

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 321: Treasure Hunt: The Depth of Water

Jake had a headache. Not the kind of figurative headache, but the literal kind. It felt like he was constantly smashed in the head with a sledgehammer while wearing a motorcycle helmet. At the same time, his body hurt as he had countless bleeding holes all over.

In his surroundings, corpses of dead fish floated, polluting the area around him. Jake had killed eight of them so far, all of them rotten through by his Touch of the Malefic Viper, while the fish had also taken some damage simply by being in the water around him, that hadn't been the primary killer. The blood he was constantly leaking out had been infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper was the source of this pollutant, and it had ultimately resulted in the fish leaving him alone for the most part, yet still circling him.

He had also tried to release his poison mist but found it useless. The water simply consumed and suppressed it instantly. The only reason his blood worked was due to the tangibility of the toxicity being bound to the blood. Touch of the Malefic Viper also didn't do shit if he just used it on the water. He also tried doing some stupid stuff like trying to absorb the mana with his new space cube, but spatial items always had the issue of needing to deposit an object. Turns out an ocean's worth of water didn't count as an object.

However, what ultimately saved his ass hadn't been all of his poison or his arcane-affinity or any of his usual go-to's. No, it had been the Expert Stealth skill coupled with his cloak. He had wrapped it all around him and focused on Expert Stealth to try and meld into the

environment. It hadn't worked, to begin with, as he still had to kill the fish already aware of him, but once those had died, it seemed to work - kind of.

The fish circling him didn't do so because they were aware of him but because of the blood of their brethren. They knew this was a 'special spot' but not why. Jake, wrapped in his cloak, once more focused on comprehending his surroundings, which was the cause of the headache.

Jake knew the affinity surrounding him was solely the water-affinity. His Sense of the Malefic Viper told him that, and Jake also knew he had that affinity himself based on his talks with Villy. Not because he had been tested, but because, according to Villy, every human who started at G-grade had it. Something about water being the basis of life in their newly integrated universe, making everyone have it by default.

With that in mind, he knew he just had to explore the affinity and learn of it to become able to filter it out with his Sphere of Perception. It should be easy... but it wasn't. For it wasn't only the water-affinity dominating his surroundings, but something more than that.

A concept Jake wasn't certain what was. All he knew was that it mixed incredibly well with the water and was the primary cause of the pressure upon him. It was clearly related to water in some ways...

Was it gravity? Just weight? Jake wasn't sure. He had no idea how far down he was and if it was just sheer water pressure. Wait, was water pressure a concept in itself? His head was filled with many questions, making it only hurt more.

Time slowly passed as Jake slowly tried to filter out the excess information in his sphere. The first thing he did was focusing on limiting its scope from the usual few hundred meters down to only a few dozen. Usually, he didn't really 'look' at his sphere when it was just that large; it more functioned as a passive detection system, only alerting him to movement, working especially well with his danger sense to alert him of potential dangers.

However, as had been shown before, like just after his evolution to D-grade, it could also be a bit of a double-edged sword at times. Jake didn't have the passive assistance of the system to help him not overload his brain but had to solely rely on himself. He was lucky in the sense that his bloodline was semi-self-regulating, in that he would instinctively try to avoid things that would cause severe harm to him.

His bloodline wasn't omnipotent, however, and ultimately relied on Jake himself. Which was why he sometimes needed to step up with his more conscious mind, like in his current situation.

Ever so slowly, his sphere shrank. He analyzed and took in the mana around him with Sense of the Malefic Viper. He kept trying to identify the concept but couldn't exactly put a name on it... but he did get a good feeling for what it did.

The concept wasn't as simple as just being water-pressure. Water pressure would solely be a physical force, while this was not. It didn't only pressure the physical water around him, but also the mana density and even Jake mentally. It simply compressed and pushed on everything. In some ways, it did remind him of what the Lighttail Monkeys did.

Yet it wasn't entirely the same, as this clearly wasn't some magical attack, but simply how the environment worked. Also, the fish were clearly unaffected by it based on their agile movements. If they were under the same pressure as Jake, they sure as hell wouldn't waste their energy swimming around as they currently were.

Which naturally begged the question, why weren't they affected? Was it some passive skill? Perhaps they were affected but were just used to it, and this was their norm? Crazy insane physical stats making them god amongst fish outside of water? Either way, before Jake could figure it out, he would have to actually be able to see what the hell was going on.

Jake focused his mind and entered meditation as he slowly explored the area around him. He began filtering out certain kinds of information and found that it helped to focus on one of the fish. The fish appeared to just be made of water in his sphere, yet it was also an autonomous creature separate from its living environment.

With it as a catalyst, Jake began separating the fish from what was around it. He began trying to discern the details of the creature, filtering out the atmospheric mana that dominated the water he found himself trapped in.

One small detail at a time, he began seeing the fish. It was long and eel-like as he expected, but it had visible scales covering its entire body contrary to eels. Jake didn't detect any gills, but it did have four large fins on the side of its body. The head was the most peculiar of it all.

It had a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and a long sword-like nose. The sword's edges were jagged, and Jake felt toxins embedded on each of the jagged edges, making the entire nose look a bit like a poisoned saw.

As the fish became more and more defined, its surroundings also began standing out more. It became murkier, the darkness fading as Jake focused on filtering all the "sameness" away. He naturally also focused on Sense of the Malefic Viper to correctly identify the water-affinity mana as he also became more familiar with that.

Ever so slowly, he began to see. The immediate surroundings of the fish were the first to come clear, and it left a trail of clearness as it swam. It spread and spread, and soon the area around 30 meters of him became visible to his Sphere of Perception.

One problem down... next up, how the hell do I move properly.

As mentioned, Jake knew how to swim already. He had even done some light training for fun in his pond, and while water did inhibit movements, the depths he currently found himself in took that concept to the extreme. He felt like he was a human from before the system stuck in water, and-

Wait, is that it?

All this time, he hadn't thought of the most obvious reason why the water was harder to move in... it was simply because it was water. No, not normal water, but magic water.

Water was harder to move in due to friction and the higher density of water. You had to always displace some amount of water whenever you moved, the same as you had to with air. Of course, water made this harder. Soil and sand even harder as you technically could move in loose soil; it was just a damn struggle – something anyone who had ever been buried in sand at the beach could attest to.

After the system, this displacement in both water and sand had become far easier. Jake was simply far stronger than before, making it incredibly easy to move some water with a light motion. Yet what happens if this density was amplified - If this denseness and friction were heightened to a supernatural level by making it a concept.

That is what Jake was currently experiencing. It wasn't that it was some other concept mixing with water... it was simply a concept naturally born of much water-affinity being together.

The reason had been so simple all along. It was because Jake was stuck in magic water, not normal water.

He had a strong feeling his insight was right, and it also allowed him to see his surroundings more clearly. The mana was simply so damn dense because magic water didn't only compress physical space but also the magical space. It also explained the mental pressure. In fact, he had a feeling that perhaps his soul was getting pressured.

Jake was happy at his realization. There was just one issue: what the fuck to do with it?

Sure, now Jake knew he truly was just stuck in super magic water, and that was why it was so dense, but that didn't magically make him able to move about in it. Furthermore, considering how much harder it was to properly analyze the affinity, he was also damn certain his water-affinity was pretty crap compared to his dark-affinity.

But... there had to be a solution. For this, Jake once more turned to the fish. These creatures were utterly unaffected by this denseness. In fact, the water seemed to give way wherever they swam. His first thought was that their bodies were coated in some kind of barrier displacing the water, but he couldn't detect any.

Next up, he wondered if they simply were immune due to system-fuckery and them being fish. However, that didn't seem to stick either, as clearly, they were doing *something*. He felt magic from them, a constant hum of mana. It was passive, but there, a bit like when his own Limit Break was active...

At least it became clear that whatever method these fish applied wasn't external but internal.

Which made Jake consider if he was able to copy it... because as he currently was, he couldn't fight for shit. The fish also kept circling him, so he couldn't move without them noticing him... actually, he had a feeling his cover wouldn't last much longer. The blood was thinning around him as it was slowly spread out and floated away. This meant him hiding under his cloak would soon begin standing out more.

Jake's hiding place already stood out, but as the blood and corpses stopped functioning as cover, he was certain the fish would discover him. While his cloak and Expert Stealth were nice, he was ultimately still free-floating in the middle of the water.

Gotta hurry.

He needed to at least find a way to make himself semi-able to fight back. Those eight he had killed so far had come with him losing over half his health pool and forcing him to drink a health potion, and currently, he detected over ten in his immediate surroundings. Jake was not looking forward to dealing with all of them at once.

Now, how the hell do you manage to be unaffected, Jake asked the fish. He didn't get any answer.

No, he knew he needed to scan them somehow. He needed to be able to see their interiors... and the only way he knew how to get a better look was through Sense of the Malefic Viper, more specifically, on a poisoned foe. At least, that is what he needed to develop his own method. For now, he just needed to find a way to survive and put up a fight.

Jake was in his current state at less than ten percent solely due to his environment. Swinging a sword was slow as fuck, bow out of the question, any magic he summoned consumed far more resources than reasonable, and even his poison was significantly weakened as he couldn't summon his mist.

There was only one thing that had improved. Now Jake could see, at least somewhat. As he became able to perceive his surroundings through his sphere, he also slowly became able to see with his eyes. Everything was still murky, but now he could at least make visual contact with his foes, which meant Gaze of the Apex Hunter was back on the menu.

Just as he was about to formulate a plan, the situation changed. A fish seemed to spot Jake hidden behind his cloak. It at least made an abrupt motion as it shot towards him, nose-first.

Not so easily this time!

Jake narrowly dodged by swimming to the side, grasping the fish under his arm as it squirmed. It did cut up his side and his arm a bit, but he managed to hold it. He infused Touch of the Malefic Viper into it as he tried to carefully see the inside of the fish's body.

Emphasis on tried, as just when he began, another fish came. Jake was forced to let go of the first one as he pushed it away. The second one charged Jake as he froze it with Gaze right at the last moment. It stopped swimming but still floated straight towards him. Jake had, at this time, managed to get both his scimitar and Nanoblade out.

He stabbed the frozen fish with the scimitar as he purposefully soaked the Nanoblade in the blood from some of his wounds to poison it. The Scimitar of Cursed Hunger didn't look or feel any different than before his encounter with Eron, except he felt its hunger even more than before. Clearly, the curse and, in concert, the weapon had both become more powerful.

A third fish dove for him, and Jake turned his head to also freeze that as he skewered it on the Nanoblade. With a fish on each blade, he was at an impasse as yet another one came towards him. Thinking fast, Jake raised his foot as it came barreling into him. It hit him on the boot, completely failing to do any damage to Jake's awesome footwear. His foot did hurt like hell, but not as much as the fish that had its nose bent from the impact.

Jake struggled as he was pulled in different directions from the fish squirming on his swords. They struggled and tried to swim away and get themselves loose. He saw how every fin-movement displaced a humongous amount of highly condensed water, making it difficult to keep hold of his weapons.

He failed to react as yet another fucking fish came from behind, and as he couldn't turn his head, he failed to even use Gaze. He angled himself to not be hit in a too bad spot but still had the damn fish pierce him through his stomach.

With a bit of reluctance, he let go of one of his blades – still binding a string of arcane mana around it – as he infused his gloves with arcane mana and grasped the nose that

came out of his stomach. He began infusing it with Touch of the Malefic Viper to poison that one, too. It quickly decided stabbing Jake was a bad time and backed away in what Jake saw as an almost impossible motion. It seemed to almost swim backward as the sword nose exited him, leaving yet another nasty wound.

Jake yanked back his sword with the string, the fish getting off the blade, and the one on his scimitar had also managed to dislodge itself and had now retreated. None of the fish attacked him right away but were nursing their wounds or being apprehensive with their attack. Some of the fish were poisoned, and the one he had grasped first was on death's door, but there were still many more.

Overall? Jake was having a very shitty time.

Chapter 322: Treasure Hunt: Be Like Water

This is bad, Jake thought as the school of fish around him grew. He quickly chugged down another healing potion as he considered his approach. However, one thing was certain, he couldn't abandon his focus on how to better move.

The poisoned fish around him became his stepping stone to understanding this. He felt the toxins circulate through their bodies, slowly being battled against. It was a struggle between the vitality of the fish in question and the poisons Jake had infused, and he saw this battle clearly.

Yet, he also noticed something else. Not in the clash of vital energy and poison, but more what was around it. Everything just felt so odd inside the bodies of the fish. The toxins constantly moved about, and he detected large amounts of water-affinity mana inside them too at all times.

It was a constant stream... but the amount of mana they had to consume at all times to circulate that amount of energy was just utterly insane. Again, one could compare to Jake's Limit Break, where he naturally expended more stamina by circulating more stamina. In the same way, these fish constantly circulated large amounts of water-affinity mana.

One would think this was tiring, but they all did it in the same way. If it was Jake doing the same thing, circulating mana inside or around him, he would be out of resources within an hour. Yet these damn fish didn't give a fuck, but just pumped mana through themselves like it was nothing.

He felt like none of this helped him. On the contrary, it only made him more uncertain of exactly how they managed to cope.

Firstly, how did they even deal with the sheer load of mana running through them? Or was the water-affinity just suited for it? Water was naturally able to flow and seemed like a gentle force. From what Jake knew, then water-affinity mana liked to be together and condensed. It also liked to conform to whatever shape it was in, being a liquid and all.

Was this why the fish could handle it? The water allowed them to handle it? Was it perhaps because it was in constant motion? So many questions, so little time with the fish becoming bolder and bolder as they came closer with every swim-by.

He wasn't sure what to do as he prepared himself. Right in front of him then passed a smidge of red that seemed completely out of place. The blood of the fish wasn't red but transparent and water-like. Which meant it was human blood from his own wounds.

Jake watched his own blood effortlessly flow through the water. Unaffected by the pressure or the concepts Jake had observed before. It seemed to almost meld into and become one with the water. In fact, when he observed it with his sphere, he saw it appeared almost to be the same as the water around him. His Sense of the Malefic Viper also told him that the blood had simply integrated the water - allowed itself to be integrated. It was mixed with the water, yet it still remained separate, with the poison still within it. Integrated but not assimilated.

That is when Jake remembered a certain quote that honestly didn't really fit that well in his current scenario:

Be like water.

Because that is exactly what the fish did... they became one with the water around them. They, like his blood, integrated themselves without being assimilated. With this realization, another one also came... he asked himself why he fought his environment so much.

The mana didn't hold any intent. It simply was. The only reason it damaged Jake was due to the sheer density and that concept, and while he wasn't sure that could be eliminated entirely, he should be able to alleviate it, right?

Jake opened his mouth and took a deep breath, letting the water enter his lungs and body. He felt like choking but resisted. Instead, he also focused on absorbing as much mana from his environment as he could. His mana pool couldn't contain all of this excess mana as it began damaging him... so he released it again.

He did discover that drinking the water was a grade-A idiot move as he only needed the mana, but in his moment of desperation, he wasn't thinking very clearly. All he knew at that moment was that he had to not fight the water or find a way to cope with it; he had to allow himself to acclimate by taking it in. This was only possible because it was neutral mana and not something summoned by anyone. If this Vault had been made with water that held inherently antagonistic properties, Jake wasn't certain how anyone could survive.

After around thirty seconds, Jake began seeing some results. His entire body began being affected by the water-affinity, and he actually felt his own weight increase. However, what he also felt was familiarity. His surroundings became clearer, and he began feeling like he could move. His headache also lessened a lot.

Jake wasn't out of the woods yet, though. Because while he had found a way to adapt, this method wasn't instant. He had to absorb the mana into his body and release it again to do this process, but if he did it too fast, he damaged himself and risked losing control. Too slow, and what was about to happen would be the result.

Three fish came at Jake. He instantly responded as his two blades reappeared. He managed to swing far faster than before, taking his opponent by surprise. A long nasty cut was left across its side. The second one found itself suddenly confronted with the edge of a blade that skewered it through the mouth as Jake angled it to avoid being hit himself. The final fish was frozen just before it hit him and collided with an arcane barrier.

Because one other thing had come from his realization. It had led to him recognizing that it was insane not to use his arcane magic too, using the environment and not fighting it. Before, Jake tried to use his own mana far too much to summon his magic. This was a necessity in the outside world, where the atmospheric mana was never this dense.

But here? Here Jake just had to not fight the neutral mana. Instead, he had to create a spark of arcane energy and then simply transform the surrounding energy with that as the base. Because Jake had learned that water very much wanted to conform once directed. Did this mean he could turn this entire shithole of water into arcane energy? Sadly not, as Jake couldn't cast magic that far away from him, and he still had to direct this transformation.

What he could do was easily summon plenty of low mana-cost mana bolts and barriers.

However, their explosions and speed proved to be lacking as he fired one into the crowd of fish. More than an explosion of arcane energy, it was more an implosion where the moment the bolt lost its form, it was just compressed and consumed by the water, not doing anything to the fish.

Thus he switched to going full-on stable arcane bolts, pretty much just creating small crystal spikes and larger crystal spears of pure arcane mana to pierce his foes. He focused on this while also trying to absorb more and more water mana... which led to another wonderful discovery.

In this place, he had near limitless mana. In fact, the fish were expending copious amounts of mana every single moment; they just didn't give a shit because they regenerated even more. Not that it helped these to have near-limitless mana, for they were utterly doomed now that Jake had a way of fighting back.

With every moment, he grew faster and stronger. His magic sped up too, and soon all that surrounded him was the blood and bodies of fifteen newly killed fish.

Jake cheered internally as the enemies stopped coming, naturally continuing to absorb the water mana and adapting. He checked his notification which instantly put a damper on it all.

****You have slain [Deepgorge Terror – lvl 119]****

...

****You have slain [Deepgorge Terror – lvl 128]****

To feel proud about slaying these fish was honestly a bit... sad. Yeah, sad had to be the right word. These fish were weak, as in, among the weakest any D-grade of their level could be. They had no skills or abilities. All they could do was swim into people and try to poison them with their nose swords. No magic or anything was ever displayed by them. They weren't even durable or overly fast...

They were just fucking fish. Barely magical fish.

Of all the D-grades he had killed, he didn't doubt these were the weakest on paper. Yet, he had to admit that this had been the most danger he had been in since fighting the Altmar Census Golem, a level 150 foe created by an ancient faction to test talents. And he had gotten significantly stronger since then in every way.

Matchups aren't a fucking Joke, he told himself, shaking his head.

Jake chose to remain where he was, slowly healing himself and getting used to the water for the time being. The entire acclimation thing was fast in the beginning, but he soon noticed it slow down significantly. Finally, after an hour or so, with him having also consumed another health potion, he noticed nothing more was happening, to his disappointment.

While he could now move far more easily than before, he still felt like a pre-system human in water. But, then again, could he expect anything more? In the end, he wasn't an aquatic animal but a human. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes and reentered meditation, not reemerging until all of his resource pools were full.

On a side note, Jake was forced to continue the mana circulation from the environment. The moment he stopped, he felt the pressure on him begin to accumulate, making him begin the process again. This meant that there was a constant mental element to keeping himself functional while underwater.

It took him another three hours and two potions before he was back in top condition. He also had to wait out the Limit Break weakness, as he had naturally used that during the fight.

Opening his eyes once more, Jake believed it was ripe time to actually begin exploring the shitty Vault he found himself in. He had moved little more than ten meters from where the teleportation had originally taken him, and he seriously doubted all there was to this Vault were a bunch of fish.

Maybe he could have stayed put to try and think up more methods for fighting in water, but he had to remember he was already on a timer. He would hate to miss out on anything important happening outside just because of his own tardiness.

Jake began swimming upwards first, but after less than a minute, he saw a ceiling. On the subject of his sphere, he had chosen to keep it at thirty meters, as anything more and the headache from information overload would resume. While he now understood the mana and could see through it, he still had to filter it.

The ceiling he encountered appeared to be made of rock, yet he noticed it was just a small layer when Jake got closer. Behind the rock was metal, affirming that he truly was just stuck inside some artificial space. Was this a giant cube of water or a sphere or something? A labyrinth?

Either way, he began following the ceiling until it began sloping downward. He then followed the wall until he reached the bottom of wherever he was. When he reached the bottom, Jake got a brilliant idea. He waved his hand as a much-helpful metal staff appeared.

[Pillar of Encumbrance (Rare)] – A metal rod made of a type of metal with the natural ability to change weight based on the intensity of the mana infused within. Incredibly durable.

Requirements: N/A

He wrapped it in arcane strings and infused some mana into it. At the same time, he infused his feet with mana to anchor himself to the bottom, and voila! Jake suddenly felt like he was standing on solid ground. The seabed - if you could even call it that - was made of stone too, and he doubted this method would work on sand, so he had to do it while he could.

There was something inherently entertaining about walking at the bottom of a pool of water. It became even more entertaining when you didn't have to breathe. So, finding some amount of fun in this Villy-forsaken Vault, Jake continued his journey exploring the bottom of the Vault – or at least what he assumed was the bottom.

For he soon came to learn it wasn't. After exploring the edges of the area, finding nothing, he walked to the center and found a circular hole with a peculiar magic barrier covering it. He frowned as he saw it was a path downwards into a new section, and his new theory was that he found himself in some kind of giant metal cylinder.

Jake leaned closer to the barrier and tried touching it. To his surprise, his hand just phased through without any problems. Well, any problems weren't entirely accurate as his hand began feeling weird as hell on the other side. It almost felt like it wasn't really his own hand, or that it was wrapped tightly in a glove or something like that.

He quickly noticed why. The other side of the barrier wasn't the same kind of water as where he was now. There was another density to it, one far lower. Either way, he would have to dive through as he saw no other exit to where he currently was, and clearly, this was the way forward.

Phasing through the barrier, he found himself in a new room. This one actually being a room and not a cavern of any kind. The walls were made of metal, and he saw several instruments and magical devices scattered about. All of them looked broken and corroded, but he had a feeling this place had once been used for research of some kind. He scouted the room out a bit, finding nothing of particular value. Everything was attached to the walls or the floor, and while the devices looked complicated, they were all ruined.

That is until he spotted something. A faint light. He moved closer and removed some debris and saw a still-glowing panel of some sort. Jake looked at it and saw a big red button with huge letters over it: ACTIVATE COMPRESSION.

Jake pressed it. It was big and red, he had to.

Also, it did exactly as he expected it to. A loud noise was heard, and dormant magic circles activated all around the room. The mana density and thus pressure in the room began heightening at a steady pace as Jake began adapting once more. It quickly became clear that this next area would be even more pressurized than the last.

He severely hoped this would be the last part of this water level, but alas, water levels also had one more important trait:

They were often too fucking time-consuming and dragged on far longer than they had any right to.

Chapter 323: Treasure Hunt: Boss Room, Please?

Casper solved the puzzle and shattered the spatial bindings holding the final fragment as Lyra flew up and grabbed it. She returned it to him, and he inspected it to make sure everything was in order.

[World Fragment of Yalsten (Unique)] – One of five World Fragment of Yalsten, the cornerstones of the miniature world. As Yalsten began falling apart, the World Core was split into five and scattered in the cardinal directions of the world to stabilize it. What has broken cannot be restored, but the fragments can be combined into Quasi-Core once more. Be warned that creating a new core from the fragments will permanently destroy the world known as Yalsten. Cores will automatically reform if close to each other.

When coming to this place, the undead faction had two primary goals. This was the first of them. A World Core was something even gods sometimes desired, as it allowed one to create a true world. Not a full universe, but a world that existed within the endless Void between the universes.

These worlds could vary vastly in size, from no larger than a single room to millions of galaxies. Compared to a real universe, this was still only a mere fraction, but these worlds were far easier to control, customize, and defend compared to managing a section within a universe. However, they also had many drawbacks, such as their fragility and the fact that the world would become effectively inaccessible if all access points were cut off. This is what happened to Yalsten.

What Casper and the undead would get wasn't a true World Core. That ship had already sailed and what they would instead get was a World Quasi-Core. This core would not allow them to establish a stable world, but it could serve other means. Of all the treasures in the Treasure Hunt, this core was possibly the most valuable.

To assemble it, Casper began heading towards the center of the Treasure Hunt – the crystal spire. The final fragment was stored there, and now was the time to make their final preparations for the battle against the guardian.

But for now, Casper needed to keep his distance from the spire, at least a kilometer or so. If he went too close, he would trigger the merging of the fragments, and then the world

known as Yalsten would begin its destruction. The unstable space at the edges only didn't spread due to the fragments Casper had taken, so once combined, nothing would hold the world back from slowly collapsing in upon itself.

Waiting was done not only for the undead but also for the other factions. After all, there were many other valuables to collect. Casper had also naturally seen the opening quest about the Vaults and knew that soon the final stage would begin without him triggering it or not. In the meantime, the undead would make their preparations while searching for the other thing they wanted.

The second item the undead faction really wanted was the Seed of Eternal Resentment, the fulcrum of the ritual that placed the curse upon Yalsten. Needless to say, an item with the ability to store and facilitate a curse able to destroy an entire world wasn't to be looked down upon. It would no doubt be weakened if removed from Yalsten, but it was still worth it.

However, with this, they reached an impasse. They discovered that the Seed had already sprung long ago. Wood had been created from off-shoots of the Tree of Eternal Resentment and turned into weapons and tools of the Pure One's faction.

The main tree itself would have had to be thousands of kilometers tall, towering over the world. Yet now, no such tree was to be found, and the undead scrambled to locate any remnants of it. There had to be at least some leaves, bark, or just any wood left... or perhaps just a single root.

"blub blub blub," Jake complained as he peered down the hole leading into yet another damn cavern, his words roughly translating to: "you gotta be fucking kidding me."

Of all the Vaults, he had now officially spent the most time in this one. In the first cavern, he had killed fish before proceeding down to the second. Inside there, he had killed slightly stronger fish. The third cavern he had killed fish, but now there were two different kinds – a second variant added with the ability to spew water bullets or something.

Fourth cavern? Two same kinds of fish, but get this, now there were also traps trying to hurt him. Fifth? More fish, more traps, more everything. Sixth, seventh, eighth? Same fucking shit, over and over again. Some were more focused on foes, some more focused on traps, and all of them equally a waste of fucking time.

Jake had gotten a grand total of *nine* kills that actually gave experience throughout the entire shitshow that was the water vault. It was just cavern after cavern with those air-lock type things in between to increase the pressure. Jake adapted every time, and he honestly barely noticed the difference between each level.

Perhaps it would screw over someone with less physical stats, but Jake handled it easily. The only real consequence was him having to limit his sphere by a little every time. In this ninth room, he had shrunk it down to only fifteen meters, which still served him fine. His eyesight had gotten rather good, so he managed.

Entering his ninth Vault, he checked it out, his sphere, to see what this place had to offer. It appeared to be more of the same as he was instantly assaulted by a school of fish. Jake sighed internally as crystalline bolts of arcane mana began condensing around him.

Some of the crystalline shards Jake still embedded with a bit of destruction, making them explode. The explosion wasn't meant to damage anything but simply sent smaller splinters of crystal-like arcane mana flying. Arcane frag grenades, if you will.

At the same time, he drew his weapons, preparing for his foes to arrive. Jake still hadn't found any feasible way to use his bow and arrow underwater, so for now, this was what he had to do. Just before the first fish reached him, his danger sense faintly warned him as he dodged a harpoon fired out of the wall.

Jake dove forward, staying mobile to avoid the traps. He cut and weaved, swimming primarily by condensing and hardening the water under his feet. Sometimes he appeared to be dragged downwards, courtesy of the Pillar on his back which he sometimes used to increase his weight.

For a lot of the rooms, he had simply reached the bottom and killed everything from there, feeling almost as if he was simply fighting flying foes. However, that hadn't worked for the last two sections, as the bottom was now a forest of large vent-like openings spitting out extremely hot water whenever he got near.

His eyes were tired as the fish were slowly culled. Sometimes he even made use of a trap, slapping a fish into an incoming spear or perhaps impaling one and sending it flying down to the bottom to become a steamed fish.

Jake could easily handle the Terror's with their large nose, but he did take some damage from the Spitters – the second variant. They fired bullets of pressured water after him, each of them able to leave small circular wounds. One or two were fine, but it was just tiresome when a dozen assaulted him at once.

Ultimately, he spent nearly an hour cleaning up yet another fucking samey session. He found yet another air-lock at the bottom and entered it. He instantly went to the floor of the small chamber and sat down to meditate, his body looking like swiss cheese from all the bullet holes. While meditating, he naturally went through all his lovely notifications.

****You have slain [Deepgorge Terror – lvl 131]****

...

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

And the only other type of foe – because who needs proper enemy diversity in a fucking water level?

****You have slain [Deepgorge Spitter – lvl 133]****

...

****You have slain [Deepgorge Spitter – lvl 143]– Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

Once more, a lot of the same shit with far too many foes he didn't even get experience from. The Deepgorge Terror fish were, as previously mentioned, bottom-tier D-grades, and the Spitters were barely a level above that. If these were translated to land-dwelling animals, Jake would be able to slaughter them even more easily than the Deepdwellers back in the Undergrowth dungeon.

As he thought this, he reached the end of his notifications and saw one more that made his eyes open wide.

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 139 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

This shit actually gave me a level?

Doing the math, it seriously shouldn't have. While Jake had certainly killed a lot, these were weak D-grades and barely any levels above himself. *Could it be it's because of the environment?*

Jake did know that a part of how much experience one got was determined by the difficulty of the fights, and he did have to admit that fighting these fish wasn't easy. He had to apply new methods, and not a single room had left him with more than half of his health remaining.

Shaking his head, Jake simply focused on his meditation, not bothering to think too much about it. Instead, he focused solely on recuperation so he could swiftly move on to the next area. The next one would be the tenth cavern, and he dearly hoped that would be the last one. A part of him had hoped it was only nine, but ten also seemed 'fitting' if that was the right word.

A few hours passed as Jake got up, ready to continue. There was now only a bit over a day of the entire Treasure Hunt left, and he seriously couldn't dally around and play around in these shitty water levels anymore.

The next cavern turned out to not be a cavern at all. Jake looked around and saw he now found himself in what looked like a flooded underwater chamber with large metal pillars everywhere. He was also fairly certain this place was larger than any section prior. This change could only mean one thing:

It was a boss room.

And what did a boss room also indicate? That's right, the end of the challenge.

Jake made a toothy smile, prepared to face whatever monstrosity was hiding within. Yet, just as he was beginning to get himself riled up, he spotted a figure out the corner of his eye. It was a long snake-like creature that was more than five meters long. He turned towards it and Identified it.

[Fulgarian Eel – lvl 140]

The slithering beast also saw Jake at the same moment. It darted towards him with its mouth open, even faster than the Terrors from the other chambers. He reacted by drawing his blades and winding up his arcane magic.

With a slash, he met the charging beast. It angled itself to bite into his sword, catching it between its razor-sharp teeth. Jake thought it moronic to do so until the very next moment. His danger sense reacted as he quickly let go of the Nanoblade he had used to attack.

A thunderclap was heard as the area lit up with blue light from his blade. Electricity, and not a small amount either. Luckily, he had let go at the very last moment, avoiding being zapped. He was still hurt by the electricity, but not as much as he would expect, being in water and all.

His body was temporarily paralyzed, but it did little to stop his arcane magic. Crystalline bolts hammered into the side of the eel, leaving nasty punctures along its side. It made an odd screeching sound in anger and pain, but all that did was to make Jake continue his assault.

Covering his body in Scales of the Malefic Viper, Jake dove in, scimitar at the ready. He retrieved his Nanoblade and attacked the eel with both of them, leaving a few nasty cuts. The eel turned around in the water, sending out a pulse of electricity after Jake, but this time his scales were up. The paralysis was negated as the beast didn't bite down on a tasty Jake, but instead a blade stabbing into its open mouth.

Frowning, Jake wondered if this could truly be the boss? It was stronger than the fish, sure, but it wasn't exactly boss-level or anything. Dislodging his blade, he attacked yet another time as another current of electric energy was emitted, this time at higher power, actually managing to penetrate his scales. Clearly, this was not done with the intent to paralyze but damage.

Jake felt the current run through his body, burning him a bit internally but far from enough to stop him. He quickly retreated for a brief moment, poisoning both his blades with his own blood before he attacked again, leaving a few more cuts. The beast was heavily damaged by now, and Jake was confident he would finish it shortly.

Sadly for him, it had friends.

He became aware of several presences approaching, not from his sphere, but his Sense of the Malefic Viper. Mana of the electric variant approached him from three sides, and he quickly oriented himself of the joining foes.

[Fulgarian Eel – lvl 139]

[Fulgarian Eel – lvl 141]

[Fulgarian Eel – lvl 142]

Four at once... still better than the other sections, Jake told himself as he activated the Pillar on his back to sink downwards, avoiding being surrounded.

Three of the eels chased him, one of them lagging behind due to its injuries. Jake faced them all as they clashed. He opened his eyes wide as he froze them with Gaze, proceeding forward with his blades. Arcane power swirled around his blade as he cut the first one deeply. The second one got stabbed through, with the third getting four arcane crystal bolts puncturing its side.

If this fight had happened in the very first section, Jake could have seen himself be utterly screwed. But now, nine caverns later? By now, he was confident in fighting underwater, and while he was still far weaker than on land, handling a bunch of eels wouldn't be an issue.

Lightning rolled through the water, poison and blood were spilled everywhere, but the winner was clear from the beginning. Jake cut and poisoned the eels till they all stopped struggling, him barely taking any damage from it. He did have to block a few blows, which resulted in him taking a bite on the arm, but it wasn't anything he couldn't easily ignore.

He noticed that the eels couldn't discharge electricity all the time. They had to slowly build it up, and from what Jake saw, they did this by absorbing the water-mana in the area and transforming it into lightning or electricity-affinity mana.

This meant he knew he could attack an eel with no reservations just after it released a blast or tried to fry him, giving him ample openings.

Jake shook his head as he dispelled his blades again, disappointed. Was this shitty place really going to continue? He couldn't see those four eels be the final challenge of-

CLICK!

A loud clicking sound echoed through the water, and a moment later, Jake heard what sounded like a generator starting. The metal pillars all around the room began glowing as electricity wormed its way up their sides, and Jake's eyes opened wide as he saw something move far beneath him. It looked like part of the room itself was moving...

He squinted his eyes as he saw the faint reflection of deep blue skin that faint crackled with lightning, and he promptly used Identify.

[Giant Fulgarian Eel Lord – lvl 158]

Thank fucking Villy, it really was a boss room.

Chapter 324: Treasure Hunt: A Scaly Intermission

Jake readied himself as the creature swam beneath him. He knew it was aware of him as he felt its attention upon him. The eels before had been about five meters long, but this one... this one was on another level. More than an eel, it was a giant sea snake. He estimated it to be in excess of a hundred meters with a large bulky form, with a diameter over six or seven meters.

However, this didn't mean it was slow. It slithered around the pillars lining the large room, seeming to enjoy the jolts of electricity that ran through them. On the other hand, Jake really didn't, as he was forced to keep his distance from all the pillars or risk getting zapped.

The large Eel Lord didn't seem to be in a rush to attack him. It appeared to have only just awakened as whatever powered the room also turned on. It happily absorbed the

electricity and empowered itself. Jake decided not to waste his opportunity as he held out his hand.

Mana condensed as an arrow began appearing from his palm. More than an arrow, it looked like a harpoon, with jagged etches and a large broadhead. It was naturally Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. While he didn't know much of these lightning eels, the Terror and Spitters were close cousins, and ultimately, they were flesh and blood creatures.

Jake kept an eye on the eel as its massive form made its way around the chamber, keeping an eye on him too. It was apprehensive, far more so than any of its brethren. This indicated at least some level of intelligence as it had no doubt noticed the four dead eel around his more-or-less uninjured form.

It wasn't that smart, though, as it allowed Jake to fully summon the arrow. Now his only issue was how to deliver it. He had no confidence firing an arrow with all the pillars lining the room to function as cover, not to mention the tiny little detail that he was still underwater.

Underwater archery didn't have a good historical track record. In that, it didn't have any track record. Because underwater archery wasn't a thing, because underwater archer would be stupid, and Jake didn't plan on inventing it in mortal combat.

So he wrapped the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter on his back with arcane strings and took out his blades. He coated both of them in uncommon-rarity necrotic poison and added a small layer of stable arcane mana on each blade to encapsulate the toxins and not have the water dilute and weaken the killing power. Also, he had a very advanced attack tactic called "stabbing both swords into the eel to their hilts" planned.

Next up, he began condensing what looked like cubes of highly stable arcane mana. Whenever he made one, he sent it flying out into the large chamber, simply floating where it was. He did this tens of times, making hundreds of these cubes. The mana expenditure was insane, but he had the natural environment to keep him topped up. As for the purpose of these cubes? That would become clear later.

Being fully prepared, Jake narrowed his eyes as mana began condensing around him. Crystalline bolts began assembled by the dozen. The eel noticed what he was doing and knew it could no longer continue what it was doing. It moved around a few more pillars as it began rapidly making its way towards Jake.

Far more rapidly than Jake had expected.

Shit, he thought as he released the bolts of arcane mana towards his foe. Despite its massive form, the eel managed to dodge most, while the rest only left surface wounds. Four tendrils of pure lightning consensed around its head when it got close and moved to grasp him.

When he got a closer look, he noticed they were a mix of highly condensed water and electricity. The Eel Lord used them almost like hands, Jake dodging backward. In his moment of temporary panic, Jake fired off a blast of arcane mana, sending himself flying back and getting a bit too close to a pillar as he felt the hair on his head stand as faint amounts of lightning entered him.

The eel dove forward, lunging as it tried to bite down on his significantly smaller frame. Jake was more prepared this time as he already made a path of escape. He condensed some water below his feet as he stepped down. One Step Mile activated as Jake found himself standing on a cube of stable arcane mana more than two hundred meters away.

He had come to learn that One Step Mile really didn't give a shit about what kind of environmental mana it had to make him travel through. Sure, the water was far denser, but in the end, it was still neutral and not antagonistic mana, making his One Step Mile work as well underwater as on land.

However, there was the issue of having something to step on. Condensing water far away from him was incredibly difficult as Jake usually used his Sphere of Perception for this, but with the Sphere limited, he required pre-prepared stepping platforms. That is where the cubes came in.

Why cubes? Well, because they had more sides, and while Jake had tried discs, they often weren't oriented properly. Cubes were far better at that as they tended to spin randomly around from the currents and whatever movement in the water his fighting instigated. The cubes of stable arcane mana also lasted longer as they had more real estate to pump mana into. So yeah, that's why he used cubes.

Jake teleported again just after landing, getting on the other side of the eel to confuse it. It sent out a large wave of electricity, but Jake was ready as he simply tanked it with his scales. The large form of the beast allowed him to take yet another step as he appeared on top of it. Electricity ran up his body, but it failed to paralyze him as he slammed both his swords down into the Eel Lord's body.

It made a loud squeal of pain, sending a soundwave through the water that made Jake's ears bleed. Yet Jake didn't let up as he dragged both the blades across the body of the beast, leaving two incredibly deep cuts in its body. Not to mention the poison that now flowed within.

Sadly, he couldn't continue his assault as the eel shook its body and amplified the voltage. Jake was forced to jump off, and just in time as an almost shockwave-like jolt of blue power ran through the eel. The massive creature fled from him as it slithered around several pillars, absorbing even more electricity as its wounds also began healing.

Jake responded by summoning even more bolts of arcane mana. However, he didn't simply do that but also coated them in his own blood as he sent them flying through the water. The eel avoided most of them, but a few did find purchase.

Annoyingly, he found that the electricity of the pillars helped speed up the elimination of poison in its body as well as heal it. Ultimately, he still chose to fight it at range and wait for it to get close as his arcane bolts petered it as it tried to hide behind the pillars. Jake still did more damage than it healed, making him unsure what the hell it was doing until he noticed its skin slowly begin turning blue and begin crackling.

It was storing electricity not only in its body but its skin and small scales hidden beneath the skin. Each of the scales served as small batteries. Jake felt his own poison be slowly led into these scales, and the poison by worn down. The entire thing reminded him of how the Malefic Viper's scales had-

His eyes opened wide as he stopped what he was doing. Without thinking, he poked a certain skill, impulsively activating it without any hesitation.

Do you wish to experience the Legacy of the Malefic Viper? Uses remaining: 2

The nine council members surrounded the dragon that was the Malefic Viper, having activated their trap and sealed the beast within a grand barrier. They were confident and saw no reason why they shouldn't be able to slay it.

Their magics activated as they rained down upon the dragon's scales, yet the moment they did, something wondrous happened. The scales seemed to almost come alive as they consumed the magic and stored it within themselves, nullifying or at least delaying much of the damage the Malefic Viper would have taken.

Everyone present was taken back, except for two other consciousness present. Naturally, the Malefic Viper had expected it, as all of this was a part of the plan to make them all fear him to amplify the effectiveness of his presence that he would release soon after.

The second person who wasn't surprised was Jake. Already back during the first time, he had noticed this peculiar phenomenon, and now that he experienced it himself, he truly understood. However, comparing it to the eel was simply shameless.

This was on an entirely different level. Jake saw the scales consume the mana with absolute avarice, and he felt that it didn't stop there, far from it. The mana stored in the scales began being broken down by an odd mix of Touch of the Malefic Viper and Palate of the Malefic Viper. The two skills seemed to fuse, existing within each scale as they passively did their work. The purpose of this was clear... to transform and then absorb the mana. Claim it as his own, with absolute gluttony and greed – a concept Jake understood very well and perhaps a part of the reason why he comprehended this skill so easily.

He felt it, he understood it, and as he focused his mind, he applied it. The vision around him began breaking down soon after, being the shortest Jake had ever experienced and even repeating the same scenario. Jake understood why... for he had wished to experience this again. He had wished to finish his comprehension, and the system acknowledged his desire and granted it.

As for why it ended so soon... because Jake was done, and he needed not see anymore. He had seen this end before, and he had his own battle to attend to. The notifications appeared before his eyes as he was transported back again.

[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Ancient)] - The Malefic Viper's scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. Allows the Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. The scales are exceptionally resistant to magic, allowing the alchemist to handle toxic substances better. Passively provides 1 Toughness per level in any profession related to the Malefic Viper. May you continue down your path, o chosen of the Malefic One.

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[Scales of the Malefic Viper (Legendary)] - The Malefic Viper's scales are the first, and often the only required, line of defense. Throughout the ages, as the Malefic Viper became a dragon, he too was granted the power inherent in the well-known dragon scales, making him a bane of all magic. Allows the Alchemist of the Malefic Viper to turn parts of his skin into scales, vastly increasing the effect of toughness and adding a certain damage threshold. All damage below the threshold is nullified. The scales are legendarily resistant to magic and will store excess mana from any magical attacks that would have otherwise damaged you. If the damage taken by the scales is too high, this mana will be dealt as direct damage after a certain amount of time. Otherwise, this mana will be slowly refined and be absorbed or dispersed into your surroundings. Passively provides 3 Toughness per level in Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper. May your scales be as perennial as the Malefic One, and may the sight of your scales let all know their resistance is futile.

'DING!' Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 131 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 135 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

The eel was clearly flummoxed when Jake returned. He had only been gone for a few seconds, but it was enough to throw it off momentarily. His trip away had been brief, but Jake was still experiencing the euphoria of the skill upgrade, and he had no patience or willingness to delay experimenting.

Scales had been the first of the “of the Malefic Viper” skills Jake got that granted him stats. The skill had been the beginning of it all. It had served him well and been his primary defense for such a long time... and now he would see what the improved version was truly capable of. Scales covered his body, looking no different than before visually, but the assumption that no changes had happened couldn't be further from the truth.

Each scale was a small magical treasure in itself, holding concepts and power Jake couldn't fully understand. Yet the knowledge of the skill made him aware this was because the scales he summoned were true dragon scales or at least a very close imitation of them. He was certain an actual dragon would have far more powerful ones, as the Viper's were still on another level, but that didn't mean his scales already weren't ridiculous.

The Eel Lord collected itself, its body now shimmering with electric light. Jake noticed the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was still on his back, and he couldn't help but smile. He began condensing mana under his feet as the massive beast charged towards him, its gaping maw open and ready to rip him apart.

Jake stood still as the eel released a massive shockwave of blue light. If it had hit him only a dozen seconds ago in realtime, then he would have been paralyzed and found himself in quite the pickle... but now? Now the electricity simply rolled over his body, small sparks absorbed by the scales here and there.

This didn't deter the beast as it still attacked. It sought to consume him; that much was clear.

He chose to oblige, but on his own terms.

Jake leaped forward, arcane energy exploding behind him as he was propelled like a torpedo towards the open razor-sharp teeth-filled mouth of the eel. Naturally, the beast noticed his near-suicidal attack and prepared to chomp down with a strike that no doubt could pierce even his new shiny scales. Unfortunately, they still carried the same relative fragility to physical damage as before, even if that had also improved.

Not that it was an issue in this particular instance, for the moment before the Eel Lord managed to close its jaws around him, its entire body froze, being affected by Gaze of the Apex Hunter for the first time. It failed to move as a figure barrelled straight into its open mouth and summoned a bow.

Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter still had to be shot from one, after all.

And while archery was utter shit underwater, it was still useable if you only had to make a magical arrow move a bit forward and puncture a beast.

The arrow was released just as the beast was able to move. He shot it upwards towards where he assumed the brain of the Eel Lord would be but didn't wait to find out.

A blade appeared in each hand as he headed not out of the mouth but further in. Simultaneously, the eel's internal defense system activated as everything around him contracted, and electricity unlike anything ever before dominated the environment, being far more powerful within the beast than outside.

The energy rolled over him as Jake's eyes lit up from the electricity. The scales blocked nearly everything, but some damage did still manage to seep through. He reckoned most things would die from being crushed by the contracting muscles of the eel and the massive amount of electricity... but Jake wasn't most.

With his two blades, he cut up the eel from the inside, storming through the inside of its body down the length of the beast. It squealed and resisted. It tried to crush him, it tried to fry him, it did all it could as it thrashed around but failed to truly do anything. Jake made things even worse as he even cut up his own arms and began spraying his blood inside the body of the eel.

One step at a time he carved his way through its body, leaving only rotting necrotic flesh and blood in his wake. At the same time, his scales were pulsing as they absorbed more and more mana. If he had done this before the upgrade, things wouldn't have ended well, but now?

Now all the beast could do was slowly realize it had swallowed more than it could chew.

****You have slain [Giant Fulgarian Eel Lord – lvl 158]- Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 140 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points****

In the end, the water level didn't turn out to be that bad – Jake just had to leave with Path of the Heretic Chosen and do something else to truly enjoy it.

Chapter 325: Treasure Hunt: Serenity & Conflict

Throughout the multiverse, different species and races were famous for different things. Humans were famed for their diversity and their ability to become nearly everything. You could meet humans as strong and tough as the most powerful beasts or mages with magic and skills that employ concepts in line with the most powerful elementals or spirits.

A cat-like monster would often be agile and fast. A fish would excel underwater and have skills well-suited for underwater combat. Among all these species, some were more famous than others. Not only for their relative strength but that it simply was a powerful race.

Unique Lifeforms, beings that were not truly a race in themselves, stood at the pinnacle of this. Any Unique Lifeform was an existence that all knew were powerful solely by hearing what they were, but this was far from limited to only them. Some races existed out there that fell under other archetypes but were nevertheless extremely powerful simply due to the subcategory their race fell into.

The most famous of these were what humans before the system often referred to as mythical beasts. A phoenix, no matter what, would be a powerful beast by courtesy of being a phoenix. The krakens, champions of the sea, chimeras, beings that could adapt to nearly any foe and had oh-so-many abilities. Yet, one creature was more known than any of these: dragons.

There did not exist a creature with the word dragon in its name that was weak. Dragons naturally also had subcategories, but all of them were powerful. There were lesser types of dragon-like monsters, also known as wyverns, land drakes, or such things, but these were not True Dragons.

The word dragon also came with certain expectations. Assumed abilities that one would be correct about, for all dragons had at least two skills.

Dragon's Breath was a destructive weapon heightened to a concept in itself. The form these breaths took could vary widely. A blue frost dragon would, as expected, spew something ice-related, while the classical red dragons would no doubt release fire. Yet all of these breaths had one thing in common: their unimaginable power.

Jake had read in a book that the weakest Dragon's Breath ever recorded was of legendary-rarity, which means most were above even that. He had seen the Viper release his breath and seen the power therein. This would be enough for most to fear dragons, but their other trait made them absolute nightmares to deal with if you attempted to slay one.

Dragon Scales. Known as the bane of all magic, these scales would make any mage grit their teeth in anger. More often than not, it would be useless to try and cast magic on a similarly leveled dragon unless you yourself were also a supreme genius.

Naturally, the nature of these scales also varied. Many simply provided ridiculous defense and magic nullification, and the scales always resisted magic more effectively based on the dragon's own affinity. That is to say, using frost magic against a blue dragon was double stupid.

What Jake acquired wasn't true dragon scales. He wasn't a dragon, so it would be very weird if he did. However, if he had picked the Malefic Dragonkin race back then, there actually was a chance he could have gotten them by now.

Instead, what he had was imitations of dragon scales. They served much the same function but weren't simply a passive ability he had at all times. Jake had a feeling he could take his scales in that direction if he wanted, one day making them a permanent fixture, but he really didn't want to as he would rather upgrade them in other ways.

Also, Jake's version of the scales did have one small drawback.

"Holy fucking shit, it hurts," Jake said, it naturally just coming out as water bubbles as he floated there, the massive frame of the dead Eel Lord beneath him. The scales on his body were all supercharged with energy, slowly being refined, but a lot of it couldn't be. So what did this energy do?

It directly damaged his own health pool, which was essentially a minor soul attack. It fucking hurt, to put it mildly. His decision of simply tanking all the power the eel had at once hadn't been the smartest and was honestly risky as hell, but hey, he got the job done.

He also discovered that he couldn't dispel his scales if they were charged with any magic. Jake even tried to cut off some scales but saw that it didn't do shit as new ones automatically regrew, the old charge within. So yeah, he couldn't hack the system that way.

Soldiering through the pain, Jake instead focused his attention on the corpse of the eel. He felt something within it, and with his blades, quickly dug out what looked like an oddly-shaped heart.

[Giant Fulgarian Eel Lord Heart (Rare)] – The heart of a Giant Fulgarian Eel Lord. This heart has potent lightning-affinity energy within and will passively generate electricity if infused with mana. Many alchemical uses.

It was nearly the size of Jake's entire body, and when Jake infused some mana into it, it beat like the eel was still alive. Very freaky. He tossed it in his inventory as he moved on, still wanting to exit the Vault sooner rather than later. Oh, and to get the loot.

Diving down, Jake encountered yet another opening, this one larger than any of the others, and coming out of it, he saw countless cables. The cables went to the pillars spread across the room, each of them fastened to the bottom.

Could I have broken the cables to make the eel unable to absorb electricity? Jake asked himself. He quickly tested it as he fired a crystalline arcane bolt into a cable and saw the bolt easily pierce it. *Guess I could. Huh.*

Moving on.

He entered the next area, and to his surprise, found that when he went through the barrier, he did not find water on the other side. Instead, he found air. As he had just hurried through, his entire body suddenly found itself falling to the floor, and to say it felt weird would be an understatement.

Momentarily he felt like his entire body was weightless before it suddenly felt like it weighed a ton. He fell straight down onto the floor, bracing himself. At the same time, he actively pumped mana out, not only due to his scales but also just from his constant cycle of water mana to adapt. It felt weird as hell to suddenly leave the depths and into a normal atmosphere so suddenly.

Jake laid there on the ground for a while as he collected himself. He had quite a few things to focus on, including expanding his sphere a bit to get a look at the room he was now in, all the meanwhile dealing with the scales and adapting to not being under the crushing weight of that odd water-affinity-concept-thing.

The new room he was in was quite small compared to any of the others but was far cleaner and well-maintained. Instruments lined the wall, a single bookshelf with books on it that looked unaffected by the moisture, and overall there was a lot of stuff that looked to be worth swiping. Especially two things stood out. One was an altar with a large tome placed on it with an orb right next to it, while the other was a large bowl of water placed on a pedestal. He noticed that some of the water from above had dripped down as he fell and landed in the bowl of water – clearly by design.

He lifted himself off the floor as he walked closer to the bowl and looked within. There, he saw a stone no larger than a child's fist at the bottom of the newly-fallen water. Jake focused on the stone as he used Identify.

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

Well, this is interesting, Jake thought as he looked at the stone. It looked simple and non-descript, and if it didn't give off the aura it did, he would easily mistake it for some random stone found anywhere. It did look like it had been polished by water quite a bit like it had come from a beach or a lake or something, but other than that, nothing.

He also felt it influence the water around it, but as the water had just dropped there, it had yet to be fully affected. Thus, he decided to not touch the bowl quite yet but moved to the altar with the large tome and the orb.

The tome looked faintly familiar to him, and it didn't take him long before he made the connection. He had seen two of these before, once when he got his profession for the first time and the other after he killed the Great White Stag. Identify confirmed it truly was such an item.

[Akashic Tome of the Fulgarian Depthcaller (Unique)] - Allows the user to acquire the class Fulgarian Depthcaller if compatible.

Requirements: Lvl 99-199 in any class. Compatible user.

It was exactly what he expected. From all the research Jake had done, Akashic tomes were quite rare but not impossible to create. However, they did still take significant investment, meaning all of them were considered very valuable. Of course, it all ultimately depended on how good the given class actually was.

The other item on the altar was an orb that clearly came with the tome.

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

Requirements: Fulgarian Depthcaller

This one was a bit surprising. Would one just be handed the class a full set of equipment and supportive items or something? That seemed a bit excessive. Jake himself didn't have any use for it, but it would probably fetch a pretty penny in the big auction after the Hunt. Surely there would be a bonus for having a set, right? Package deal and all that.

Now, he still had to figure out how good the class was, and he had a feeling the bookshelf would help him answer that. Jake waltzed up to it, his scales disappearing one by one meanwhile. By now, most of his scales had vanished as the mana within was neutralized, and he was beginning to feel back to normal after being so suddenly de-compressed.

The bookshelf held around thirty books, all of them seemingly related to the class, the Vault, and generally just stuff about water magic and such. Jake didn't want to check them all out now, but he did find one book aptly named Fulgarian Depthcaller.

Jake opened it and quickly skimmed a few pages to get some basic knowledge of the class. He came to learn that the class had once belonged to an A-class vampire King of Yalsten, and this entire Vault had been created with the intent of preserving his own legacy.

The book included quite the detailed description of the class as well as a damn history lesson about how the King got his class after training for many years underwater. There, he had battled and trained with eels learning from their powers and slowly beginning to mimmick them. Before that, he had already been a lightning mage, and through his evolution, he had merged water and electricity.

Exact details on the class were limited, but just the fact that an A-grade found it worthy of creating an Akashic Tome of and leave behind for future generations should say something. Jake put all of the books and the bookshelf in the Hunter Insignia. Some of them he would keep for himself, while others he would use to heighten the price during the auction.

Taking another look around the room, Jake once more noted how everything seemed to be in far better condition than anywhere else. A bit like a Count's chamber. Considering that... wouldn't it be a shame to just leave it behind? Surely it would.

In all his generosity, Jake began ripping everything off the walls, burning the instruments from their fastenings, and putting anything in his inventory if humanly possible. Computer-looking devices, shiny pieces of metal, even some wall platings were ripped loose and thrown in there.

It took him a good half an hour to tear the room apart and take everything that looked to be even vaguely of value. He even ripped down a lot of the wiring leading up to the chamber above. He did remember copper cables selling quite well before the system, so magical high-conductivity wires had to sell well, too, right?

With everything done and looted, he turned his attention towards the one item still left in the room, one he had left for last on purpose.

He returned to the bowl of water and, this time, noticed a difference. The water in it had changed and now gave off quite a bit of mana, making him naturally use Identify on it.

[Serene Water (Rare)] – This water calms the mind of anyone who consumes it, allowing them to more easily focus while suppressing the effects of most mental afflictions. Continued consumption will help heal minor soul injuries. Has many alchemical uses.

Jake smiled. He was reasonably confident he had just found something very useful for the future. Lifting up the bowl, he took a small sip of the water, feeling a cool stream go through his body. He felt his mind soothe a bit, the mental stress of constantly having had the adaption process going lessening. It was some good shit. He quickly scooped up the entire bowl, including the water and Dewstone within.

Now, with all of that done, Jake sat down on his ass and entered meditation to fully recuperate as he turned his attention towards the next subject on his to-do list:

****Avaricious Arcane Hunter class skills available****

As Jake spent far too long inside the damn water level Vault, the Treasure Hunt outside progressed as before for the most part. However, something had changed. Before, working together and progressing towards mutual goals had been the norm, with human-on-human conflict being rare, often only happening if pre-existing antagonism existed.

Now, things had changed. When around three days remained, the Court of Shadows changed their MO. Their goal changed from seeking out Vaults themselves to claiming the loot from what had already been opened.

Them doing this led to a cascade effect, changing the dynamic when people met. No longer would it simply be apprehensive greetings, but instead, chances are it would lead to a straight-up battle. No one trusted each other, and many believed this had been a part of the Court's plan from the start.

It allowed them to swoop into the battles of others and claim all the treasures, being the premier masters of stealth and deceit within the Hunt. Another thing that certainly didn't help was rumors that some members of the Court could change their appearance and even aura, appearing to be someone else. A recording of this soon surfaced, showing a man suddenly transformed into an assassin with two guns donning a black metal mask and ambushing the people who thought he was a member of their own faction.

Some factions were hit harder than others by this. The Holy Church had already bunkered down and centralized their loot in their base within a tower, making it impossible to claim much of what they had. Members would just send everything of value there with heavily protected escorts, meaning the members of the church rarely carried anything of value on their person. The undead were still rarely seen and moved in large groups. This meant that primarily the Noboru Clan, Valhal, and all the independent factions were hit repeatedly, forcing them to change their tactics and group up more.

One of the only factions generally left alone – at least to begin with – was Haven. Rumors of Jake's slaughter when ambushed had spread far and wide, and the Court naturally left the members of Haven alone. They seemed to be the only ones viewed as untouchable until something else happened.

The tower in which the Court of Shadows had set up their base of operations was attacked. Not by an army, but a single man. Their barriers were broken, the defenders forced to leave or face death, and all the supportive staff escaped through their Insignias. In the end, only those not in the tower and a few elite members managed to escape – including a heavily injured Judge. More than two hundred members of the Court either died or had to leave the Hunt within less than an hour.

After that... no one dared to go after the Noboru Clan either, lest they face the wrath of the Sword Saint.

Chapter 326: Treasure Hunt: Arrow Time

A bolt of black lightning struck from a clear sky. It impacted the ground, leaving a crater smoking with dark mana. As the dust settled, a single figure could be seen kneeling within the crater, holding his shoulder as blood dripped down on the ground beneath him.

Caleb slowly got up, breathing heavily as he felt exhausted from using the skill. It had drained a good ninety-five percent of his mana pool, making him not worth much at the current time. He took out a mana potion to at least be functional as he reflected on mistakes made.

It turns out being a shadowy organization had quite a number of challenges, especially if they had a lot of enemies due to the nature of their trade. It made everyone an enemy and forced you to look out for more threats than you possibly could.

The Court of Shadows had faced quite the challenges trying to mobilize themselves and secure their position. Not with getting the loot, that part went relatively easily; the issue was keeping ahold of it. Most assassins operated alone or in very small teams of a maximum of three, so facing a large group was difficult. Hit and run was the name of the game.

Stealth was their only true weapon to hold onto the loot they obtained. Against the usual enemy of independent factions, lone individuals, and small parties, that was all fine and dandy, but they began having issues when all their couriers or smaller groups got hit repeatedly. They then tried to centralize the loot with the stronger people in the Court, but then the couriers just got ambushed during transport.

Their ambushers? The Holy Church.

To hide from someone with the ability to divine the future and peer into fate became a challenge they honestly should have predicted. The Holy Church discovered that there was a lot to be gained by stealing from the thieves, and they could even claim the moral high ground while doing so, making it a purely win-win situation for the religious fanatics.

This forced the Court to pool the loot more on people who were either strong enough to defend it or good enough at hiding. The Augur seemed to know who was worth hitting at all times, and the Court of Shadows took more and more precautions. In the end, they began having a large central group, with the majority of loot being carried by Caleb. He and others could veil them all constantly to keep them hidden, and they escaped the Church and went on with their business without any major issues for a few days.

Keeping an eye on other notable figures was something they also did. Eron had disappeared, so that made them worry a bit. The people of Valhal seemed to just take the losses from the occasional assassin, seeing it as simply a sign of weakness and a teaching moment for those hit. The undead were rarely targeted as they moved in big groups, and they had shown no signs of significant movements against other factions. The people from Haven? They were naturally left alone, and besides, they had been stuck in the massive maze-like Vault for a long time. A few from the Court had also been trapped in there too, as well as over a thousand others.

As for the Noboru Clan? Their notable members were either trapped in the big maze or moved around in one large group these days. The Sword Saint was spotted often with the

group, so the Court followed it to keep an eye on him. The man himself disappeared occasionally, but he never strayed too far from the central base of his faction.

Until he did.

Out of nowhere, he was suddenly just there, right in front of their temporary base, one hidden behind endless barriers that had primarily focused on obscuring divination and hiding them. The Sword Saint had cut through them all, and the Court had reacted too slow.

He was just a single man, and in all their arrogance, they had believed he wouldn't be able to break them himself. They had a few hundred people there. Barriers. Traps. Caleb himself, as well as Matteo, Nadia, and a few others of the most powerful assassins. Even Caleb had believed the man was arrogant for truly believing he could defeat them all alone.

How wrong they had been. Caleb had faced the Sword Saint with all the others... the result?

Well, him having to flee, fourteen dead, and one-hundred and ninety-one forced to leave the Hunt, including Nadia and Matteo, who had both tried to hold him off. Those who died were the weakest, mainly people who had been arrogant and tried to face him head-on.

The only consolation was Caleb having carried over eighty percent of the Court of Shadows total loot as he was the one with the highest level of confidence in retreating due to his near-immunity to divination and his many methods of escape. But, even then, it had gotten far more dangerous than he was comfortable with.

All of this made Caleb wonder. He had known Jake was monstrously strong before, and him having even trounced all of those independent factions once more confirmed his strength, yet now Caleb couldn't help but worry...

Because the Sword Saint was also an absolute monster.

Ah, skill selection. Always a good time to get a better feel for one's progress and see what the system had conjured up. From fucked up skills telling One to become a sadistic slaver to telling someone they should really consider getting a proper arcane barrier skill. Or, as it most often ended up doing, just giving Jake ideas on how to improve his existing freeform version of magic.

Thus, as always, Jake went into it with high expectations, looking for a skill doing things he himself could not, or at least something so darn complicated or weird he had wouldn't figure out how to do it himself anytime soon. Or, you know, just something that sounded cool.

The first skill was neither of these things.

[Hunter's Natural Adaptation (Uncommon)] - A hunter must always adapt to the environment in which they hunt. Allows the hunter to acclimate to new environments more easily and grants resistance against neutral mana you do not possess an affinity to. This effect is amplified by Toughness.

This skill was just the system going: “Oh hey there, I saw you just experienced something new! Here, let me give you a skill retroactively after you already figured out how to deal with it. Sure would have been nice to have earlier, eh?”

It made him wonder how many people had died a level or two before being offered skill that would allow them to avoid that death. Sure, he got how the system couldn't just give skills and predict the future, but...

Anyway, he didn't want it. It was uncommon-rarity too, which was just icky. Moving on.

[Explosive Arcane Orb (Rare)] – By your will, explosive arcana shall come into being. Allows the hunter to summon an explosive orb of arcane mana at a target location within your range of perception. The arcane orb will be highly unstable and will automatically explode mere moments after being conjured. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Explosive Arcane Orb.

It appeared Jake's explosive arcane orb-like things had finally become different enough from arcane bolts to warrant their own skill, so that was nice. Proof he was going in the right direction with that one, which naturally made him happy.

Arcane Orbs, rather than bolts, were more just manifested bombs at specific locations and weren't really designed to be fired, just summoned and then made to explode where he summoned them. A bit of a by-product of his Pride of the Malefic Viper upgrade and his infused presence, making mana control more straightforward in his surrounding area. There was just something about summoning bombs in mid-air that was funny.

Didn't make him not skip it, though. Next!

[Arcane Shotgun (Rare)] – Your arcane-mana can take many forms, so why not mimic a weapon of old? Allows the hunter to fire off shards of highly stable arcane mana, functioning as a shotgun. These shards will pierce and deal significant damage at close range while becoming less effective at long distances. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Intelligence when using Arcane Shotgun.

Jake wanted to pick this one just from the name alone, but his logical mind managed to hold him back. It did give him an idea to have Arnold design one just to look cool. Either way, the skill had clearly come from the crystalline bolts he kept making against the fish, and he *had* kind of mimicked how shotguns worked when he fired arcane mana shard with a good spread. You needed good spread when you fired many small projectiles, after all. Also, it helped with him not having to be that accurate.

Another funny one, but not one Jake would ever pick. So far, this skill selection had been a case of “see what you have done in the past in the form of uncommon and rare skills,” which wasn't very interesting. At least the next one was Epic-rarity and a bit different.

[Conjure Arcane Armaments (Epic)] – A weapon or piece of equipment is always within grasp when you can simply conjure them yourselves. Allows the hunter to summon armaments of stable Arcane mana. The shape of the weapons or equipment is determined by the summoner. Armaments can be given to others. The duration and durability of all equipment summoned are based on mana expended. Adds a bonus to the effectiveness of Wisdom when using Conjure Arcane Armaments.

This was the one... if Jake wanted to become an arms dealer. If he read it right, he could create weapons others could temporarily use with his arcane mana. It was an upgraded version of the Spectral Weaponry he had seen oh-so-long ago. Back then, he had skipped it as he believed it was something he could do himself with freeform magic, and he still believed that to this day.

The only possible thing that could make him pick the skill was how it explicitly stated others could use what he created. Not because he wanted to have others use it, but because it could possibly give him some inspiration when it came to using Touch of the Malefic Viper and transmuting items. If he could make transmuted stuff useable by others, that would be great, and no doubt also allow him to heighten his own skill significantly... maybe even get that to legendary-rarity too.

But why would he do that when he could just pick up a legendary skill here and now by choosing the fifth option?

[Steady Aim of the Apex Hunter (Legendary)] – When the string is taut and the arrow ready, the hunter’s focus reaches new realms. To aim and shoot the perfect shot is what any hunter aims for, and as one who stands at the apex, you refuse for even time to hamper your accuracy. Allows the hunter to significantly heighten his focus when the bowstring is fully pulled, tapping into the concept of time to slow down his perception of it while simultaneously boosting all effects of Perception significantly. Your eyes receive this boost to Perception at twice the effect of all your other senses. All effects scale with Perception.

Jake had to admit... the name was incredibly boring to the level of nearly being criminal. It was pretty much just a “steady aim” skill with some fancy title added on and a flavorful description. Also, let’s be fair, the name was bad, and Jake didn’t understand why the skill hadn’t just called it by its rightful name: Arrow Time. The bowman version of bullet time.

Alright, in all seriousness, the skill description and simplicity of the skill really did speak for itself. It was a skill made for better aiming taken to an absolutely extreme level and made into a legendary skill. Perhaps it was one of those times where Jake was meant to be offered some version of Steady Aim, and the system then analyzed Jake or something and decided he had reached some threshold to get the legendary version.

As for how that would have happened... well, the skill did feel awfully similar to his Moment of the Primal Hunter. Likely there was even a bit of Gaze of the Apex Hunter mixed in there considering the similarity in name between the two skills and the extra bonus to his eyes. Perhaps it was just an amalgamation of a few different skills and Jake's practice with aiming and ability to quickly aim and make decisions.

Honestly, he had no way of ever knowing. He just knew he had the skill offered and that he would be an utter moron for not picking it up. Which is to say he naturally picked it.

The moment he did so, he felt... nothing. Yeah, he just picked the skill and stood there expecting something to happen. Not to be misunderstood, he was only anticipating some instinctive knowledge, not some grand understanding of the concept of time. Just something.

Yet nothing. Jake frowned, checked his status, and saw the skill there. Shrugging, he decided to just take the most straightforward approach and test it out. With his bow in hand, he casually summoned an arrow and nocked it. He raised his bow as he drew the string, and then... then the world slowed.

Jake's eyes began glowing with even more power than before. He felt the droplets of water dripping from above slow down significantly... in that to the naked eye, they had entirely stopped. One had to remember that under normal circumstances when Jake focused on aiming, it already felt like time slowed down simply due to his high perception. Same as when he was fighting, it was something everyone experienced simply due to the growth of stats. If not, how else would anyone be able to react to an arrow flying faster than any sniper bullet or a sword swung several times the speed of sound?

But this? This was different. This was like the difference between when Jake perceived his surroundings while still in E-grade and now. With this new skill, he had ample time to think, react, aim, and locate the optimal target. He even felt that many aspects of his shots would be improved... for didn't his passive Archery of Vast Horizons make his arrows stronger based on perception? And his stable arcane arrows damage more based on it too?

He attempted to move as the entire world seemed to have stopped moving and found that it wasn't only the world but him too. It wasn't like Moment of the Primal Hunter, where he could move unaffected with everything else slowed down. This time around, he was also affected just as much as everything else. In other words, it was only Jake's mind and perception of time, not time itself.

Shifting his aim a bit could still be done slighter faster, and micro-movements were naturally more precise when he had more time to adjust. However, it quickly became apparent he didn't have infinite time to just stand there with the string fully pulled. He began feeling a faint headache slowly come on, and Jake finally released the arrow.

It slammed into the wall, failing to truly leave any mark due to the indestructible construction of the underwater Vault, but he still felt that the arrow had been more potent than usual. Jake instantly drew his bow again, and the moment he had the string taut, time slowed once more. This time, the headache came quite a bit faster. He shot and pulled the string again a third time. The headache came super fast now.

Some separate limited resource meter for Arrow Time? Jake wondered. He had been standing there for a damn long time with the string fully pulled with the first arrow. A dozen seconds in realtime at least with everything slowed down, just observing his surroundings and himself. He would have to avoid doing that in the future.

Jake sat down to meditate a bit more, getting up every hour to consume a potion and do a light amount of practice with his new skill. He instantly discovered a few very interesting things he couldn't wait to test out in live combat.

Overall? The skill felt awesome, and he had a feeling it had great future potential. Now he only needed a good fight to truly test it out.

Luckily, he had a feeling he would soon get one.

With around twenty hours of the Treasure Hunt remaining, Jake left the water Vault through a teleportation circle in the center of the room, ready for the final stage of the Treasure Hunt.

Chapter 327: Treasure Hunt: The Final Stage

Miranda walked together with quite the group of people through the giant maze. A single Vault far larger than any other, and they soon found out why... because it wasn't only one. It was several Vaults hidden within one Vault in some complex pattern, and one had to solve all of them to open the final one in the middle.

Coupled with that, it was a massive maze with dead-ends, traps, monsters, and – worst of all – other participants. Fights happened all the time, forcing people to group up whenever possible, and small factions had ended up forming.

As for who Miranda found herself with... well, it was a nice mix of new and old. Sultan had stuck with her after the whole Eron business, something she wasn't sure how to feel about. They had later been joined by Sylphie and Carmen, who had managed to find each other. Then suddenly, a drone from Arnold had passed by, which was how they got to their current size, as he apparently had over a hundred in the damn Vault scouting things out.

Neil and his entire party, people from Valhal, a few members of the Court of Shadows, random individuals who Arnold had 'employed' prior, and even people led by a woman named Reika from the Noboru Clan ended up joining them. It was a mighty political mess, only made worse when Priscilla and a large group of undead also turned up.

Miranda, Priscilla, Carmen, and Reika became the leaders of this small band of misfits – although some would argue Sylphie was the true leader – as they explored the Vault and solved challenges one by one. The difficulty increased the further in, and as more and more powerful foes and dangerous traps appeared, their collaboration became quite the boon.

The four women and bird handled everything far more easily than expected, and Miranda had to admit things went a lot more smoothly than anticipated. She had expected it to be a political nightmare, but it actually turned out quite pleasantly. She was already friendly with Carmen, Sylphie accepted her, Priscilla was very accommodating and open to any positive relations, and Reika was also surprisingly friendly for someone associated with a faction Miranda felt wasn't exactly an ally.

Solving the final Vault itself was done through their teamwork, and more than the final rewards which they shared, Miranda felt like the foundation of trust built among their factions was the true gain. Not that she was complaining about the Legendary-rarity Magic Circle Foundation she got – a large disc of odd stone specifically made to carve magic circles on and amplify them significantly.

Upon exiting the Vault, Priscilla turned to them.

“I believe it pertinent to warn you all that the final phase of the Treasure Hunt will begin shortly... heading towards the central plains would be the wisest to do.”

Reika nodded. “I also just got word when we got out of the Vault that the Holy Church has been preparing there for a while for what is to come. The rest of the clan too.”

Miranda listened, being a bit jealous of the women’s information network, while also wondering how the hell Arnold had managed to communicate and help guide them through the Vault while still hiding outside. Because it appeared like everyone else had been cut off.

Nevertheless, she nodded as they all split up yet stayed fairly close to each other as they all began heading back towards the Mistless Plains. Even Miranda, who was not a fighter or had particularly honed instincts when it came to this kind of thing, knew a big battle was on the horizon.

Jacob opened his eyes as he shook his head at the uselessness of his divination of the upcoming fight. The system wasn’t the one making things difficult; it was the presence of so many extraordinary people. All he knew was when and where it would begin. Thus the Holy Church made preparations – in fact, they had done so for days already.

A mighty magic circle was being prepared to face the final opponent of this Hunt.

“Think we will even need it?” Bertram asked as he stood beside him.

“I truly don’t know... this fight just has too many unknowns. Better safe than sorry, right?”

“Hm,” the large man nodded. Jacob looked at his old bodyguard and friend. The man was powerful, one of the strongest people of Earth, and the party he was in was likely the strongest on Earth... yet Jacob was fully aware the five of them couldn’t truly stand tall before the best Earth had to offer. They were all geniuses, but people like Jake and the Sword Saint were more than that.

“Great-grandfather,” Reika reported in as she met up with the Patriarch. The man stood staring into the horizon. Reika followed his gaze and saw the figure she recognized as the Judge from the Court of Shadows. He looked back their way, his gaze icy, but he didn’t look like he was planning to pick a fight. It would be foolish of him to, for the Patriarch had already shown mercy when he taught them a lesson.

“Has your time been fruitful?” he asked with a friendly smile. Reika couldn’t help but feel how he looked so weak standing there with his thin frame, long sparse white hair, sunken eyes, and wrinkled face. Yet his eyes remained strong, making her admonish herself for even thinking such things.

“It has,” she said, returning his smile. “How about you, Patriarch? Is all well?”

He shook his head a bit as he answered. “We always have more to strive for, and there is always more to do.”

Reika hid her frown as she saw the melancholy in her great-grandfather's eyes. She didn't understand why and looked questioningly at him. He returned her gaze and gave a comforting smile.

"It's nothing. Just the ramblings of an old man who has to realize perhaps his time in the sun will soon be over. This world is for your generation, Reika. Ah, but don't worry, dear... I shall remain long enough to play my role and have the clan experience this springtime season at least a little longer."

She only got more confused, but she didn't say anything... until she noticed him moving his arm a bit, revealing a few black spots that still emanated faint amounts of shadow mana. *He was hurt*. He had not trounced the Court of Shadows for free... and the wounds still lingered. She couldn't help but worry, but he just placed a comforting hand on her head.

"I told you not to worry. I still have a role to play, and I shall not bow out before it has been played to completion. The wound is merely a reminder of my own incompetence and the constant need to strive for improvement."

Jake broke out of the Vault, mentally spitting at the shithole that was the water level. He was a bit sad he hadn't learned the subspecies of vampires responsible for the Vault. That would have given him some easy targets in the future to carry out justice on. Fuckers probably liked mushrooms too.

He had barely been out of the Vault before he noticed someone... or rather something looking at him. He looked up as he saw something float far above. It looked to be made of metal of some kind, and before he could properly investigate it, the thing flashed a small light in an odd pattern.

The issue was, Jake had no idea what it was trying to tell him. He was pretty sure that was one of Arnold's satellite-like things, wasn't it? Staring way longer than he should, he finally noticed something else looking at him. A small drone flew towards him at pretty high speeds, and this one he knew for sure belonged to Arnold.

"Hey there!" Jake yelled to it as it got close. The drone stopped in front of him as Arnold's voice sounded out.

"The satellite should have already informed you that the City Lord and others have organized a rendezvous in the central plains."

"It did?" Jake answered, staring up at it again, noticing it had stopped blinking.

"Through morse code."

"I don't know morse code?"

"Apologies for my assumption of competence," Arnold acknowledged in the most insulting way Jake could imagine phrasing it, yet he felt not the slightest hint of intent to insult in his voice.

“Anyway, where do we meet exactly?” Jake asked. “Also, how has the Treasure Hunt treated you?”

“I have had adequate success in this event. To get to the central plains, simply head that way,” the drone said as it fired off a small beam of light towards the distance, “and spotting someone should be natural. However, be warned that there may be others in the path.”

“Got it, thanks, mate,” Jake answered as he turned and took off, waving to the drone as he took off.

It was difficult to explain how damn good it felt to run across the open plains and over the small hills after just being stuck in water or that small final room for so long. He felt faster than before but knew it was only marginal and due to his stat growth.

Jake ran without using One Step Mile to enjoy the wind on his face. He passed a few groups of people and soon made it to the top of a hill giving him a good look at the Mistless Plains. Looking in the direction where he felt Sylphie, he could faintly spot Miranda and Carmen with her. Sylphie sent back a mental greeting asking if she should come, but Jake declined and said he would come to her.

Just as he was about to head off, someone approached him. A man was flying through the air surrounded by odd energy, and when Jake got a closer look, he recognized it was his old colleague-turned-undead.

Casper landed in front of Jake elegantly, touching down elegantly before not-so-elegantly yelling: “So YOU have it!”

“Oh, hi Casper, nice to meet you too,” Jake said a bit snarkily. “Also, I have what?”

“A byproduct of the Seed of Eternal Resentment. You know what I mean, right? It can take many forms, including a small pebble-like seed, perhaps a large spore or a weapon forged of it or something,” Casper explained.

“Something like a Root also works?” Jake asked as he turned his wrist and made the Root of Eternal Resentment appear.

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

Casper stared at the black root in Jake’s hand before he slowly nodded, having clearly used Identify on it himself. “That’s the one. How much do you want for it?”

“Before I answer that, tell me first what you will use it for?” Jake countered. He did know Casper was into curses and stuff, so maybe he wanted to make a weapon out of it or something? Jake didn’t really wanna give it up as he had a strong feeling he could still find a use for it.

“I will use it to absorb the curse energy in the large spire and then against the final boss of the Treasure Hunt to weaken it,” Casper answered. “At least that is the official story I was supposed to give you. In actuality, we will use it on the spire to still absorb the curse, act like it has no other uses, and beat the final boss without it by using people like you and the Sword Saint. We will then bring the Root back to Earth, where we will use it as a power source in a ritual together with the World Quasi-Core we will get from this final stage. All to construct a special dungeon especially suited for us undead and inherently antagonistic to anything and anyone else.”

“Oh,” Jake said, taking it all in. “Sounds fancy. Do you absolutely need the Root?”

“Absolutely? No, but it would be very useful for us,” Casper answered.

“You know what, let me think about it, okay? If I don’t find a use for it, I doubt there will be much interest at the auction,” Jake answered. “Also, thanks for the tip. I didn’t even think about bonking the big spire.”

Casper just smiled as he shook his head. “I guess it’s about time to get the show started. Once the two of us move closer to the spire, the final phase of the Treasure Hunt will begin. You good with that?”

Jake quickly took a glance around, noticing a slew of familiar faces. He saw Jacob far off in the distance with Bertram beside him. The moment Jake looked at him, Jacob looked back. Jake felt the guy was using a skill to see that far but didn’t consider it more as he saw Jacob just give him a nod. Clearly, the Holy Church was ready. He then tossed a glance the way of the Noboru Clan, seeing the Sword Saint and Reika both stand ready, also fully aware of what was about to happen. In fact, Jake felt like he was the last to know. That did suck a bit.

“Let’s go,” Jake said as he summoned his wings. Casper followed him as they flew to the spire. Once they got within a certain distance... something shifted. Like the sound of a massive mirror being broken, the sky above shattered, and Jake’s eyes darted around as he felt the entire world change.

Casper was enveloped in light as an item appeared in his hand before swiftly disappearing into his Insignia, and at the same time, the system responded.

Quest Received: Cursed Monarch

The world of Yalsten has reached the end of its lifespan as the last anchors keeping it together have been removed. A foregone conclusion, as suppressing the curse would inadvertently lead to this fate anyway. Space will crumble as the world slowly turns to nothingness.

Yet, in this final moment, an ancient figure has awakened. The husk of the once glorious King of Blood who cursed the World of Yalsten, resurrected by his own creation, morphed and twisted by eons of pain and torture, his Records and existence morphed into something unrecognizable.

In his greed, this Cursed Monarch chose to be buried with not only his entire clan but a mighty treasure, one their world had been tasked with keeping safe by the True Ancestor – a treasure still untouched by the curse. The Cursed Monarch must be returned to the soil along with the soldiers he raised alongside himself to claim this treasure.

Objective: Defeat Cursed Monarch and his soldiers.

Final Rewards will be calculated after the Treasure Hunt concludes.

Warning: Due to the destruction of the world, the Treasure Hunt will end in: 11:59:59

Jake skimmed it as he made his way to the massive spire. He bonked the Root into the crystal spire without any hesitation, making it shatter just like the sky above. It turned to crystalline dust the moment the Root touched it, and Jake felt the curse in the Root of Eternal Resentment amplify to extreme levels as it absorbed far more than anything prior. The intent and emotions of the curse invaded his mind as this happened, assaulting every inch of his being. Gritting his teeth, he channeled his Pride and suppressed the desire to slay the vampire he knew dwelled beneath and was about to awaken, getting himself fully under control. No fucking way he was going to let a stupid ancient curse able to destroy an entire world ruin a good fight.

He tossed the Root back in the Hunter Insignia as he flew over to Miranda and the others, the crystal spire slowly turning to nothing behind him. He had barely landed and given them a friendly nod before another message appeared before him and everyone else.

System Announcement: The Cursed Monarch will awaken soon. For the next fifteen minutes, anyone can choose to exit the Treasure Hunt while retaining all currently obtained treasures and without any penalties besides the inability to participate in the final stage. During this time, no items can be withdrawn from or deposited into the Hunter Insignia or any other spatial storages or items.

Countdown: 14:58

Jake read over the messages, and before he even had time to open his mouth, the plains were filled with flashes of light as people began leaving the Treasure Hunt. He even saw quite a lot in the distance, making it clear that this wasn't even a question for many. A way to escape without having to fight some final boss and potentially even risk more human-on-human conflict? Jake could kind of understand it.

Not that he himself had any plans of leaving.

The same couldn't be said for those around him.

"I believe it would be wise of me to take my leave," Miranda said. "I have gotten enough... and quite frankly, I'm not confident in my ability to fight on a stage like this."

She looked like she was afraid Jake would disapprove, but he just nodded at her. "Understandable. This is more my kind of thing, so I'll happily be the representative of Haven."

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched at his side.

"With Sylphie, of course," he quickly added on with a smile. Miranda nodded and disappeared. Arnold also said his goodbyes without any explanation as the drone he kept with Miranda just poofed out of existence. The rest of the people from Haven chose to stay behind. Neil only gave Jake a brief greeting, the man and those with him fully aware they were not there to fight the Monarch himself but the soldiers the message mentioned. No, those who would fight the Monarch were the best Earth had to offer.

Jake peered all around the plains as he saw everyone who would face the Cursed Monarch.

The Sword Saint, Casper, Priscilla, Carmen, Sylphie, Reika, Caleb, as well as the most powerful parties of Earth with Bertram and Sven in them. Others also remained behind. In fact, many chose to face the final stage and help assist them, including a large group from the Holy Church and another large one consisting of undead.

Jake exchanged glances with the Sword Saint who stood beside Reika. The man gave him a knowing smile. Jake nodded with understanding as he also prepared himself to face the final boss.

With that, the fifteen minutes expired... and the Cursed Monarch awakened.

Chapter 328: Treasure Hunt: Starting Shots

At the edges of Yalsten, destruction was unfolding. The equilibrium of space that had been formed for so long was now broken, and the world began collapsing in upon itself. Earth and soil were turned to nothingness as everything just began shrinking, any matter being cut up endlessly.

It progressed fast, and a few people who had not been close to the Mistless Plains found themselves with no choice but to leave the Treasure Hunt or run from the world's destruction. But it was only a few, for the vast majority had already gathered, ready to face the Cursed Monarch.

Inside a maze of metal, a magic circle suddenly stopped functioning. The caster had disappeared, and all connections cut. A few seconds passed until suddenly a hand emerged from the ground that appeared to turn liquid.

The man dragged himself out as he stood up, covered in green water.

Eron frowned as he saw the quest but didn't decide to leave. Instead, he walked casually out of the Vault, making a mental note to avoid Haven for the time being, or at least until he came up with a valid countermeasure. Issues for later, because he saw no reason to miss out on contributions against this final enemy calling himself a Cursed Monarch.

"So, you know guys have any tactics in mind?" Jake asked the people around him.

"Stay the fuck back," Christen said, getting nods from Neil and the rest of her party.

"Good call, one I think I will follow," Jake said as he looked around, finding a spot in the distance. He felt energy gather as the Cursed Monarch was slowly coming to life. All the mist from Yalsten was gathering at the coffin that was now visible as the spire had been broken.

Jake took flight as he headed off, getting a few odd glances on the way, but nothing that bothered him.

He was an archer after all, right? Hence he was looking for a good vantage point.

A pulse went through the entire Treasure Hunt. Then, a few seconds later, a second one. It soon began rhythmically beating like a heart as an ancient being that had slumbered for an untold number of years awakened.

Yalsten was now nearly entirely devoid of mist, except for a few dozen meters right around the coffin and the sky far above. Then, as if appearing from nothing, figures suddenly stepped out of the mist. Hundreds of beings resembling the Reanimated Armors were the first to become visible, all of them pulsing with power.

[Cursed Soldier – lvl 135]

The mist around the coffin slowly dispersed, revealing a single cloaked figure. A black crown adorned his head, a cloak dark as night behind him, and piercing eyes that were entirely red beside the deep red irises. He was over two and a half meters tall, but his form was willow and thin, his eyes sunken, and his appearance was decrepit. Around him stood five heavily armored beings, one with a sword, another a spear, a third a bow, a fourth a staff, and the fifth with two floating orbs revolving around it.

It was clearly a party setup, the five of them all called Royal Guards.

[Cursed Royal Guard– lvl 160]

The final one was naturally the cloaked figure. A being that absolutely pulsed power as he simply stood there. The vampire looked up towards the sky before releasing his aura, truly making himself known as the Cursed Monarch.

[Cursed Monarch – lvl ???]

Most everyone present was intimidated by the absolute power of the Cursed Monarch, yet they also breathed out a sigh of relief because while the boss was powerful...

Then he was still D-grade.

Jake observed it all happen from far away. The boss and those around him didn't move to attack right away but seemed to need to collect themselves after just awakening. Or was it that none of them were truly intelligent anymore?

The primary evidence for this being the case was the Cursed Monarch not yelling out something like "I HAVE RETURNED TO FEAST ON YOUR BLOOD" or another likewise cringy way of announcing himself.

What talked against it was him looking towards the sky. It was a needless action unless he detected something up there, and Jake didn't think that was the case. If that was true... was it simply that the Cursed Monarch didn't view any of them as a threat?

No, that couldn't be it either... for at least he and a handful of others sure as fuck were.

Jake held out his hand as he began his own true preparations now that he saw them. A part of him hoped to just get an easy opening shot, but it appeared that wasn't going to happen. The first to make a move wasn't Jake or the Sword Saint or even the Holy Church, but a single person.

Casper flew up and opened his arms wide as he regarded the army of vampires, the Curse of Yalsten burning within him. The Cursed Monarch looked up at him with blank eyes before the undead pointed down at the resurrected king.

“Resonance.”

Then... both of them froze. Jake had not been informed much of what was going to happen, courtesy of him being stuck in a goddamn water level, but it very fast became clear these people had planned more than just coming together and attacking.

Whatever Casper had done had frozen the entire group of cursed vampires. Behind him, Jake saw two giant pillars of power ascend towards the sky, one of them a mix of white and black, exuding a ghastly color and powerful affinity of death, while the other was a pillar of holy light.

It was quite the deadly combo when mixed Jake came to learn, as two huge blasts released by rituals with hundreds behind them descended on the group of frozen vampires. Or... at least they looked immovable - for, at the very last moment, Jake saw the Monarch release a faint pulse before the explosion engulfed the army.

An explosion more powerful than anything Jake had ever caused ravaged the Mistless Plains as the powers of death and holy light mixed, not much different than Jake's Corrupted Mooncore back in the day against the King of the Forest. It worked in the same vein with two very much opposing concepts mixing to create something more powerful than the sum of their parts.

Jake heard cheers from below but knew it was premature. At the very next moment, the Monarch moved. The remnants of the explosion were parted by a screen of red light that cut across the plains and directly into the camp of the Holy Church. Barriers activated but shattered like wet paper before the attack, instantly killing a dozen or so members of the Church.

Another wave was released towards the undead, but they were prepared and managed to avoid losing anyone. A third then came, aimed towards the campsite of the Noboru Clan. This one wasn't dodged.

An old man stepped in front of the group from the clan, them having not made any barrier in preparation. He waved his blade as a blade of water appeared and was shot towards the deep red slice of pure blood power. It didn't crash with it or enter a contest of strength. Instead, it subtly hit the side of the wave and almost seemed to be absorbed into it as it guided it in its path – making it curve slightly.

It completely missed the old man and the camp, none of them even looking worried as they charged up some kind of magical ritual themselves. It felt and looked far weaker than whatever the undead and Church had made – and even weaker than the second magic ritual the Church were cooking up hidden away behind a hill.

As the dust settled around the Cursed Monarch, his undamaged form was revealed along with the Royal Guards and the closest soldiers. Jake did a quick headcount and noticed over a hundred Cursed Soldiers were gone, and the Royal Guards had clearly expended some resources too.

They had lost many Cursed Soldiers right off the bat, and hopefully... one Royal Guard.

For while Jake had been an onlooker so far, that didn't mean he hadn't been preparing. The Cursed Monarch had turned his attention to the one person who had blocked his blow. Five Royal Guards stood around him, three of which were of the fighter variety, while two were casters.

Jake aimed for the one with the staff, as it gave him healer vibes. The show earlier had given him ample time to prepare an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter – formed using his knowledge of vampires and the cursed golems as the basis – and charge a full-power Arcane Powershot.

It was tight on time to get everything ready, but he managed to without pulling out any new tricks. The enemy hadn't noticed him yet when he released his attack, too many other people and sources of potential danger around the plains.

***BOOM*!**

Jake had shot from the balcony of a building nearly fifty kilometers away from the Mistless Plains. It tore through Yalsten, the unstable space breaking and cracking in its wake from the destructive arcane power. Reality rebuilt itself nearly instantly again as

the arrow passed by, but even so, it proved that both that space was unstable... and how Jake's shot was damn powerful. More powerful than any he had released before.

Steady Shot boosted his perception, which boosted his archery, which boosted everything related to archery. It made the arrow fly fast and hit harder – hard enough for the Royal Guard to not notice before it was too late.

Or, it did notice... but Jake was already ready as he drew the string of his bow. When it was taut, he felt the world slow down, and at that moment, he used Gaze of the Apex Hunter on not only the healer but all five Royal Guards.

At the same time, arcane mana swirled around him far faster than ever before - at least from an outside point of view. To Jake, he did as always as he manipulated the energy to charge up Arcane Powershot, but with his perception of time slowed down, it meant his actual manipulation was faster in reality.

Physical movements were limited by this slowdown, making Jake unable to move his limbs as he wanted, but mana was something entirely different. The speed at which mana moved and how fast Jake could manipulate it was primarily limited by three things: One, Jake's own skill at manipulating it, two, his ability to impose his control – reliant on the willpower stat – and finally, Jake's own durability both mentally and physically. There were a few other minor details and contributing factors, and time did sure affect him still, but compared to before, his Arcane Powershot was charged approximately three times faster. With practice, Jake reckoned he could improve it even more.

Ultimately, this meant that Jake already had another two Arcane Powershots in mid-air just before the arrow hit his target, all of them charged for only a single second, but all still packing potent power.

The frozen Royal Guard that was his target still managed to muster some response. An entirely white barrier appeared around the Guard as well as the vampire's comrades. It was hastily constructed and, needless to say, not enough.

Like glass, it shattered as the Guard was hit by Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, sending it tumbling back from the impact. Its comrades still stood frozen as the Monarch turned and looked Jake's way. The Monarch began moving, but Jake smiled.

You stop too.

Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated as Jake felt himself pierce into the soul of the Monarch, a soul even more powerful than all of the Royal Guards put together. Yet the Cursed Monarch still froze, unable to resist the skill powered by his increased perception. The big boss vampire still managed to break free in only half a second, but it was enough for a second Arcane Powershot to hit the healer Guard.

The first arrow had merely sunk into the body of the healer, its effects serving to not only damage it but severely hamper the natural regeneration of vampires. The second arrow hit the healer in the chest, blasting a palm-sized hole through it as the vampire was sent flying even further away – right in the direction of two people in particular.

Black lightning struck from above as a powerful magic circle activated with intense curse energy at the healer's landing spot. Caleb and Casper both struck together as the healer was blasted even further. His brother had landed with his staff and smashed the healer into the ground, and spinning his staff in the air, he smashed the vampire in the side, sending it flying even further away from the Monarch and the four other Royal Guards.

The other vampires tried to come and help, but only Caleb was there. He dodged back as another attack from the Monarch arrived, his entire body turning into black lightning. However, the power difference was too high as Caleb still took a nasty cut on his shoulder just before he transformed and retreated.

Ranged attack began raining down on the healer as Jake fired towards the Monarch and Royal Guards but found his arrows blocked by the Monarch, who had also blocked his third Arcane Powershot originally aimed for the healer. Even then, bullets, bolts of all elements, spears, beams of light, over a hundred attacks descended on the already heavily damaged healer as the Royal Guard still managed to form a barrier.

The armor of the Royal Guard was broken now, revealing clear female features and a completely blank face, not showing any emotions or even that she was so hurt. Her one arm was dangling, the wounds not healing as they should due to Jake's arrow and poison combined with the black lightning and curse. One had to remember she and everyone else were also still affected by whatever magic Casper had activated in the start.

Jake knew he didn't need to do anything more to the healer himself as he just focused on distracting the Monarch a bit longer. The boss-level vampire stood there, and Jake let his own aura flare-up to attract attention. The Monarch didn't strike him as truly intelligent based on how he reacted, and it proved to be correct as the vampire clearly focused a lot more on powerful foes than making the smart choice of trying to save the healer vampire.

As for how Jake knew he didn't need to do anything more? Because a second later, the barrier around her was shattered as a woman smashed it apart with her fist. Carmen moved forward and punched the vampire in the stomach, sending it flying upwards. A green dart of pure death came from behind the pugilist, and in a fly-by as fast as Caleb's lightning, severed the head of the vampire.

Back in the center of the plains around Monarch and Royal Guards, the Cursed Soldiers had begun finally waking up and looking about to notice the enemies in the distance. They

began running amok, each of them as powerful as some of the strongest Ekilmares around. They would surely be powerful foes... except they were severely outnumbered and outmatched. The best Earth had to offer, bar a few people, were present in these plains.

From the start of the fight, Jake had a feeling that this stage was inherently unfair. The vampire Monarch was incredibly powerful, the strongest foe Jake had ever seen. Each of the Royal Guards was as strong as a Count of Blood too.

All of this is to say that It was truly unfair... for the vampires.

Chapter 329: Treasure Hunt: Quite the Mix

About twenty kilometers from the center of the plains, six figures suddenly appeared – five humans and one vampire. The vampire instantly turned towards the humans and charged without any hesitation.

Neil blocked the Cursed Soldier with a barrier, giving Christen time to engage it in melee. Levi was already flanking the vampire as Silas cast buffs on Eleanor, who was charging up a Powershot. Neil had managed to teleport them all to the circle he had prepared in the distance, isolating them with the Soldier just as planned.

The Soldier and Christen crashed, but she easily held on as he redirected the sword swing with her buckler. This particular Soldier had a sword and a shield, and while it was quite powerful, it wasn't very talented at using its weapons.

Levi came in from the side as his sword was aflame. He cut the Soldier across the back, making it growl and turn to hit him. Christen took the opportunity to try and stab the vampire with her rapier but found her blow blocked by the shield.

Neil moved his magic as he created spatial pressure on the Soldier to try and suppress it and allow his comrades to land blows. Eleanor was finally ready just as Neil's own magic also finished, and with a combined attack, the Powershot empowered by Silas was released as it left a wake of silver light.

The vampire was blasted back, allowing Levi to strike again with a crosscut that sent out a small whirlwind of fire and wind. The rest of them also kept up the pressure as they dominated the Soldier from start to end. They killed it within a few minutes, and once it was done, Neil disappeared.

Ten seconds later, he reappeared and nodded towards Eleanor, who stood ready with a charged arrow. He activated his spell, and space warped as a Soldier was teleported. The Powershot hit it before it could get its bearings, as the group attacked it, using many of the same tactics as the last one.

Neil and his party had naturally chosen to stay and fight, yet they had no delusions about their presence truly having a large impact. They had seen the monsters that would handle the most dangerous foes and knew it was not their place to stand beside them... at least not yet.

Because while they knew they weren't extraordinary, they were still hopeful. Neil was a space mage, a very good class that took a lot of natural talent to comprehend. The rest of his party also weren't slouches either, and they had all five managed to get the Perfect Evolution. After they all reached D-grade, things had truly taken off as they grew more in levels than before, their teamwork also improving.

They had constructed a strong foundation and were now building upon it further to improve their strength. Their time in the Treasure Hunt had been very fruitful, with plenty of treasures obtained and levels gained. It had also helped tremendously that they had avoided all human conflict due to their affiliation with Haven, at least after Lord Thayne had that confrontation with the independent factions. Before that, there were some rather passive-aggressive people.

Neil had even spent quite a while with that guy Casper inside a Vault. Neil had detected one that was heavily based on space magic, so he had sought that out as the rest of his party hunted and leveled up against those Reanimated Armors in an abandoned tower.

He had to admit, the undead had some interesting and very different insights into space, but that also meant Neil had actually managed to help a lot. It felt good and affirmed that Neil wasn't as untalented and useless as he had begun feeling while only spending time in Haven.

There was a strong feeling of inadequacy when he and his party had to compare themselves to Lord Thayne for the longest time. Neil had then seen the World Congress, where he felt like one of the weakest people present. Besides Lord Thayne, there was Arnold, an insane scientist of sorts who Neil wasn't sure about, but he seemed smart and, of course, Miranda. Then Sultan also came, another man more talented than any of them. Miranda wasn't a combatant and had always been clear about that. Oh, but it did help when some unaffiliated D-grades began showing up, and Neil began to realize that none of them seemed even close to as good as he and the party were.

But... they still had a long way to go. Neil teleported another Soldier away from the center and to their ambush spot as he took a good look at the battle between the true elites. A stage where they did not belong yet, but one he yearned to stand on.

For now, all they could do was help with the small-fry. The same as thousands of other people who knew directly engaging the foes in the center of the Mistless Plains would be utter suicide.

One Royal Guard down

, Jake snickered as he stared at the battlefield in the distance. The Soldiers were running towards the many humans lining the perimeter of the plains, many already fighting. There were foes in all directions, meaning most groups of Soldiers weren't more than five or six, with many even being alone. Parties of humans had engaged them, some employing interesting tactics, such as Neil and those guys and gals teleporting Soldiers away and fighting them there.

Jake himself didn't bother with the Soldiers. They were a good source of experience and fighting experience for those on the weaker side. Instead, he would focus on the Royal Guards and Monarch. The death of the Royal Guard healer at the hands of him, Casper, Caleb, Carmen, and Sylphie had now truly woken up all of the more powerful vampires.

The four remaining Royal Guard's had their eyes lit up as a bit of clarity returned to the Monarch's eyes, and coupled with the "resonance" stuff Casper had done beginning to fully wear off, it was time for the true battle to begin.

As expected, the four Royal Guards moved as a party as they took up a defensive perimeter around the Monarch. The big boss regarded his surroundings, it looking like he had now fully understood the situation.

"I see."

For the first time, he spoke, his voice reverberating throughout the plains. Jake felt the power it held... perhaps vestiges of a being that had once been A-grade. He looked into the horizon, Jake following his gaze. With the mist gone, for the most part, Jake could see the sky in the far distance shattering as space broke apart, and so could the Monarch.

“Yalsten has fallen, its inhabitants gone.”

He turned his attention towards the people attacking him, throwing a glance at Jake and the Sword Saint in particular.

“Is this my final role? Is this meant to serve as punishment? Tell me... how many eras have passed?”

All of the Soldiers still ran and fought people, but the center of the Mistless Plains was devoid of fighting. Everyone had stopped as the Monarch began talking, with the Royal Guards also doing nothing. The Monarch did not seem to carry any hatred towards those who had come to slay him either, or even that they had killed one of his comrades. Or maybe subordinates was a more accurate term?

“We have just entered the 93rd era. Not even a year has passed since then,” a voice echoed out as a figure in all white stepped forth from the Holy Church camp, flanked by Bertram and his four party members. It was Jacob, who Jake had honestly thought would have left the Hunt.

The Cursed Monarch looked towards Jacob as he stood there. Jake tried to identify him on instinct but hit a barrier.

[Human – lvl ?]

Jake frowned but knew his Identify didn't fail because Jacob was too high level; the dude had just gotten a skill to resist it. Sadly, Jake didn't have time to try and peer around it as the Monarch spoke again.

“You give off the stench of the Holy, yet I feel no trace of lies in your words.. truly so long as passed. Tell me, slave of the Holy Tyrant, have you come to finish the job at the behest of your masters? Or have I simply become the subject of the system's limitless mercy?”

He saw Jacob in the distance frown, his façade falling for a moment as he felt the pressure of the Monarch's aura.

“Ah... my words strike true. A second chance, given as my world crumbles. Another life. Escape, gifted with only a single requirement-”

Power suddenly enveloped the entire Mistless Plains as the Cursed Monarch released his aura, and his body began burning with power.

“-I merely have to claim my own future... by taking all of yours'.”

He raised his hands as two beams went out, one towards Jacob and the other interestingly enough headed straight for Jake. Jake watched it as he fully drew back the string on his already nocked arrow, allowing his perception of time to slow down.

A fraction of a second before the beam hit him, Jake released the string as he sent the stable Arcane Arrow barrelling down. It hit the beam and parted it as two red screens of light flew by Jake at either side, him snickering beneath his mask.

It's on.

As for Jacob, he did perhaps the most interesting. He just stood here as he had a hole blasted through his body and was sent flying back with worried gazes upon him. Yet he had barely landed before he stood back up, the wound on his chest already healing, not from some healing spell, but solely due to his insane vitality.

His old boss had clearly gotten some pointers from Eron, and Jake also knew the lopsided stats of Augurs gave them a shitload of vitality.

As for the people around Jacob, they took the chance to charge towards the Royal Guards and Monarch. The same was true for Sven and those from Valhal, Priscilla and an undead party, two groups from the Noboru Clan, and a few other talented or overconfident people.

One of the groups from the Noboru clan had Reika in it, and Jake saw her as four swords were summoned above her head as she charged forth. All of the swords burned with intense blue flames, giving off a rather dangerous aura.

Yet, the Monarch cared not for any of these parties. He suddenly turned to mist as he appeared several kilometers in the air where he looked down. Jake met his gaze and saw him also observe a few others, primarily the individuals Jake also knew were powerful.

Jake just drew his bow and fired an uncharged arrow, which the Monarch easily swatted away, but just after a bolt of black lightning came from below, followed by two kinds of crescent waves – one green and one blue.

If it was the Monarch before his ‘awakening,’ he would have just taken them... but as he was now, he had intelligence, so he merely dodged as he turned to mist again, appearing a bit to the side with a smile.

More attacks arrived soon after, as space began warping around him, a group of space mages from the Holy Church below trying to restrict his movements. The Monarch scoffed as he merely pointed down at them, making five people explode as they turned into mists of blood, disrupting their ritual.

He turned around in the air as a figure was flying towards him at high speeds, holding out his hand as he blocked the glowing fist of Carmen. He furrowed his brows a bit as he was pushed back slightly and quickly had to react again as a metal staff descended with dark lightning crackling around it.

Jake’s arrow then arrived from the side, forcing the Monarch to dodge back, only to find himself confronted by an old man who looked even older and more derelict than the vampire that had been dead for countless years.

The Sword Saint slashed down, and for the first time, Jake saw the Monarch open his eyes wide. He exploded with a wave of blood, sending everyone flying back away from him, including Sylphie, who was preparing to strike from behind.

Another teleport later, and the Monarch found himself free of enemies.

“Not bad for a bunch of low and barely mid-tier D-grades... or have I truly become that weak? No, that isn’t it. Tell me, what factions do you all belong to be sent to such a perilous land? I already see those of the Holy Tyrant and the undead, even a warrior of Valhal, and an assassin of the Court, but as for you two-“

The Monarch motioned towards Jake and the Sword Saint in particular. **“You two, I cannot quite place. Free agents? Hired help? I must admit, this entire entourage is quite the mix.”**

Jake stared from afar, not being able to answer due to the vast distance. Or maybe the Monarch would still hear him? Eh, it didn’t really matter as Jake didn’t feel like answering. He was totally fine with being a far-off sniper.

Who did answer was the Sword Saint. “I serve only my clan,” the old man said as he stayed alert.

“Hm, I guess it does me little good to know; I am certain many new factions have emerged. What of you, Hunter?”

Jake stared back again, still not sure what to answer... but decided to anyway. The Monarch knew of most anyway, and he saw no reason to hide himself. Besides, the Monarch would probably figure it out himself. If he had once been A-grade or at least contained many of the memories of an A-grade, it only made sense he would be familiar with an ancient faction like the Malefic Order. Also... everyone else knew.

He released the aura otherwise suppressed by Shroud of the Primordial. The power of his bloodline mixed with the signature marking him as the Chosen of the Malefic Viper as he let it wash out of him.

The Monarch stopped as he stared. He looked deep into Jake's eyes, the deep red eyes of the Monarch meeting those of the hunter. No one moved for a while as the Monarch just looked confused more than anything else.

“Why?”

Having noticed the confusion, Jake frowned. He saw Casper looking a bit weird, Jacob too. It looked like they expected him to know something. *Did I miss something?*

“What has happened throughout these eras for the Malefic Order to decide to hunt us down? Why would the Malefic One make such a decision...”

Chapter 330: Treasure Hunt: Proposition

Jake stared confused as he had a feeling he had *really* missed something. Also, why did Casper look so weirdly at him? He got Jacob, but even Casper knew? Shit, even Carmen threw him a confused gaze. At least the Sword Saint wasn't in the loop either...

He tried to focus his voice as he infused some will into it and projected it into the distance towards the Monarch. **“Being real honest here, I have no idea what you’re talking about; I’m just here to get treasures. Do feel free to clue me in.”**

This only got him more confused stares from everyone, the Monarch too. Jake, on the other hand, was just happy his voice-projection had worked so well.

Casper, in the distance, just began laughing as he shook his head. Jacob face-palmed, and Carmen nodded like his answer made sense.

“Hah.... Ha, I must confess, this is quite the situation. Who would think the system would throw me into such a bizarre situation. Tell me, does the Chosen come here at the behest of Malefic One or of his own volition?” the Cursed Monarch said as he laughed out loud.

“Nope, I’m here all on my own,” Jake answered truthfully, just wanting to get back to the fighting.

“I see... it does sadden me our race is so insignificant that not even his Chosen would know of us... but more than eighty eras have passed, have they not? Perhaps it is to be expected,” the Monarch said, looking disappointed.

Jake was beginning to feel a bit bad for the poor guy. It must suck to be resurrected and find out that your entire race has potentially been wiped out without any way of finding out. Or there probably was, Jake just didn't know, and even if he did, would it help to tell him?

Also, more than eighty eras... and with what Jake knew, it had to be nearly ninety, as to his knowledge the Viper had been 'gone' for more than eighty. He didn't know the exact timeline yet, and he had never asked Villy as he didn't want to dig up old wounds by asking about stuff like that.

"I wouldn't say that," Jake answered back. **"I'm just not the most informed when it comes to matters like that. Besides, does it matter? I reckon if you win here today, you can leave, and if you lose, well, you'll be dead, so that's that."**

He really wanted to finish off the conversation, as it was tiring to project his voice like this. The fighting below with the army of Soldiers and even the four remaining Royal Guards was ongoing, so in that sense talking was to their advantage. Humanity and the undead were clearly beating the army of cursed vampires handily, and Jake would lie if he didn't find the Monarch's indifference slightly surprising if not downright worrying.

"You may have a point, Viper's Chosen," the Monarch acknowledged. **"And as you said, the system has given me a new path. I merely need to defeat all of you, making you leave before Yalsten collapses to escape. Meanwhile, I assume you lot have to exterminate me."**

The Monarch didn't need any answer to get his theory confirmed, as the silence of those present was good enough.

“Chosen, I have a proposition,” the vampire Monarch said as he looked towards Jake. **“Assist me in slaying the slaves of the Holy Tyrant and the filthy undead as well as those who side with them, and I shall allow you to finish me off afterward or do anything else you wish with me. My only other request is that if you choose to slay me, then you will at least promise to assist in the survival of the vampiric race in the multiverse, or at least not be their enemy.”**

Jake stared at the vampire as the Monarch waved his hand and did something. He was surprised at the proposition and even more so when a quest suddenly appeared before his eyes:

Quest Received: Friend of the Monarch

As you stand before the Monarch has given you a choice. Side with the Monarch to defeat everyone else by either making them leave the Treasure Hunt or slaying them. The endless gratitude of the Monarch will be yours.

Slaying the Monarch or choosing to fight him will nullify this quest. Accepting it will nullify the quest: [Cursed Monarch].

Objective: Defeat all other Treasure Hunters present. (4.2%)

Rewards: Final rewards will be calculated after the Treasure Hunt concludes.

Warning: Due to the destruction of the world, the Treasure Hunt will end in: 11:28:52

The atmosphere of the Treasure Hunt seemed to change as he felt the gazes of all present and not occupied with fighting. Even Casper looked worried his way, with Jacob looking especially troubled. The only ones who looked unbothered with it all were Caleb and Sylphie. Sylphie just seemed confused as she had also gotten the quest, but she either couldn't or didn't do anything as she allowed Jake to decide.

Now, for the large pros and cons list, first of al-

“No thanks, can we just get to fighting already and stop chatting? Oh, but I have nothing against vampires; I just don't really wanna make any promises.”

Seriously, why would he accept such a bad proposition? Also, he could only begin to imagine how pissed Miranda would be if he decided to make pretty much all other humans on the planet his enemy. It wasn't like he would actually kill them and make troubles go away even if he had a momentary lapse of judgment and joined the vampire. They would just leave, and he would return to Earth with everyone hating him. On top of that, he would miss the best part:

The fight with the Monarch himself.

Jake visibly saw the relief of the anxious onlookers, Caleb just shaking his head with a wry smile. The Cursed Monarch didn't look surprised or even mad. Instead, he just nodded in acknowledgment. **“Very well... I must admit, to fight the Chosen of a Primordial just after my return... the system has given me quite the path.”**

A bit of a miscalculation there, mate, Jake thought. I'm not the only one you have to be careful of.

Almost as if his words were prophetic, a figure flew up towards the Monarch. Carmen appeared with her glowing fists as she punched, sending a wave of force out. The Monarch blocked easily but was once more attacked from behind as black lightning struck, and before he could even register that, a bird attacked from above.

The first blow was blocked by a palm, the lightning dismissed as he simply tanked it, with the bird's attack narrowly dodged as he turned to the side. With a palm strike, he leaned forward and sent Carmen flying away with a hole in her chest and a trail of blood in her wake.

An orb of blood appeared in his one hand as he sent it flying towards Jake. It began morphing in mid-air as a clone of the Monarch appeared, flying at high speeds in Jake's direction. Jake scoffed as he fired a barrage of arrows towards it. The clone was fast, but just as it tried to pass through the projectiles from the Splitting Arrow, they all blew up, taking the clone with them.

It was the first time Jake had used an explosive attack, and it worked quite well as the clone clearly wasn't made to be durable. It was just a distraction allowing the Monarch to continue his attack towards Carmen, who he had apparently viewed as the one he wanted to take down first.

He pointed down and fired a red beam towards her still-falling form. No one could get there fast enough to help block it, but luckily they didn't need to. Carmen somehow punched the red beam, making it explode and sending her smashing into the ground even faster. Her fist was mangled, but she was already self-healing at a visible rate.

The Monarch clearly wanted to try and finish her off but had to block another blow as the Sword Saint appeared. His blade fell, and the Monarch coated his hand in a red aura as he blocked, yet as the sword made contact with it, it seemed to almost pass through as the Monarch was truly wounded for the first time.

A small cut appeared on his one leg, making his eyes open wide. He attacked the Sword Saint as twenty orbs of blood appeared around him and bombarded the old man, but the swordsman didn't let up. The sword fell two more times, making two large cuts on his arms before the Sword Saint was forced to retreat from the orbs. The old man looked to almost shimmer as he fought, making even Jake frown in confusion.

Seeming almost offended, the Monarch began glowing red as he moved like he wanted to tear the old man to threads, but for the umpteenth time during the fight, he was forced to face something else. An arrow came in from far away, making him dodge back and away from the Saint, clearly not wanting to block the Arcane Powershot directly.

Jake himself was currently flying closer to the battlefield. Hitting reliably from such a distance was hard, and he wanted to at least get within a few kilometers where his arrows would arrive within a second with every shot. Currently, Jake had to calculate every blow far too much, and the last Arcane Powershot was fired on the way. Oh yeah, that was another thing, he had to use Arcane Powershots to make the arrows faster, and that simply wasn't sustainable.

He fired a few arrows a second as he flew forward, aiming at the Monarch and throwing off his momentum. Jake deliberately avoided using Gaze as he wanted to save it for a more opportune time and not tire himself out.

The Monarch fought the Sword Saint more, and with the support of Jake, the old man avoided taking any injuries. Caleb and Sylphie were incredibly fast strikers, coming in and landing glancing blows from time to time too. Carmen also joined their assault not long after, completely healed from her previous injuries.

Below, Reika, the party with Bertram in it, the ones from Valhal, Priscilla and the undead, and several others were fighting with a huge advantage against the Royal Guards, who were a member down. Each of the Royal Guards was about as strong as a Count of Blood, and like the Counts of Blood, could also be weakened by stakes. It didn't take long for the human side down there to figure that out as each of them was stabbed through, every faction having more than enough stakes left over.

Jake saw that the Monarch's confident grin began turning into a frown. A few more minutes had passed, and Jake was now only a few kilometers away and had stopped to bombard the Monarch from there. After all, as an archer with so many melee fighters to support him, why get close?

Casper did a bit the same as Jake as he prepared some magic off the side. Several wraiths flew around him, and Jake faintly felt the Root of Eternal Resentment react within his Hunter Insignia, making him aware those wraiths were like that Shade of Eternal Resentment he had seen back then. Ghosts of sorts born from the curse... and from the looks of it, Casper was preparing an attack using them.

The battle continued both above and below. The Monarch was faster and stronger than anyone else present, but he was pressured by so many strong people around him. Anytime he was close to landing a blow, he was forced to block or dodge, something that seemed to miff him quite a bit.

However, this did also mean that the Cursed Monarch had only taken minor wounds so far. The few wounds he did suffer healed nearly instantly too, and Jake began to realize something as the fighting went on. *Time isn't on our side.*

For some reason, the Cursed Monarch at least believed so. Was it because of the world breaking down? Would that result in default victory for him? Or was it something else? Jake did notice how the Monarch never really committed in any attacks. If he would have to trade blows, he would rather avoid it altogether.

Or perhaps the Cursed Monarch just had confidence in being able to outlast their resources and win through that... which actually wasn't out of the question.

Jake himself would be fine due to his high and diverse stats, alchemy, and even the mask increasing mana regeneration. Casper also looked like he would be fine as he mainly borrowed power from other sources, but the Sword Saint, Carmen, Caleb, and Sylphie? Jake could see all of them run out if this kept on. Especially Caleb and Sylphie were people who burned their resources to land swift and deadly blows. This was all fine and dandy if you only had to land a few and win a battle through a burst of power, but in a drawn-out struggle, it could spell disaster.

He sent a message towards Sylphie asking her about her resources and got a bad response... she was spending way too much. She herself didn't see any issues, but Jake clearly felt how unbothered the Monarch was.

Was the talking also part of his plans to drag things out? Jake had no idea, but he knew he would have to change up the game, so he did what he always did when people wanted to play the long game against him: proved that was a really bad idea against a poison alchemist, much less the Chosen of the Malefic Viper.

Jake drew his bow and got even closer than before. He drew back the string, and just as time began slowing, he spat some poison on the tip of the arrow. One had to remember that his most effective version of Blood of the Malefic Viper came from the poison excreted by his canines using Fang of the Malefic Viper – a skill he really didn't think about much.

Taking aim, he fired at the Monarch. As always, the vampire tried to dodge, but for a brief second, his body tensed as Jake used Gaze, allowing the stable arcane arrow to hit the vampire in the left arm. Jake followed up with another arrow, also with spit on it. At the same time, he had summoned two bottles of uncommon-rarity Necrotic Poison and poured it in his quiver.

He shot again and then swiftly moved his hand to just above his quiver. He began summoning stable arcane arrow after stable arcane arrow, allowing them to drop down into the quiver and soak in the poison. In less than a second, he summoned thirty arrows into his quiver, and with that done, he chugged a mana potion. Unfortunately, all the Arcane Powershots earlier, as well as the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, had drained his mana quite a lot, and if this was going to be a long one, he would prefer to get ahead of it.

On the good side, the Monarch had been hit by two arrows, and Jake would now begin to build up damage. Now the only problem was if the rest of them could keep the Monarch busy and outlast him long enough for it all to accumulate. If not, Jake would have to take matters more into his own hands.

The problem was how they could possibly outlast the Monarch. One would have to be-

Suddenly light washed over the Sword Saint and Carmen, who were engaged in melee, making the old man heal at a visible rate and speeding up Carmen's regeneration. The Monarch opened his eyes wide and saw the newcomer. In a flash of mist, he disappeared. Clearly, he knew a healer would complicate the situation... there was just one problem for the poor guy.

The Monarch's fist penetrated through the chest of the white-robed man, and with a palm-strike, his head exploded. Wanting to make sure – or perhaps just not seeing a notification – the Monarch blew up the rest of the healer's body, leaving nothing behind.

That is until a second later, a new body appeared right in front of the Monarch, making him stare down in confusion.

“My, my, quite the rude welcome,” Eron said with a smile as white flames began burning on the madman's body.