February 24th 2016 The Club, Gotham City, New Jersey, 5:00 PM EST

It felt different returning to The Club this time. More…comfortable. The stronger I got, the more at home I felt in this place. It just felt right to me. I wondered if I continued to grow, if I'd eventually ONLY feel at home here. Would I get so powerful I'd start feeling like a stranger in my own world?

But then I considered people like Superman. He was all but invincible, had been for years, and he still managed to maintain his kindness and decency. Still stayed connected to the world. I could follow his example.

I stepped up to the counter and raised an eyebrow. "You're new," I commented idly. "What happened to Vile?"

The man behind the counter was a very different being than the one I'd traded the cup with. Tall and exceptionally pale, with delicate features and hair so dark it looked blue, the creature reminded me of nothing so much as a sock puppet. The human form I was looking at was like an ill fitting suit, stretched taught over the broken glass edges of the monster beneath. It strained at the seams, the mouth (too large and full of teeth), the eyes (glinting with an unnatural bloody light), everything about it was subtly wrong.

"Vile isn't working today," it said in a voice like the sighs of a thousand suicidal saints. "Just me."

"And who or what are you?" I asked bluntly. "Because no offense, but I don't think you're human, and I'm pretty sure you'd eat me if given the chance."

He gasped, putting a hand to his chest. "How rude. I wouldn't do something like that. You're far too stringy. The muscular ones are always too chewy. I like them fat and slow. Keeps the meat tender." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "If you know anyone like that who won't be missed, I wouldn't be averse to a little side business. I could take out some excellent items from my personal collection. Items of terrible power."

"And on a scale of one to ten, how cursed are these 'items'?" I asked wryly.

I gave him an unimpressed look. "Would these particular curses be a blessing to ME?" I wasn't planning to buy any of his shady items, firstly because I'd have had to feed him people and second because he didn't strike me as particularly safe to deal with. With skills, I was pretty sure there was some oversight to prevent abuse, but having traded a truly horrifying item to Vile, I suspected they were less particular about people exchanging items.

"Probably not," he admitted. "Can't blame a being for trying."

“How should I refer to you?” I asked him slowly. “If we’re doing business I should know that at least.” I was getting a weird vibe from this thing. A vibe like if I wasn’t careful he might trick me into selling him my soul.

Seeing my wary gaze he laughed. “Oh how fun, you’ve got a brain. You may refer to me as ‘The Demon Prince’,” he said airily. “May I have your name?”

“You may not,” I said firmly. “Though you may refer to ME as Apocryphon.” I decided using my cape name would provide an extra level of security. I didn’t want this thing to know anything about me at all.

He smiled in a deeply unsettling way. “Well then, what can I help you with on this fine day?”

“I need to buy a skill,” I said warily. “Specifically, a disguise skill. Something that will let me go undetected in a magical setting.” Intergang was part of some weird pseudo-mystical cult even my grandfather was afraid of, and based on the people he knocked around with, some sort of magical ability was definitely on the table. I needed something that could avoid magical detection.

The Demon Prince smiled wider (which was horrifying and made his head look like it would split in two). “Interesting. I suppose I could be of some assistance. Allow me to peruse our selection. One moment.”

He withdrew a large black leather bound book, slamming it down on the counter and flipping through. “Your request is somewhat complex,” he said breezily as he flipped. “Traditionally, anything that would bypass the mystic arts would come from another power system. But any skill that represents a completely separate power system is Legendary at least, and we don’t sell those.” He flipped for a while, finally coming to a specific page. “Ah! Here we are. This would most likely fit your requirements.”

He turned the book, and I leaned forward to read it. “Desire for Sight?” I asked slowly. “What the hell is it?”

It was Epic, but also very vague in its description.

“This is part of a set technique,” he explained. “Legendary techniques aren’t for sale in the shop in their complete form, but some Legendary techniques aren’t IN a complete form. In some worlds, it is common practice to break techniques into smaller skills in order to make them easier to learn. Desire for Sight is one of six parts of the Mantra of the Inner Demons of the Six Desires, which is in itself part of a further segmented Divine technique called the True Art of Mara.”

I froze at that, staring at him. “Did you just say this is part of a DIVINE level skill?”

“Indeed,” he said solemnly. “So, as you might imagine, this is a particularly expensive skill to purchase. I would suggest barter, if I were you. The value of such a skill is far beyond what your average Iron ranked Epic skill could even approach.”

I stared at him. I wanted a Divine rank skill. Badly. But I ALSO didn’t trust this motherfucker further than I could throw the moon. “How many parts?” I asked suspiciously.

“Six,” he answered promptly. “I believe I was clear about that.”

“No, how many parts in the total Divine skill?” I clarified. “There’s six parts in the Legendary. How many Legendaries do I need to combine for the Divine version?”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “Just two,” he said dismissively. “This and one other. Finding a Legendary skill is difficult, but I’m sure with your resources and contacts you could track it down without TOO much trouble.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. There was a trick here. He was being too forthcoming and this sounded too good. I went back over what I’d just said. “Wait a second,” I said, zeroing in on something. “Which of my questions were you answering just now?” I had added a clarification after the first question, but thinking about it from another angle, that had been an entirely new question he could answer truthfully. I was PRETTY sure he wasn’t allowed to just straight up lie to me in his capacity as an official salesperson of The Club, but he could certainly mislead me.

“The one you asked,” he said cheerfully.

“Answer the first one,” I demanded. “How many parts are there in the Divine skill you mentioned, The True Art of Mara.”

Clicking his tongue, he sighed. “Four,” he admitted.

“And only two of them are Legendary,” I said slowly. “Which means that the other two are probably Mythical. Which I ALSO can’t buy, and have very little chance of finding on my own. So this Epic skill is worth WAY less than you’re implying.”

His eye twitched. “It’s still part of a Legendary,” he said sulkily. “That’s very impressive.”

“Either way, I’m not buying this until you tell me what it DOES,” I said bluntly. “And even then, how much I’m willing to trade will depend on how useful it is to me at the moment.”

He sighed. “Desire for Sight is a technique dedicated to the power of vision. It mainly consists of five unique abilities. Evil Eye Confounding Realm creates visual illusions, deceiving the mind and senses. The second is Mental Vision which allows you to see long distances. Inner Illusion of the Twin Pupils, which creates illusory disguises. Search, which allows you to track and distinguish anomalies. Visualization, which allows you to peer into the inner workings of a

person to see the flow of their power. And finally Heaven Patrolling Eyes of Malice which allows you to manifest remote eyes that can be used to expand your field of vision and view multiple things at once."

"Five abilities," I said slowly. "So…what, unlock a new one every twenty levels or so?"

He nodded. "Not precisely," he cautioned. "Desire for Sight is a mana skill. It isn't connected to a specific stat, and functions more like a spell. Theoretically, you can do ANY of the above actions even at level one, you'll just do them poorly. A point of reference will help you level faster, but other than that you'll just need to grind the skill to an acceptable level."

I nodded along. "Alright. I'll take it." I reached into a pocket, withdrawing a single crystalline item. "I'll trade this." I set it on the counter, and I saw his eyes lock onto it with fascination. A Power Boost. I'd made one to bring with me on this trip, managing to cobble together enough mythril by Disenchanting some of Zee's stuff (with her permission). I'd managed to boost Disenchant to level 36 off just that one use, which showed how far behind I let that skill get.

Trading was pretty much my only reasonable way to buy things at the moment. Considering how expensive an Epic Tin skill was, the chances of me gathering enough liquid capital to buy an Epic Iron skill were minimal. But I COULD craft, and I had a sneaking suspicion that things like the Boosts would be highly sought after.

"This is worth more than your technique," I stated unequivocally. "So I want more than just the skill."

His eyes narrowed. "It's just a single item," he said stubbornly.

"Sure," I shrugged. "But I could auction it and get substantially more, I'm sure. I just don't have the time to wait right now. This is a permanent plus one to strength. No one in The Club would say no to that."

"What do you want?" he asked coldly, the smile vanishing.

I pointed at the book. "I want you to keep an eye out for me. Find me people who are interested in trading those other three techniques."

He looked pensive, but finally nodded. "Very well," he said, a hint of respect in his tone. "But I can ONLY locate them. This is an official marketplace barter. I'm limited in what I'm allowed to do by market rules."

I knew that. I could feel it, actually, and I was glad for it. I'd never have been willing to make a deal with someone like this if I didn't have that confidence. I pushed the crystal across the counter and he tapped his fingers, conjuring a smaller book, which he then passed to me. I picked it up, using it immediately, just to be safe.

[New Skill unlocked! Desire for Sight (E)! Desire for Sight (E) level up! Desire for Sight (E) - Lvl 1 > Lvl 2]

I blinked as I felt the knowledge pour into me. Skill books were always weird to experience. This one, fortunately, was actually somewhat understandable to me already. Mainly because between Observation Haki and the NSB aura reading, I already had mechanisms to do some of these things and could cross reference. I was confident I could grind this one up a few levels and master the illusory Pupils so I could disguise myself. Once that was done, I'd be heading for Metropolis.

I raised an eyebrow at The Demon Prince. "You know how to contact me with the information?" I asked.

He nodded solemnly. "I'll be in touch. Pleasure doing business with you." He sounded like he meant that, too. Which, if I was being honest, worried me quite a bit. I just hoped The Club's Rules protected me as well as I thought they did. But that was a worry for another time, for now, I had a criminal organization to infiltrate.