split up.

Miranda had found herself alone, split from Sylphie and Carmen. The three of them had stayed together and done well, even clearing a few Vaults together. She had heard that Jake had an incident with details still unclear of what had gone down. All she knew was that it involved killing many people, and many of the smaller independent forces were now afraid of anything related to Haven.

She would handle that later. What mattered now was the situation in front of her.

Standing in a hallway, she was faced with a man she had only ever seen once before but heard of many times. His black combed-back slick hair and casual demeanor undoubtedly gave him an offputting presence as he stood there staring at her.

“Eron,” she said.

“Miranda, I believe?” the man asked rhetorically.

In a situation that mirrored the one where Jake met him, she was now faced with a conflict she would prefer to avoid. Under normal circumstances, they would have no reason to fight; however, this Vault fostered battles.

When they were teleported, each got a small mark that others could claim. These marks allowed the challenger to open certain passageways and grant them more access to deeper areas of the maze and eventually the Vault itself.

This Vault was perhaps the largest of the bunch with the most rewards, and from her estimates, in excess of a thousand now found themselves within. Miranda had already used a device given by Arnold to send out a distress signal, so she could only hope someone would come... because she wasn't certain how to handle the supposedly immortal healer.

"An unfortunate situation and the peculiarity of the circumstances are not lost on me," Eron spoke. "I hope we too can have a friendly bout like I did with Mr. Thayne."

"I don't suppose we can't just go our separate ways?" Miranda asked, having a feeling her time in the Treasure Hunt was about to be over. Sadly one couldn't simply hand over the mark from the Vault. It was only dropped by leaving the entire Hunt or dying.

She should know. She had already made a handful of people leave, which was also the reason why she knew Eron wouldn't simply let her go. He also had quite a few marks too, but less than her.

"Sadly, I don't believe that is a course of action worthy of consideration."

With those words, he exploded in white flames and began manipulating his magic.

Miranda also used her own skills as she began retreating, having been warned by Jake of the odd affinity Eron possessed. She considered what to do as a voice suddenly entered her mind making her eyes open wide.

She was chased through the halls firing magic after Eron as he pursued her. Miranda turned a corner, with Eron turning it soon after. He found that the woman had erected a wall of stone to block his way. He burned through it within a minute, and on the other side found Miranda surrounded by a barrier. She had reached a dead-end.

“I can at least waste your time,” the woman said as Eron walked forth. He waved his hand as white flames blanketed the barrier of mana. Miranda kept up the shield as he slowly burned it down, waiting for her to run out of resources. Because he knew she would run out before him.

Seconds turned to minutes, and soon a quarter of an hour had passed. No one else had arrived during this time besides a woman who saw Eron and then swiftly ran the other way. That put his mind at ease as she would serve as a distraction if anyone else came down the same way. As they were at a dead-end, no one should come.

“I must admit, I expected more,” Eron said as the woman had only been defensive throughout it all, besides the first few minutes where she at least attempted to stop him. “One would think the City Lord of Haven had more tricks up her sleeve.”

“Trying my best here,” she answered as sweat pooled beneath her. Eron looked on, knowing she would soon reach her limit.

“A valiant attempt indeed if the purpose is only to waste my time,” he muttered.

A minute or so more passed.

“I do hope you are aware this is in no way personal,” Eron told the woman. He saw blood come out of her mouth and her one leg wobble as she kneeled down. “Just leave now, Ms. Wells.”

“Why would I?” he suddenly heard a female voice say. His eyes opened wide as he looked to the side and saw the City Lord of Haven standing on a magic circle more than ten meters away from him. Completely unscathed.

“How is-“ Eron begun as his vision shifted. The room expanded, showing the barrier of stone he had made a hole through gone, and a long hallway opened up in front of him where a dead-end had been. Beneath his feet was a magic circle that had not been there before. He whipped his head to see what he had been burning and saw a figure stand beside what looked like a metal mannequin with white flames on it.

The figure was one Eron recognized.

“The pleasure is all yours,” Sultan said with a smile, staring mockingly at Eron.

Eron knew himself and his powers very well. He feared very little and knew few things could truly harm him. However, that didn’t mean there weren’t people on Earth he would avoid at all cost. People with magic and methods he wasn’t sure how to handle or who countered him.

Sultan was one of these people.

The man took out a black notebook as the pages began turning. Eron couldn't move. He tried to, but the command simply didn't register. Instead of moving he chose to blow up his own body to escape.

BOOM!

White flames blanketed the hall, and he saw Sultan and Miranda both be pushed back. Eron could move again and swiftly retreated back where he had come from. He ran through the halls, seeing the two people chase him. He sent back a wave of white flames, making them both stop their pursuit. His escape continued for a minute or so until he turned several corners and felt like no one was chasing him anymore.

Eron sighed with relief as he resigned himself to-

“Verdant Feast Of the Lagoon’s Insatiable Depths.”

He hadn't moved. He hadn't self-destructed. The realization struck him as a hand reached up from the magic circle below him. The entire floor turned into murky green water as countless greedy hands pulled him under. He tried to explode again but still found himself frozen.

The last thing he saw before being pulled under was the smile of Sultan as he stood there with his black book.

Miranda collapsed with fatigue as the man disappeared, devoured by the ritual. She looked at Sultan, for the first time feeling a bit of fear towards the man. He had spoken in her mind and told her what to do, even being aware of her Feast ritual.

“Well, that’s that handled,” Sultan said as he closed his book.

“Will he die?” Miranda asked.

“Doubtful. However, the feast is self-perpetuating, correct? So let him be the fuel of his own prison till the Hunt ends,” Sultan said, shaking his head.

Miranda gave the man a look again, slowly nodding her head. A small pool of green water remained on the ground where Eron had once been, no other signs of him present.

“It should keep him trapped till the end of the Hunt.”

Miranda once more nodded. Eron could probably find a way to break free eventually if he was truly invincible, but it shouldn’t be possible in such a short amount of time.

Sultan himself stood there nonchalantly as he motioned for her if they should continue their journey. The slave woman also soon came up to them, having served to put Eron’s mind at ease before.

She couldn't wrap her mind around how Sultan looked completely unbothered by how they had just put someone out of commission that even Jake had told her to avoid at all cost.

At that moment, Miranda had to admit... she was happy he was on their side.