

Hunter 451

Chapter 451 - Ambermill: A Quaint Little Town

There were few kinds of people in this world Carmen hated. Scratch that, there were a lot of people she hated, but some she hated far more than others. Towards the top of that list was anyone who reminded her of a certain someone. Someone who relied solely on their status, their family or backing, or whatever else vain bullshit to lord over others. In fact, she just hated people who liked throwing their weight around to have others do what they wanted if they couldn't even back up their words.

Carmen had entered Ambermill like any other small Pylon-less settlement. It was relatively large for not having a Pylon, and due to its proximity to Haven, there weren't many strong monsters around. This made Ambermill a popular place to settle down. She didn't get why they didn't travel the rest of the way to the Fort, but oh well.

She saw no problems with any of that. No, the problems came later.

Carmen had been on the road for around three days without any rest and seriously needed a god damn shower before making it the rest of the way. It would take her only an hour to reach Haven from Ambermill, so she decided it was a good place to get all the things done to not look like a hobo when she finally made it there.

The first thing she noticed upon entering Ambermill was the presence of several people wearing what looked like police uniforms. Way too many of them. She considered if maybe they had some problems with crime, and in the beginning, they seemed nice enough. Carmen had gained a ring that helped hide her level, and she was just asked to not make trouble as she entered. One of them even pointed her toward a motel.

So far, so good.

She had barely managed to settle down and get a room when she noticed some commotion outside. Looking out the window, she saw several people being rounded up by the police from a nearby house in what looked like the slum quarters. Carmen naturally failed to hold herself back, and without even taking a shower, she had gone to investigate. However, the owner of the motel stopped her and said curfew was in place and to please return to her room until morning.

So Carmen slipped out a window instead and followed after the people from the house, and when a police officer saw her, he yelled at her to join the group. She complied to figure out what was going on as she blended into the crowd. Something she did easily as she was still wearing a dirty cloak and hadn't had time to clean herself up.

They were all led to a large building. Carmen tried to talk to some of the other people, but they looked at her like she was insane for just attempting, and the police officers also gave her a stern warning that talking was not allowed before they made it to the hall to "not wake up the ones sleeping."

Who the fuck still slept?

Carmen found this ordeal incredibly fishy, and she instantly concluded that some nefarious cult or something like that existed in this small town. Looking at the other people with her, she noticed it was primarily women and children, with a few young men also present.

For some reason, the mood did seem generally positive despite the secretive methods. Carmen decided to not act out as they all entered a large hall before the door was closed, and she felt isolation barriers be activated.

“Welcome, everyone,” a suited man said as he went up on a stage. Everyone around looked at him with mixed feelings, and she detected outright hatred from some of those present. Plenty of killing intent, too, something she had gotten very sensitive to due to her heritage. So, not a popular figure. Got it.

“I apologize for bringing you all here on such short notice, but we just got word that Haven and Sanctdomo opened up their borders once more, and we have been allowed slots to send people there,” the man on the stage said, making many in the crowd sigh in relief.

“We had to do this secretly as the slots are limited, and I am not blind to the struggles of those less fortunate. This is an opportunity for those deemed worthy of joining a powerful faction and finally get a stable and safe home with wealth and comfort,” the man continued. “Representatives of Sanctdomo and Haven are both here, so please, apply if you are interested in this opportunity.”

Needless to say, this entire shit was getting shadier as fuck by the second. However, the people around her seemed excited, making her doubt herself.

“Hey... this is my first time hearing of this. Is this for real?” Carmen asked a woman with her young daughter right next to her.

The woman smiled and answered. “It happens once a week or so and is always secretly. An open secret I guess. I heard it is to not cause too much dissatisfaction or something as normally only women and children are allowed to join the powerful factions. I do find it mighty kind of them to help us.”

“Can’t you just go to Haven or Sanctdomo without getting a slot or whatever?” Carmen asked, a bit confused.

"No, of course not; you need to be invited, or you will be get rejected at the gates. That is why they send these representatives out to other smaller towns," the woman answered, shaking her head. "Don't worry, though; I am sure you will get selected."

Carmen nodded as she just went with the flow as people were brought to interview rooms one by one. A few people returned dejected, while some didn't return, having been selected according to what others said. She just stood around as soon enough, an officer went over to her. "It is your turn. Good luck."

Curious, Carmen walked into the interview room and saw a man and a woman sitting at a table with a few chairs in front. Looking about, she saw that three other women were there together with her, all around her own age from the looks of it.

She took a seat as the man at the table began talking, first introducing himself as a representative of Haven, and then he asked them to please take off their robes and get comfortable.

Carmen found it weird but did as asked. The others did the same as they all took a seat. The man and women talked a bit amongst themselves and asked some basic questions such as what class and profession people had, family and friends in the city or among other factions, as well as their ages. Again, just basic stuff.

Nothing was really that weird until the two spoke between them again, using some magic to hide their conversation. "I am sorry, please leave numbers three and four," the woman then said, making two of the other women exit the room dejected, leaving only Carmen and a blonde woman. Carmen did note how they were the two who said they had no family or friends around. Curious.

"Congratulations on getting selected," the man said with a bright smile. "Please follow me to the others."

By now, Carmen knew something was off. The man in front of her was level 121 with the woman level 114, making them both solidly in the D-grade. Meanwhile, the woman with Carmen was only 32, and Carmen had lied, saying she was level 101, but only due to her profession and said that she had given up on her class.

She followed troop and did as she was told. They went out a back door, and she felt the magic on the other side before even going through it. The blonde woman was big smiles and chatted with Carmen excitedly until the moment they stepped on the other side of the door, and both instantly felt the shift.

They had walked into another large room, and the doorway behind them instantly got sealed off by a barrier as a large shirtless man stood up after sitting on a stool in a corner. "New batch, eh? Two young ones?"

"Excuse me, what is going on?" the blonde woman asked nervously.

The man smiled. "I am going to take both of you to somewhere much nicer than here. We just need to sign some paperwork first."

"Paperwork?" the woman asked

"Just a tiny little slave contract. No biggie," the man kept smiling. Carmen saw him clearly enjoy himself as she herself tried to look neutral.

“Haven has slaves?” the blonde woman asked with fright, her eyes wide open. Okay, perhaps Carmen gave the gal a bit too much credit for her ability to read the situation.

“A bit of a dumb one, but I am sure some people like that,” the man shrugged. Finally, he turned his attention to Carmen. “A fiery-looking silent type? A personal favorite of mine. Let me make it clear, you two don’t have a choice, and if you are good and obedient little girls, I will be sure to get you nice brothels. Any questions?”

“Left or right?” Carmen asked.

“What?” the man asked tauntingly.

“What arm do I rip off first? Actually, never mind.”

The man didn’t even have time to speak before Carmen stood right in front of him. Despite him being level 118, he couldn’t even react as Carmen just ripped downwards, tearing both his arms off at the shoulders.

“Argh!” he yelled as his eyes opened wide in despair. Carmen caught him by his skin-shirt before he could fall back onto the floor. “Now tell me what the actual fuck is going on here?”

Jake and Sylphie flew through the air towards the small town of Ambermill. Studying the tablet a bit on the way, it looked like Ambermill was a small town of about five or six thousand but had a steady flow of new citizens who were looking to enter either Haven or travel further for Sanctdomo.

It was neutral and didn't have any teleportation gates connected to it, making it a little isolated but otherwise safe. The leader was some level 120 dude who had been the first to stumble upon an old mill that had been transformed into a natural treasure, and since then, he had taken it as his home and would use it to harvest and generate wind affinity crystals. This was also the primary export of Ambermill and where the name came from as the wind crystals looked like they were made of amber.

A quaint little place, Jake reckoned. This is why he was confused when he got closer and saw smoke in the distance. The mill that stood atop a hill was broken in half, and Jake felt intense energy emanating from the town. As he got closer, he began to smell blood too, and he activated his tracking skill instantly to search for Carmen.

Something that turned out to be utterly unnecessary as he felt her familiar aura without having to use any skills. Jake swiftly got a look at the city from above and saw dozens of broken buildings, more than a hundred corpses wearing what looked like police uniforms, and Carmen punching a bunker-like construct. Every punch sent shockwaves through the town that had already shattered every single window in the vicinity and cleared out the area.

Well then, Jake thought as he headed down, followed by Sylphie, who also seemed interested in exploring these odd happenings.

He quickly detected people hiding inside houses and a general sense of panic in the city. The entire central square and what looked like the mayor's office were utterly ruined. Corpses were smashed to pieces in the rubble, and in the center of those ruins was what Jake assumed was a panic room that Carmen was currently punching.

Jake landed a bit away with Sylphie landing on top of his head. Carmen instantly turned around, still on guard, but stopped when she saw them.

“Why the fuck are you here?” she asked, clearly annoyed. “Did this fucker really call you?”

“I tend to not have fuckers on speed-dial, so no. I came looking for you,” Jake shrugged. “Why? Did whoever you are trying to kill make up some bullshit?”

The people hiding within the bunker also heard Jake, and one of them quickly yelled out from within: “Lord Thayne, you are here! This maniac began to-“

“Who are you?” Jake cut him off.

“Ah, we have never met in person, but I have-“

“Why are you trying to kill this guy?” Jake cut him off again, asking Carmen this time.

Carmen looked at Jake a bit suspiciously for a moment, but a screech from Sylphie seemed to dispel her doubt. “This entire fucking town is just a front for slave trading.”

Jake frowned as he looked at the bunker guy. “Explain?”

“Please, it is not just me; we were all forced to assist them! They had D-grades and people far more powerful than us; what were we supposed to do?” the guy asked from within his bunker.

Looking inside the bunker with his sphere, Jake saw a total of five people. The guy who spoke wore a ruined business suit, while the four others had full combat attire on. He also saw one of the four working on what looked like a magic circle.

“If you want to talk, get out with your little friends and tell them to stop trying to put down a teleportation circle to escape,” Jake said casually. He didn’t actually know it was a teleportation circle, but he seriously doubted anyone inside that little bunker wanted to fight a pissed-off Carmen.

Within the bunker, he saw the mage stop for a second and look back at his comrades. The one who appeared to the leader – not the suit guy – motioned for him to continue. The suit guy also looked at this leader and nodded after they exchanged a look.

“Alright, but it takes some time to deactivate all the wards, and we will also need some insurance of safety before we-“

“Have it your way,” Jake shrugged as he went over to the bunker.

“It is sturdy as fuck,” Carmen warned.

“To your attacks, sure. But if you know the right spot to poke-“ Jake began as Touch of the Malefic Viper activated and what looked like dark green lightning spread all over the magic barrier, “it isn’t that hard.”

Within seconds, the barrier broke down as Jake successfully ruined what kept it together. What? It was a basic defensive formation, and Jake had studied enough about anti-mana poisons to know what worked well against such barriers.

This was clearly not the expected outcome for those hiding within as Carmen flew forward and shattered the entire bunker with a single punch, sending debris flying and revealing the five people within. The guy in a suit looked absolutely horrified, but the four others moved fast as four attacks were tossed Carmen's way.

She ignored all of them, and within ten seconds, three of the four were dead, and the last one – the leader – lay broken in the middle of the square with both his legs missing. It all went relatively fast, and Jake honestly had no skin in the game or bothered to interfere. Why would he? This was Carmen's crusade and a justified one, it seemed.

The man on the ground without legs managed to get his bearings somewhat even with his friends dead as he turned to them.

"Do you have any idea what you have done? The people that back us?" he threatened, trying to puff himself up. "Even if you two manage to survive, what about your cities? Families? If we reach some agreement, I am sure I can make all this go away."

He spoke to both Jake and Carmen, and Jake did believe the guy had some pull. He had a high level, after all.

[Human - lvl 139]

Carmen turned to Jake, but Jake just shrugged.

"Please do tell, who exactly backs you?" Carmen asked the guy.

"Slaves are in high demand all around the planet for various means... someone needs to provide them, and we are those people," the man just said.

"Ah, gotcha," Jake nodded. "So people we would also kill if we came across them."

"I second that," the still bloodthirsty member of Valhal said.

"Please wait!" The guy in the suit suddenly yelled before Carmen could crush the legless guy's skull. "If he dies here... we..."

He stopped talking as Jake and Carmen both stared him down.

"Hah," the legless guy said as he turned to the suit guy with a devilish smile. "You were the one who came to us first. You were the one who offered those useless people in the slums in exchange for cash to expand your little settlement. You enjoyed quite a few of the women, too, didn't you? At least die like a man with some pride intact."

"Says the guy who begged for his life a minute ago," Carmen rebutted.

"Fuck off and just kill me already," he just scoffed.

Something Carmen gladly did as she kicked his head so hard it exploded in blood and gore.

The suit guy looked absolutely horrified. He began to open his mouth to explain himself, but before any words came out, his chest separated from the rest of his limbs and head as it flew into a nearby wall, splattering all over it.

"I already knew he was a shitbag," Carmen muttered as she looked at Jake.

Jake, in turn, looked around the place as he scratched his head.

"What? Got any complaints about how I handled things? Every single motherfucker had it coming," Carmen said defensively.

"Nah, not that," Jake shrugged. "I was thinking about what to tell Miranda."

"Just tell the truth," Carmen said with a deadpan face.

Miranda was working in her office as a walkie-talkie on her table suddenly rang. She saw it was Jake and instantly responded.

“Hey Jake, I heard you went out to meet up with Carmen. How did it go?”

“Know Ambermill?” he just asked.

“Yeah?” Miranda answered, perplexed. Ah, had she stopped by there? That made sense to-

“Well, apparently they were running a slave business, Carmen found out, and she may or may not have killed the entire leadership structure and pretty much every single member of their local law enforcement. Oh, and left the town in ruins.”

Miranda was silent for a moment before she just sighed. “I will send some people...”

Chapter 452 - Friendly Advice & Competition

Sultan stood in the old ruins of what had once been Ambermill as he looked at the departing former citizens. Four large barges able to accommodate every person had been brought from the Fort and would help transport them all back to the settlement.

He had been asked by Miranda to go to Ambermill together with a crew of others to handle the situation. She had heard slavery was going on, and people had been forced into contracts, so she wanted someone with knowledge of slave contracts to go and hopefully help annul those already signed as well as track down potential leads. The first one he had gladly done, but the second job was a bit more... complicated.

"I did tell that idiot this was too close to Haven," Sultan smirked as he shook his head. He had known about the operations going on in Ambermill for quite a while but had naturally kept quiet. It wasn't anything that affected him, and he had already left the entire slave-trading scene for good. That didn't mean others had, though.

As he stood there alone, a person slowly became visible as he exited the shadow of a nearby house. "Libra took it too far, attempting to take advantage of the gap in the market left by Haven and Sanctdomo, both cracking down on slavery. I do agree it was wise to take him down a peg."

The shadowy figure soon became fully visible. He wore a dark cloak and was enveloped by shadow magic Sultan naturally recognized.

"I am surprised the Court of Shadows didn't try to defend one of their clients," Sultan said with a teasing smile.

"We are by giving him the advice to not fuck with this area and hiding all evidence of Libra's involvement in this shithole," the assassin sneered. "The other constellations have already requested an emergency meeting. Have you been informed?"

Sultan nodded. "Naturally."

"Great, then my job here is done. Now for my pay," the assassin turned instigator of town destruction said with a smile.

Returning his smile, Sultan transferred the sum as per the contract for a job well done.

If Carmen had been there, she would have recognized the cloaked man as the same police officer that had brought her to the town hall. The same man who had coincidentally chosen a house right outside the motel Carmen was staying in as a great place to round up potential slaves and the person who had “screened” Carmen as being part of the slums.

Sultan had predicted Carmen to raise a ruckus, but it had become a bigger issue than expected, more or less leading to the end of the entire town of Ambermill. It wasn't really a big deal, though, as with the biggest asset of the town destroyed – the mill – it held no value anymore.

However, more importantly... he managed to toss out a competitor from his very own backyard and, if things went well, possibly get rid of him entirely in the near future.

“Pleasure doing business with you as always,” the assassin said as he slowly faded back into the shadows, his presence disappearing entirely.

Sultan summoned his small black book and circled a name in it as he nodded. With his work done, he summoned his ship to travel back to Haven – after a little detour and a covert meeting, of course.

“Do you seriously just do that every time?” Carmen asked Jake as the two were running leisurely through the plains. They had already returned to Haven, teleported a few times, and were now running from a small-ish Pylon city with a teleporter in it. It was the settlement closest to the port city, and thus they had to run the rest of the way.

The problem was that Carmen kept giving Jake grief over Miranda's response. When they returned to Haven, Jake, Sylphie, Miranda, and Carmen had met up briefly for them to exchange greetings and for Jake and Carmen to explain the situation in Ambermill more in-depth.

Carmen found it hilarious how little Miranda seemed to actually care or be surprised. Miranda had then made it worse by telling her about all the times Jake had forgotten things, been late or nearly late to events, and how he just kept doing unpredictable stuff. Case-in-point when they went and said hello to Rick because Carmen really wanted to know if they were just pulling her leg when they talked about the "troll gardener."

What was so weird about a troll gardener?

"Ree?" Sylphie asked with a confused screech, coming in with the clutch assist.

"As Sylphie said, I wasn't the one who did anything this time. You did," Jake shot back.

"She did not say that."

"Ree!" Sylphie huffed.

Carmen looked at the bird. "Touche. How the hell do you even understand Sylphie? Like, I can get general intent and stuff, but not anything even halfway complex."

"I did hawk language courses when I went to college. Damn those unrelated electives," Jake teased.

"With how fucking useless college was for all my friends, I could believe that was an actual thing," Carmen scoffed. "But seriously, how? We both got that language translation skill, but I don't think it translates anything that isn't considered an actual language."

"To be honest, I have no idea myself. It's mainly guesswork and just intuition as well as reading the intent as you said," Jake shrugged. "It helps when you spend a lot of time around the other person. Sylphie and I also have a weird contract and a connection of sorts due to said contract."

Carmen looked sharply at Jake. "What kind of contract?"

Jake instantly knew what she was thinking about. Beast tamers – which Valhal had plenty of – used contracts or forced bonds to pretty much enslave beasts to use them in armies. Not that some beasts didn't also willingly join these tamers, but the fact that they were bound to a master was still a thing.

"A Union Oath, and it wasn't even me who initiated it but Sylphie," Jake answered.

"Ree!" Sylphie confirmed as she happily flapped her wings and circled around the two running humans a few times, being faster than the both of them by quite a bit.

"Good," Carmen sighed in relief.

They kept running a bit more in silence as Jake considered their merry band. It did come as a bit of a surprise, but Carmen had not surpassed him in level as he had thought. She was level 153, seven levels below himself, and the explanation for this was the same as his: she was consolidating her Path.

She had focused on her profession as her class had gotten too far ahead, and she had pursued improving other aspects of herself, such as forging her fists through weird rituals and magic – something she still did. She said that she had to take a few hours every week and submerge her hands in some golden concoction she had brought with her to forge her hands. Jake was very much looking forward to seeing this process.

This did mean Sylphie was the highest-leveled among them, and damn did she flex it. She flew around them in circles as she made noises to taunt them, and she sometimes sped ahead and then laid down on the ground pretending to be asleep until they caught up. All juvenile things that Jake and Carmen both found absolutely adorable.

Sylphie had only grown faster and was naturally also the fastest of the bunch. Her sprinting speed had always been extreme, but even her normal flying speed now exceeded Jake's by a large margin, and while he could keep up with her by using One Step Mile, he would be far slower in actual combat.

Not that he could use One Step Mile, as Carmen didn't have any long-distance movement skills to travel with. Flying up in the air also wouldn't be faster for either of them as the energy expenditure was far larger doing that. So they were stuck running with Sylphie enjoying herself by flying around them.

The little feather ball did help them a bit as they always ran with a tailwind and a refreshing breeze blessed their way forward, giving them a bit of speed and reducing their energy expenditure.

Jake kept an eye on the tablet given by Arnold and tracked their movement, and about two days after departing from the small town, they came to one of the areas marked with orange and a P. Orange

meant there were high-tier D-grades, and the P meant the energy signature of a Prima had been detected.

"I never got to ask, do you have a full key for that Seat of the Exalted Prima thing and the system event?" Jake asked Carmen as they took a small break before heading into the orange zone.

"I had a key..." she said and seemed oddly reluctant to talk about it.

Jake quickly caught on. "Had a key?"

"Well, Sven came out of the dungeon that he had been stuck in for a long time right around when I left... three members of his party died, and he was in shit condition. He would have no chance to get three fragments by himself, and I had easily gotten my key, so I thought I would just hand him mine," Carmen admitted.

"Wait, then why the hell didn't you focus on getting another one?" Jake asked, perplexed.

Carmen just shook her head. "It just isn't that important to me, I guess?"

Jake raised an eyebrow as he looked at her. "Bullshit."

"Whatever," she just scoffed. "Why do you even care?"

“Well, I just wanted to know if we are collecting one or four more fragments. It seems we are going for four, so it may get a bit tight on time, but I am sure we can manage. There should be several Primas in and around this Grand Mangrove River,” Jake shrugged.

“I said I don’t care about getting a key,” Carmen insisted.

“And yet you will. Why are you afraid of the system event?” Jake asked pointedly.

“I’m not fucking afraid. I just don’t need it.”

“Neither do I, but I will sure participate anyway for whatever rewards it may give. You should do the same,” Jake insisted.

“We are back to asking why you even give a fuck,” Carmen kept being combative. “I don’t want to get told how much I fucked up my life already and how I could have been way smarter in retrospect or suddenly be forced to choose some other class or something, wasting all the effort I have put in so far.”

Jake looked at her and thought for a bid before he just shrugged. “You like punching stuff, right?”

“Duh,” she said, almost offended.

“Then just keep punching stuff and keep walking a Path where you punch stuff. Heck, I can see myself being shown a Path during the event telling me I am an absolute moron for choosing to use a bow, but I like my bow, so that event can fuck right off. I will instead just use what I learn to improve what I currently do. You should do the same, and fuck what is optimal or considered the best. Just pick what you like the most,” Jake said.

“Sounds like a good way to end up stuck at early C-grade if you even manage to evolve,” Carmen shook her head.

“Quite the opposite. You know Valdemar, right?” Jake asked.

“Alright, now I am just assuming you are purposefully being an asshole,” Carmen said, glaring at Jake.

“Dumb question, sorry. Anyway, Valdemar was, well, just a dude who liked swinging his axe and apparently didn’t think too much about stuff, but he still ended up reaching godhood in a time where it was far harder than now. All he had were balls of steel and a drive to get stronger,” Jake said.

Carmen now looked at Jake with quite a glare. “Valdemar was a warlord who managed to lead countless battles and dictated the rise and fall of entire intergalactic empires. He was a hero who managed to unite the enlightened races and brought them recognition in a time where humans and most other enlightened races were struggling to gain a foothold.”

“Being that and a hardheaded dude who likes to swing an axe isn’t mutually exclusive,” Jake pointed out.

“Are you trying to start a fight or-“

Carmen suddenly just stopped talking as she stood with a blank stare for a few moments. Jake wondered what was going on, but Carmen quickly snapped out of it. “Well fuck me.”

“What happened?” Jake asked.

“Valdemar’s fucking wife just laughed and said you were right on the money,” Carmen said with disbelief.

“See?” Jake just said triumphantly. “So just do whatever feels right.”

It looked like the god who had blessed Carmen – Gudrun – spoke to her again as she stood there with a blank stare. Jake saw a faint hint of gold in Carmen’s eyes and noticed how she was pretty much in a trance. Like she wasn’t really there.

A few seconds passed before she “woke up” again and shook her head as she groaned a bit. “Fucking hell...”

“What?” Jake asked.

“Just... nothing,” Carmen said, having clearly been told something by the god she didn’t want to share. “Fine, let’s collect those damn fragments already. Let’s go.”

“Ree!” Sylphie agreed, obviously bored of their, in her mind, boring conversation.

Jake was the slowest to react as he suddenly got a few system notifications he had not in any way expected.

‘DING!’ Profession: [Heretic-Chosen Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 169 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

‘DING!’ Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 161 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

At first, he had no idea why the hell he had just gotten a level out of nowhere, but he quickly connected the dots: Legacy Teachings of the Heretic-Chosen Alchemist.

Jake hadn’t really used the skill for anything before but had clearly just done something related to it during his talk with Carmen. Which had to mean Jake had taught her something. On accident. Something related to his unique Path of being blessed and, at the same time, a bit of a heretic.

Shaking his head, Jake followed after Sylphie and Carmen, who had already run into the tunnel in front of them. As he ran, he focused on his tracking skill together with Sense of the Malefic Viper as he fished out one of the key fragments to get a feel for the energy signature.

Shortly after, he caught up to the woman and bird.

"I can definitely sense a Prima somewhere," Jake said, a bit surprised at being able to actually detect anything.

"So you do know how to track stuff," Carmen nodded, a bit of relief in her voice.

"Kind of. And I have a feeling tracking down a few Primas will help make me better than just kind of being able to track stuff. For the record, I sense the energy in the center of this very tunnel, right in our path if we keep going straight," Jake explained.

The tunnel was carved into a mountain chain and was the fastest way to their destination. Arnold had marked that they could take another path through a smaller passage, but they decided to go straight through considering they needed to hunt some Primas anyway.

It was a huge tunnel that was several hundred meters in diameter and had a rather winding path and several tunnels leading in all directions. Jake managed to really put his tracking skills to the test as he followed the energy down certain paths, slowly closing in on their target.

Five minutes into the incredibly long tunnel, they both noticed the lack of any other life present in the tunnel. Not even plants. It was just blank stone walls on all sides. At the same time, the level of earth affinity mana in the air also spiked with every passing step, making the conclusion obvious.

"Earth elementals," Jake said.

Carmen nodded, with Sylphie trying to mimic her nod, just looking a bit silly.

Jake soon felt some subtle movement down beneath. It was not an attack but instead felt like something traveled through the earth to get behind them. With deeper probing, he noticed presences, in other words, living beings, in the simplest words, earth elementals.

"I feel them below," Jake said. Carmen once more nodded in acknowledgment as they both put together the plan of these elementals.

Taking advantage of the terrain, they planned on attacking from both sides while at the same time using the tunnel walls themselves as weapons against Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie.

The three of them soon stopped as the earth in front of them rumbled. Behind them, the tunnel was cut off as a large wall of earth sprung up, and vaguely humanoid forms began emerging from the ground, walls, and ceiling. Jake identified a few of them quickly as he got a feel for what they were facing,

[Earth Elemental – lvl 179]

[Earth Elemental – lvl 178]

[Earth Elemental – lvl 181]

Carmen had clearly done the same, and the two of them exchanged a look. Sylphie also joined in, looking between them excited.

“Most kills win?” Jake asked, getting a smirk and a “ree!” in response before all three of them made it absolutely clear that these earth elementals had just seriously fucked up.

Chapter 453 - Earth Elemental Prima

Martial artists had a long history of chopping down on stones – or tiles - to show off how strong they were. Now, this wasn't actually the martial artist having tougher hands than the tile but just someone that took advantage of physics and generally weakly-constructed and brittle tiles to make themselves look cool. Some did it with bricks, too, even though that also didn't make sense as these bricks were not constructed to resist force applied to the edges, making them rather brittle too.

Lots of tactics were applied to do this. The simplest of which was to always make sure there was a small gap between the surface and the object before hitting. This increased the force applied significantly as the object was smashed down and thus breaks more easily – the fact that there are always small gaps between stacked tiles is for this exact reason.

All of this is to say that actually smashing rock with your hand isn't going to happen. No martial artist before the system could break a normal everyday rock with his or her bare hands. What would break instead was the hand of the person. The reason for this was basic damn physics. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction and all that.

This law of physics was also mostly true after the system. There were magical ways of making it not really a thing anymore, but when punching someone or clashing using weapons, it mostly existed. There were some examples of martial arts being able to circumvent these laws, such as when the Sword Saint blocked Jake's weapon back during their duel and more or less nullified or fully redirected the force.

Carmen clearly didn't have any such skill. Neither did the Earth Elementals. With how the system worked, one would also think that the bodies of the Earth Elementals were, on average, more durable than the exposed fists of a human.

But... well, looking at what was currently happening, Jake wasn't so sure, at least not when the elementals were compared to Carmen's fists.

She flew forward as her fist smashed into an elemental, sending it flying back as shards of rock flew everywhere. It rapidly regenerated as the tunnel itself seemed to attack her with dozens of spikes erupting from all sides.

They all hit a golden set of phantasmal armor as Carmen kept up her attacks, utterly annihilating the Earth Elementals. Jake had to admit that she was a lot better at melee fighting than he, not just in that she had higher Strength, but her technique was also far superior.

Some blows were large and flashy, but others were far more complicated. When an elemental charged her, Carmen countered by landing three quick jabs that each left microcracks on the elemental before she followed up with a straight to shatter the entire central part of its body.

Jake, for his part, wasn't slacking off either. He teleported and sometimes floated through the tunnel as he fired off arrows, went into melee, used magic attacks, and was just generally switching it up for whatever was appropriate. Needless to say, he couldn't use his full power when with others and in an enclosed space. If he was alone, the entire area would already be filled with poison mist and arcane explosions.

However, the one who was thriving the most was a little murder bird who was like a tornado of razor blades just shredding the elementals one by one. Sylphie flew around faster than the poor elementals could handle as they were cut to pieces.

As for the elementals themselves, they were a lot like the Cloud Elementals Jake and Hawkie had fought. They were pretty slow but incredibly durable and annoying to put down for good. They kept re-constructing themselves until they ran out of mana, and the only good way to kill them was to just break them repeatedly.

Offensively they were a bit meh, primarily manipulating their surroundings to strike at their target or by just hitting with their huge bulky bodies consisting of stone and soil. They weren't a threat to anyone in the party of three and were, on average, very low-tier creatures. The same as most common natural-spawning elementals, actually.

Elementals were a bit interesting in how their races worked. Basic elementals like Fire Elementals, Earth Elementals, Wind Elementals, and even Cloud Elementals could vary pretty widely in power even within the same level. The way the race gained stats per level could vary, and one Earth Elemental could gain 100 stats per level while another got twice that. This was more or less always tied to the area in which they were born and resided, and sometimes maintaining this growth required them to remain where they had spawned.

Measuring the strength of an elemental was still pretty easy, even without Jake's instincts. You just had to measure the mana levels they gave off and compare that to their level. As mentioned, these Earth Elementals were on the weaker side, making the three of them do quick work.

They began diving deeper and deeper into the tunnel as they killed anything in their path. Another general trait of elementals was their lack of intelligence, making them little more than environmental hazards with a bit of instinct tossed in. Needless to say, elementals were often the prey and not the predator. The cloud island was a great example of this, and the only way they tended to survive long was if they dominated an area like the tunnel Carmen, Jake, and Sylphie were currently tearing apart.

Soon they were practically sprinting as they barely bothered to finish off the annoying elementals. They took too long to kill and would keep chasing anyway, so they just let them pile up and then took down bigger groups. When they got further in, the entire tunnel also expanded to a large cavern with several pockets in between narrower tunnels. Carmen began making a few stops and made Jake and Sylphie follow to loot some precious metals and other natural treasures she needed for her profession.

Jake was all-good doing this as these open spaces where the precious materials existed in were also ideal hunting grounds for Jake. It allowed him to get more distance as he began bombarding the elementals with explosive arrows and even began testing some things on them, primarily with Touch of the Malefic Viper.

He didn't have any poisons that were good against Earth Elementals. Heck, he didn't have anything good against most elementals. Lightning poison was pretty decent against many elemental types, but following pocket monster logic, electric-type moves didn't work against rock and ground types. Of course, the poison type didn't work either following this logic, but luckily poison in this new world wasn't quite as restricted as before, and Jake soon began making some progress as he used the poor elementals as test subjects.

Honestly, what worked best against them was perhaps what one should have expected: corrosion. Stones were durable and steadfast but also slow at adapting and expelling energy. A stone could not easily change shape or shake off acid, and the elementals were always forced to take solid form in some way or another. Of course, if he just doused an Earth Elemental in acid, it could just shear off its outer layer. This would still do some damage, true, but it would be minor at best.

But what if you spread the corrosion into the body of the elemental? Infecting not only the physical body but the mana itself with the power of corrosion? Jake didn't have any good anti-rock corrosives he had any experience with, but he did know a few basic types from lessons, all of which proved somewhat effective.

Sure, it was less effective than just using destructive arcane mana, but Jake still found it worth his time to learn and improve this aspect of his profession. It wasn't like these elementals would put up a good

fight anyway, and Carmen was damn slow at times getting the metals she needed as the extraction processes weren't always as simple as just smashing the ground and grabbing whatever gave off the most mana. It was a bit like collecting some herbs, though Jake tended to swipe them up swiftly anyway, even if it lost some efficiency.

Ah, who was he kidding? He just scammed ancient vampires with antique furniture whenever he needed stuff.

"You good?" Jake asked as he finished off the last elemental that tried to stop Carmen from slowly getting the small gem out of the stone. She had carefully taken it out after rubbing away the surrounding stone with her palm like was it made of sandpaper.

"Yeah, I got it. Last push for the Prima?" she asked.

Jake nodded as he sensed the air and took a deep breath, practically smelling the unique mana of the Prima. "It's up ahead... one, maybe two caverns. Honestly, hard to tell with how dense the mana is."

"Ree!" Sylphie complained as she puffed herself up in anger. She really didn't like the heavy earth affinity in the air hampering her wind mana. Jake knew she had to spend more mana than usual, something Jake luckily didn't have to due to his arcane mana being so closely connected to affinity-less mana, something there was still plenty of.

"Alright. We make the push then, no breaks till the Prima is down," Jake said, getting quick confirmations from the others. None of them were tired out yet, and Jake had naturally shared his potions with the group, being a good team player and all that.

Two minutes later, they departed for more Earth Elemental slaughtering and to reach the Prima. Many Orbs were collected along the way containing pure earth mana, too, making it not entirely a waste of time, even if the experience was subpar.

As Jake had guessed, the first cavern they reached was devoid of any Primas, making them swiftly move through. By now, the areas were getting pretty big, and it especially began opening up when they got closer to their goal.

"It is right up ahead," Jake said with great confidence.

His words were proven true as they reached a new expansive cavern. However, this one was different from the others. The occasional crystal lined the walls, giving off a faint light, and in the middle was a pillar of crystals that seemed to hold the ceiling of the cavern up. It was humming with power, and Jake instantly recognized the pillar as a natural treasure similar to the lightning tree on the cloud island. The tree did give off more power, though, and Jake was certain the tree was a better treasure. The giant elemental that was currently siphoning off its energy certainly didn't help it either.

The Prima itself looked like a large bulky golem with blocky but faintly humanoid features. It was more than fifteen meters tall as it stood with both its arms on the pillar and was practically pulsing with power. Jake and the others used Identify on it, and it was indeed the strongest thing around and had the Prima tag.

[Earth Elemental Prima - lvl 185]

Jake tossed Carmen a look, and she just snickered as she knelt down and pressed her fists to the ground, giving Jake a nod as he also began to prepare his opening attack.

He did so as he whipped out his Bow of the Apex Hunter and began charging his Arcane Powershot. Sylphie also began glowing green as a small whirlwind began revolving around her. Their actions truly got the attention of the Prima as the entire cavern began moving. Dozens of elementals emerged every second, and the Prima itself reached out a hand to attack.

It wasn't a fully charged Arcane Powershot, but it was good enough. Jake let go of the string as he exploded with arcane power, and at the same time, Sylphie flew forward with speed matching his arrow.

"Sacred Battleground," Carmen spoke as a golden pulse went through the entire cavern. She stepped forward and blocked a barrage of stone fragments heading for Jake, who was already charging his second Arcane Powershot while at the same time beginning to condense an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter within the special space in his quiver.

Two things impacted the Earth Elemental Prima a second later. One of them was an explosive arcane arrow that sent shards of rock flying, and the second was a hawk that just pierced straight through, surpassing the power of Jake's arrow by quite a bit.

However, the elemental healed near-instantly as it kept pulling power from the central pillar. Its outer shell also began changing and taking on a crystalline form as Jake noticed the many shards embedded in the walls of the cavern give off similar energies to the Prima.

Some kind of resonance? Jake asked himself. One thing was clear, this entire cavern was the domain of the Prima and would make it a lot harder to-

Jake then saw Carmen make a weird hand sign as she punched the ground. A shockwave traveled all throughout the surfaces of the cavern, and within an instant, thousands of crystals exploded, taking away a large part of the elemental's home-field advantage while making crystal dust rain down.

The pillar in the middle still stood strong as the Prima displayed a level of intelligence Jake was not used to seeing from elementals. It retreated by sliding up the pillar as it sent the many regular Earth Elementals after Jake and Carmen as it focused on Sylphie.

An endless barrage of rocks went for Jake and Carmen, making her unable to fully defend Jake, forcing him to fire his Arcane Powershot to blow up a few elementals. Meanwhile, Sylphie engaged with the Prima that had begun changing its form. It transformed into a long snake-like creature instead of its humanoid form as it coiled around the crystal pillar. It opened its mouth and sent out sharp barrages of rock, each one of them the size of a human forearm.

Sylphie tried to attack, but her smaller attacks had a hard time breaking the crystalline outer shell of the Prima, while the larger ones were instantly healed anyway. Jake kept an eye on everything as he and Carmen killed the elementals one by one. He didn't see them losing, but if the situation continued, it could get tricky... the pillar more or less seemed to give the Prima infinite energy to absorb. It was a situation Jake had seen before, and he knew just the thing to fuck the Prima up.

"I need a path to the pillar," Jake said as he flew next to Carmen.

"Got it," she nodded as she smashed her fists together, making her entire body glow golden. She stormed forward and began clearing a path that Jake quickly went through, switching position with Carmen, so she covered his back while he went for the pillar.

"Cover me," he said as he went up to the base of the pillar. He also sent a mental message to Sylphie, and she reacted by beginning to fly around the pillar. Jake felt the wind pick up all around him as a whirlwind of green energy formed, covering his form and keeping the projectile attacks of the elementals away. The only way for them to actually attack him was to come with their true bodies, but Carmen had that covered.

Jake placed his hands on the pillar as Touch of the Malefic Malefic Viper activated along with Arcane Awakening in the balanced state. He focused his energy on the pillar as he pulled out two items he quickly began consuming to aid the process. One of them was a rare rarity Refined Dark Orb from a powerful Dark Elemental that had been refined into a catalyst for dark affinity magic, and the other was an all-purpose amplifier for transmutation magic called a Transmutation Stone.

[Transmutation Stone (Uncommon)] – An uncommon stone used to aid in the transmutation process, functioning as a catalyst. Using a Transmutation Stone makes harmonically fusing energies easier.

It was the kind of item that Villy would describe as “a crutch” that wasn’t good to use under normal circumstances, but it did make the process slightly faster.

Jake’s attack on the crystalline pillar was quickly noticed by the Prima absorbing energy from it, and it promptly reacted. The ground beneath Jake began pulsing, but Jake was ready as he stomped down, sending a wave of pure, stable arcane mana through it. The mana lingered, making the elemental unable to manipulate the earth, buying him time.

Sylphie also picked up the pace and began attacking more viciously, even trying to pull the Prima away from the pillar altogether. It didn’t work, but it brought Jake even more time as he worked fast.

Both his items were rapidly consumed as Jake pumped mana into the pillar. Dark cracks began spreading as the dark mana consumed everything it could, and Jake happily helped it along, giving him flashbacks to his days with the Quintessence in the boar dungeon with the lake.

Back then, it had taken him many hours for a lake with far less energy than this pillar to be corrupted... but the Jake of back then was not the same as now. He pushed in the mana as the cracks began spreading several meters up the pillar every second, and when the Dark Orb cracked, it reached the Prima coiled around the pillar.

When it did, the Prima knew it was screwed. It rapidly uncoiled itself as it tried to flee to the ground, but Sylphie managed to create a wall of wind that sent it tumbling down in Carmen's direction. Jake also stopped what he was doing and went on the offensive again. The pillar would no longer help the elemental, and it knew it.

The Prima changed shape again mid-air into a panther-like form as it met Carmen's fist with a claw. They were both blasted back, but before the Prima had any chance to stabilize, it was attacked by Jake and Sylphie. One was an archer that fired explosive arcane arrows that broke the outer crystalline defensive layer, and the other was a hawk that attacked and sent what may as well be air shotguns into these exposed areas.

It kept trying to retreat, but they simply didn't give it a chance. The Prima kept struggling, but when Jake pulled out and hit an Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter, it seemed to know its days were numbered. Its form had reduced significantly, and with reluctance, the Prima suddenly flew towards the central pillar again. Jake, Carmen, and Sylphie had placed themselves to stop it from fleeing away from the cavern, not run towards the very center of it. This meant none of them able to react as the elemental smashed into the pillar. It seemed to almost merge with it, and Jake felt his corrupted mana be affected within the pillar... but it wasn't getting weaker. No, it was being purposefully fed as it grew in power.

Jake's eyes opened wide.

"Defenses, now!" he yelled as a huge surge of energy erupted from the pillar, making it explode into millions of shards as cracks formed all over the cavern walls. A huge rumble shook the ground as Jake, and the others got notification of the Prima's death. It had consumed itself in an attempt to take down its attackers...

By bringing down the entire fucking mountain on top of them.

Chapter 454 - The Great Escape

Was it a sign of intelligence to willingly kill yourself to try and take down your would-be killers with you? It was undoubtedly a sign of ego and proof the Earth Elemental Prima had been no simple-minded creature. Calling it smart would perhaps be a bit too much, but it certainly did have some level of intelligence not found in its regular brethren. They just died when they ran out of mana and fought the same way from the beginning till the end. They simply didn't have the mental faculties to display desperation.

They displayed this as even with the entire place coming down, they kept attacking Jake, Sylphie, and Carmen, putting extra pressure on them as they tried to make it to one of the tunnels leading out of the cavern.

"Blocked off here!" Carmen yelled.

"Here too," Jake noted as he quickly surveyed their surroundings. "Fucker managed to direct the force to collapse the entrances first."

He also sent out a string of mana as he tracked the mana of the fragment dropped by the Prima. It was currently falling to the ground along with the broken pieces of the pillar, making it easy enough to snatch it along with the Orb dropped by the Earth Elemental Prima.

"Plans?" Carmen asked while smashing an elemental to pieces as she looked up at the rapidly cracking ceiling, clearly knowing it was only a question of when, not if, the entire mountain would come down. "I have an escape talisman, but it only works for me."

Jake looked up too as he held down and destroyed another annoying elemental. “We break out of here.”

“How?” Carmen asked with exasperation. “While I don’t see myself dying, it will take a long-ass time to dig myself out of this fucking place, and if these elementals survive and keep attacking, it could get dangerous.”

Sylphie agreed as she kept killing elementals, clearly waiting for Jake to decide what they were going to do.

Jake held out his hand as a transparent flame appeared. “Trying to trap an alchemist under a rock without any will of its own is pretty dumb; that’s all I’m gonna say.”

He manipulated the flame as it revolved around him and shot it off towards a nearby wall. It simply seemed to remove a part of the wall, confirming his theory. Jake had taken lessons in using his Alchemical Flame, and he still vividly remembered the one about Soulflames and properly merging your flame and your will. Jake was far from that stage, as the dragon back then would have just snapped and made the entire mountain disappear, but he could at least manipulate his flame well enough to dig them out.

Above, a large section of the cavern ceiling cracked, and a massive boulder fell down, causing a chain reaction as everything began collapsing at once. “To me!” Jake yelled, and the two complied, disengaging from the elementals still causing them trouble.

In an act of irony, the elementals were crushed by boulders falling down on them, making them lose their forms and become unable to assemble themselves again. Jake spread out his hands as he manipulated his Alchemical Flame and formed a barrier of transparent fire around them. A rock fell down on top of the barrier and was consumed as it made contact with the fire, draining Jake's mana in kind.

"Let's go!" Jake said as he walked to the wall and began walking into it, creating a new tunnel with his flame. The stones weren't that tough, and he had managed to burn through the incredibly durable stone back in Yalsten to steal the doors back then, and this mountain couldn't even hold a candle to the mountain towers back in the hidden vampire realm.

Even within the newly-formed tunnel, the cracks kept spreading, and it kept collapsing upon them.

"Can you keep this up?" Carmen asked as she cradled Sylphie close to her chest and walked close to Jake, who had been forced to make the bubble of Alchemical Flame smaller to reduce mana expenditure. They were practically huddled together as Jake and Carmen slowly moved forward.

"That fucking Prima did something... or maybe the pillar was just holding this entire mountain up," Jake muttered, annoyed. "Depending on how deep we are, I may run out of mana."

"Got it. Say if you need any help," Carmen said, nearly hugging him from behind as they moved forward. They soon began going at a bit of an upwards angle as Jake closed his eyes and focused on not only his magic but also his mana sense and intuition. He went for where the earth mana became thinner, meaning what was closer to the outside.

Jake's flame didn't give off any light unless he used it to heat up an object and set it on fire. However, what he was doing currently didn't really utilize any heat as he infused his flame with destructive arcane mana. The malleable flame accepted it without complaint or resistance.

In complete darkness, they walked. Jake could still see due to his high Perception and his sphere, but it was clear that Carmen had a hard time. Sylphie managed by not having to move at all, just relaxing in Carmen's arms.

Forty minutes passed as Jake took out a potion with the new special enchantment of his necklace, allowing him to consume it right away. The way it worked was a bit... off. Jake literally had a bottle placed in his stomach as far as he could tell, but the bottle disappeared instantly as it was consumed, allowing the mana potion to rejuvenate Jake.

This forty-minute figure became critical. It was the time it took Jake to consume the full amount a potion could restore, meaning he was constantly losing mana. As the hours passed, Jake's mana pool slowly dwindled, and they began to discuss alternate strategies.

"We could punch and blow ourselves out?" Carmen proposed.

"Potentially," Jake said. "But if we do that, we need to spread out. The shockwaves you send out would end up causing issues for Sylphie and me and will surely cause cave-ins. This is also assuming the new tunnel or path you make is in any way stable. At least now the ceiling is collapsing at a slow and steady rate."

It was collapsing a bit, making Jake constantly have to consume soil falling from above, but as they kept moving forward, it wasn't as bad. However, if he began making big moves, it could make everything above collapse and put intense pressure on them. No, the only good way would be to more or less slowly muscle themselves upwards, practically trying to "swim" through the stone, which would take ages.

“Why are none of you a space mage...” Carmen muttered, and Jake couldn’t help but smile a bit himself. If Neil was there, he would have just teleported them all out or created a spatial bubble and then put down a formation to get them out.

“Ree!” Sylphie complained, incredibly offended, getting a quick apology from Carmen, who made it clear she was complaining about Jake.

“I do agree we need to speed this up,” Jake said unbothered. He had actually hoped to improve his efficiency and thus speed, but he didn’t get any worthwhile progress using Alchemical Flame, and a skill upgrade was definitely out of the question. He would just have to keep going and hope they got out in time, but it was looking grim.

Taking a break would mean the tunnel collapsing down on them and slowly drowning them in soil and stone, so that was out of the question. Jake could stabilize the surroundings with mana, but what was the point of what if the entire purpose of the break was to regenerate mana?

“Ree?” Sylphie suddenly asked.

“Say that again?” Jake asked.

Ree! Ree!” Sylphie repeated. Jake nodded along at her suggestion as his eyes flashed.

“That... could work... definitely...” Jake muttered, deep in thought.

"I feel left in the dark here," Carmen sighed. "In more ways than one... I can't see shit."

"Carmen, are you up for doing something incredibly risky but also potentially cool as fuck?" Jake asked as he shared the idea with her. The woman at first had a look of utter disbelief with her mouth wide open before it just turned into a huge grin.

"That sounds so fucking dumb. Of course, I am up for it, and if it fails, well, I guess we will manage."

Jake snickered too. "Sylphie. Fire it up!"

The lizard stalked the small rodent that was hiding within its burrow. Both were merely early-tier E-grades, but on this desolate mountain, no other predators existed. The lizard was only the size of a house cat, with the rodent being nothing more than an overgrown hamster. Both were able to utterly slaughter a human pre-system, but in this new world, they were weak, and they knew it.

Sneaking forward, the lizard used its sleek form to enter the burrow. It had barely gotten halfway down as suddenly everything began shaking. The burrow collapsed from the tremors, and the lizard rushed out in panic.

It looked around with fright as its instincts told it to run. Without hesitation, it stormed down the mountain as a huge explosion sounded out behind it, and a tornado of earth, wind, and transparent flames erupted from the mountain. It sent the lizard tumbling and rolling down the mountainside as it just tried to escape with its life intact from the three monsters that had appeared. One of them even yelled something with great vigor, making the lizard even more scared.

It definitely wasn't going to go rodent-hunting on this mountain again, that was for sure.

Why hadn't they done this from the beginning? Well, the reason was partly that they hadn't thought about it and that Sylphie had been low on mana when they began their escape. The biggest reason was the lack of thought, though. Also, it was kind of stupid and risky, but it wasn't like that had ever stopped him before.

As for what they had done?

"This is the drill that will pierce the heavens!" Jake yelled the moment they erupted from the mountain, getting an eye roll from Carmen, who flew up alongside him.

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched as she got free from Carmen's grip and took to the air, flexing her wings.

"Seriously?" Carmen asked the moment they were down on the ground again.

"Are you saying the Sylphie-Jake Wind-powered Mountainpiercing Drill isn't a great technique?" Jake asked, faking offense.

"Ree?" Sylphie screeched sadly as she landed on top of Jake's head.

"No, I..." Carmen said as she looked at Sylphie, who was giving her sad puppy-hawk-eyes. Carmen finally gritted her teeth as she made a strained smile. "It was a great idea..."

“Ree!” Sylphie happily flapped her wings at her own genius. Jake had to admit she was a smart little hawk. She had actually been observing Jake’s flames and had managed to analyze them. She noticed that his flames didn’t work against types of mana with intent or, more Sylphie-accurately, “person mana.”

So she asked why Jake didn’t just make a lot more fire, and then Sylphie would just make it rotate super fast like a tornado to burn away all the stone. As Sylphie’s mana was filled with intent, Jake’s flame wouldn’t work against it, and Sylphie had good enough mana control to not accidentally fight the flame. Then they could just travel upwards and ignore everything else until they would finally get out.

And worked it did! They were finally out, and it had taken like six or seven times longer to use the shortcut tunnel than if they had just moved over or around the mountain. It was totally worth it, though, as they had yet another Prima fragment, making Jake now able to form a key.

“Take a break?” Carmen asked.

“Yeah... I am spent,” Jake said. And he really was. The amount of mana he had pumped out during their escape was insane, and Jake was down to less than five percent when they finally made it out.

“Alright,” Carmen nodded. “Did you happen to grab the Orb from the elemental?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you need it, or can I have it?” Carmen asked a bit nervously. “I will compensate you for it if that is the-“

Jake took out the Orb and tossed it to her. The Orb was epic rarity, so it was a pretty good one, but not one Jake was desperate to keep. Heck, Jake had kept the Prima fragment, so this was only fair.

“Thanks,” Carmen nodded with a smile as she took out two candles and a small altar. She placed the Orb on the altar as she knelt before it. “I tribute this victory and bounty to Valhal.”

With those words, the Orb turned to golden dust and disappeared, and for a fraction of a moment, Jake felt some kind of divine presence that disappeared just as it came. Carmen got up and re-deposited everything back into her spatial storage as Jake looked at her with a questioning gaze.

“Part of my profession,” Carmen answered. “Dedicating battles and loot helps me in various ways, the most obvious of which is experience gained, but it also gives some other bonuses. It allows me to have “recognition” within the halls of Valhal, which empowers many of my skills. Honestly, it is more that I fuck myself over without any tributes.”

“Huh, you learn something new every day,” Jake shrugged. “When I meet up with my god, he is usually the one who brings tributes in the form of beer.”

“You and the Malefic One have a fucked up relationship, you know that, right?” Carmen asked with a deadpan face.

“Funny,” Jake chuckled. “I think we are the only ones who have one that isn’t fucked up.”

Carmen just shook her head. "Weren't you supposed to be meditating so we could get moving again?"

"I was," Jake smirked. "I guess it would be too much to ask you to carry me like Sylphie?"

"If you allowed me to first squish you down to be her size, sure," Carmen shot back.

Jake just chuckled as he closed his eyes and entered meditation to regenerate. He still kept an eye out with his sphere, and he saw that after a brief rest, Carmen and Sylphie began playing around. It was a mix between play-sparring and actual sparring, but they didn't use any skills or serious magic but were more just playing "block the bird peck."

A few hours and potions later, Jake was in pretty good condition again, and with the two others also chugging down some potions, the three of them were ready to head out again.

They grouped up as Jake pulled out the tablet Arnold had given him. He brought up the map as they all studied it. "Okay, so if we go down this mountain this way and pass this small patch of forest, we only have that plain left, and we reach the Grand Mangrove River. After we pass the river, we only need to cross a few flood plains, and we are in the port city of Changhul."

"Are we going for that orange zone?" Carmen asked.

"No P," Jake pointed out. "AKA no Prima. I think it is better to aim for the Grand Mangrove River for Primas."

“How many Primas do you think there are? Not just in that Mangrove place, but on Earth in general?” Carmen asked.

“Arnold says that based on his algorithm made from data on all the Primas he has surveyed so far and locational data of how far spaced out they are, there should be around eleven-hundred within human-occupied land on Earth. He did say it is a bit shaky due to many beings underground or high-up, but it shouldn’t be too far off. If these Primas exist all over the globe... well, it wouldn’t surprise me if they were in the tens of thousands at least. Knowing the system, the number of fragments and keys likely correspond somehow, so maybe thirty thousand? It has to be something that can be divided by three.”

Carmen nodded along. “So, there are quite a lot of Primas. Got it. Now let’s go kill some.”

“Already looking forward to it,” Jake smiled as they set out towards one of the few red danger zones identified by Arnold and a place Jake was certain he would find a good fight.

Maybe even a C-grade or two.

Chapter 455 - Grand Mangrove River

Earth had some damn beautiful vistas after the system arrived. Grand forests with multi-colored trees, endless sprawling plains with groups of deer jumping across them, passing tens of meters with every single leap.

Jake, Sylphie, and Carmen traveled through this land as they kept a good pace. They didn’t get into any fights for the next two days as none of them saw any need to bully far weaker creatures. Even the playful Sylphie had an instinctive repulsion to killing anything below herself in grade and level. A usual thing, as killing a bunch of E-grades while in D-grade could apparently have negative consequences on

your Records based on the circumstances it happened under. Mainly in the sense that it could bring you in a bad direction evolution-wise.

This meant it was a peaceful time where they mainly just chatted about different things, and Jake also finally got to see Carmen “forge” her fists. She did so by making a golden liquid that seemed to almost have acidic properties, but Jake didn’t sense any poison from it. When Carmen submerged her hands, this golden liquid would slowly drill itself into them, and based on Carmen’s gritted teeth during this entire process, it was in no way pleasant.

Afterward, she told him that she had to control the energy and use it to form runes of sorts into her very Soulshape. It was incredibly complicated magic tapping into many different concepts, and Carmen also made it clear she only knew what the outcome of the rituals were and not how anything actually worked. However, she did say this golden liquid also had to do with the tributes, as the unique energy gained from doing them helped the forging ritual along.

It was interesting magic, that was for sure, but nothing Jake could use or even gain any real inspiration from. It required things Jake simply couldn’t get, and he also learned that forging her hands led to some changes Jake would not be a fan of – such as the inability to channel mana through them. Something that didn’t matter at all to Carmen, considering she didn’t even have mana, having converted it all to stamina.

The two of them did have some interesting discussions regarding the application of stamina, and Jake found out that Carmen really had no idea how to properly manipulate her own Soulshape or even properly perceive it. She just used the methods she had been taught.

She likened it to when she was training to be a boxer. She was no nutritionist or had any education in biology or physiology, so she just did as she was told and saw the results. Carmen said she didn’t need to know why something happened, just what she had to do to make the outcome she wanted possible. Rather than learn what lifting weights did to muscles, she would just lift weights and build the muscle.

Jake disagreed with this approach somewhat. He had always been all about feeling the changes on the deepest level possible. Even if he didn't know all the biology about building muscle, he would still understand the process by feeling it. He would feel the muscle fiber break down and rebuild itself, feel the nutrients and protein feed his muscles to make them stronger and faster.

Comprehending concepts was also essential to upgrading skills. While it was possible to upgrade them without learning how they truly worked, it would never be to your own upgraded versions. Carmen would only be able to follow the teachings of others and upgrade through a linear Path defined by whoever trained her. Jake was very much the opposite, at least when it came to his class. He did follow the teachings of the Malefic Viper, especially with Path of the Heretic-Chosen, but his way of learning wasn't by following a training regimen but by comprehending and understanding the skills. The true versions of these Legacy skills were also just so all-encompassing that borderline anything Jake learned using them was already an aspect of the "true" version.

This all resulted in an interesting dynamic where they each had something to teach the other - Jake teaching her a bit about Soulshapes and Carmen teaching him a bit about fighting.

"You have the most unbalanced melee fighting style I have ever seen," Carmen said as she looked at Jake after they had a brief spar. They had decided to take a break, but their breaks often didn't include as much rest as they probably should.

"How so?" Jake asked, but he already had an inkling himself.

"Well, first of all, you suck at attacking," she said curtly.

"A bit harsh," Jake muttered.

“No. Not really. Come at me, try to land a hit,” Carmen taunted him. “You can use your swords and daggers and all that too.”

Jake complied as he shot forward, Eternal Hunger and Bloodfeast Dagger ready. He swung, and Carmen dodged to the side but didn’t counterattack. Jake swung again, and he tried to pin her down as Carmen just kept dodging and weaving in between his hits, not even trying to strike back a single time.

He kept pushing as he picked up his pace, but he somehow couldn’t land a hit even when he was faster than her. Jake kept swinging until finally, Carmen leaped back, making Jake stop.

“You are good at dodging,” Jake nodded.

“No, not really. I am decent, sure, but the primary reason is how utterly predictable you are. It is like fighting a beast. You don’t fucking think. You are just swinging your weapon towards the nearest vital area. No feints, no baiting, no combos... nothing,” Carmen shook her head.

“Is it really that bad?” Jake asked. He had this conversation before, and he honestly felt like he had gotten better with Fang of Man. It was true the skill didn’t actually give him any fighting experience; it just allowed him to properly use any weapon he did pick up. There were no techniques or anything. Jake felt like it was fine as overcomplicating things just seemed dumb.

“It is,” Carmen nodded. “You have no technique at all.”

“Shouldn’t that make me less predictable?” Jake muttered.

“No, it just makes you suck. You know how to use your body and your muscles. Every swing is powerful and would be potent if it hit. You just have no way to make it hit,” Carmen shook her head.

“Any advice?”

“I am not good enough to give any,” Carmen shook her head. “I am a pugilist. I can teach you how to punch things and be a boxer, but I don’t know shit about using a blade or any weapon for that matter. No, it is better you find someone more qualified. You got a lot of the things down that most find the hardest, like proper footwork and efficient movements, so you just need a good teacher.”

Jake nodded in understanding. It seemed like he would actually have to get some lessons in proper fighting when he returned to the Academy.

“But... just one thing, how come I did manage to land hits on people before then?” Jake asked, still a bit confused.

“Well,” Carmen began, “because while you suck at attacking, you are a fucking monster defensively. Attacking you is a nightmare, and that will inadvertently lead to exposed weaknesses you take advantage of... I don’t get how you don’t understand this? Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t wanna know.”

Jake just nodded. “I get it... I will find someone to give me some pointers.”

He actually felt a bit bad as while Carmen did give some serious advice, Jake couldn't actually give anything proper back. Explaining how to "feel" something related to your Soulshape wasn't really easily described, but they did make some progress. Jake advised her to try and feel the stamina moving through her body – something she already had experience with – to map out her Soulshape and slowly imagine it.

Sylphie also chipped in asking what a Soulshape was, at which point Jake learned that Sylphie didn't have one... well, she did kind of have one, but not really. She had several "states" of Soulshapes as far as Jake could tell, but honestly, it was all a bit too complicated for him. Sylphie's own explanation was that she could just be windy and not windy, so that was very useful.

On the third day, they finally made it to the red zone known as the Grand Mangrove River. They had seen the mangrove much earlier, and Jake finally understood why Arnold had said flying over it wasn't possible.

"How the fuck is that even possible?" Carmen asked as she stared at the sight before them.

"Magic, system-fuckery, and probably a bit more magic," Jake answered, also staring.

"Ree!" Sylphie explained very accurately.

What they saw was indeed a mangrove. The trees that made up the mangrove had large root nets and crowns that began rather far up. This meant that above the surface of the river, there was space between the many roots to move. The problem appeared further up where the crowns of the many trees were.

The many branches had formed an impenetrable wall that shot into the sky further up than Jake could see. It was a barrier of pure greenery that seemed to extend infinitely, and Jake quickly formed the personal theory that the mangrove that gave name to the Grand Mangrove River connected to something up there. Potentially another cloud island.

From what Jake could see, the only way to pass the river was at the bottom and through the net of roots. At least there was a lot of space there. The roots had different sizes, with some being as thin as a finger and others nearly four meters in diameter. At places, the roots were also well-spaced out, and with how much they wound and bent, traveling on top of them and avoiding the river below was entirely possible, if not kind of easy.

“This seems like such a shitty place to travel through,” Carmen complained.

“No other way,” Jake shrugged. “The river cuts off everything. According to the notes in the tablet, this mangrove even makes teleportation incredibly difficult, explaining why no network has been established with the port city.”

“Has anyone made it through before?” she asked.

“A lot. If you go straight, use stealth skills, and just generally try not to cause a ruckus, it shouldn’t be too dangerous as the local denizens shouldn’t be that aggressive. That is if we want to stick to the safest path.”

“Which we don’t,” Carmen nodded. “Oh well. Just to check, how are you in water?”

"I can swim," Jake answered.

"I mean fighting in it...." Carmen said, taking a deep breath. "Does your archery work underwater?"

"No, not really," Jake said. "I would definitely prefer to stay out of it. How about you, Sylphie?"

"Ree!" Sylphie screeched.

"She isn't a fan of water either?" Carmen asked. She had an oddly hopeful gaze as she waited for Jake to confirm or deny.

"Yep, something like that," Jake said, getting a small cheer out of Carmen as she triumphantly celebrated her increased ability to understand Sylphie.

"Ready?" Jake asked as he checked the tablet. "We are heading straight for a Prima that should be the closest to our side of the river."

Carmen and Sylphie nodded and flapped their wings respectively as they headed into the danger zone.

Jake scanned his surroundings as they dove under the canopy of the many mangrove trees. Somehow it didn't turn dark as he noticed how sunlight seemed to some-fucking-how still make its way through the many-kilometer wall of leaves and branches. Perhaps it was absorbed somehow and then released at the bottom? Jake could feel the sun affinity energy coming from the leaves as he reckoned they

somehow emitted it for the river below. Likely to feed its own roots and underwater plants to not kill the ecosystem in the river.

“Ree! Ree, ree, ree,” Sylphie suddenly chirped.

“Okay, I did not get any of that,” Carmen muttered, disappointed, while Jake realized how the sunlight reached them.

“She said that she can feel the wind pass down from above... meaning the sunlight reaches us through a net of reflected sunlight,” Jake explained, having understood and confirmed this himself by inspecting the structure of the leaves.

“How the hell is that possible?” Carmen asked. “Are you telling me these trees all agreed to set up a huge net of reflective leaves or what?”

“No,” Jake shook his head as he inspected some of the trees very carefully. “There is no need for agreement... this entire mangrove is one single plant, or at least this section is.”

Carmen just looked at him. “That is just-“

“Left!” Jake yelled as his danger sense warned him.

A few spears of wood flew straight toward Jake and Carmen both. Carmen just caught one with her hand, and Jake dodged the others easily as he saw where they had come from.

A small, lithe form was sitting on a root as it looked towards them. It was surrounded by five of its brethren as they just stared. Jake recognized the creature as he sighed. "Really?"

[Mangrove Monkey – lvl 140]

The monkeys seemed to have heard him as they bolted off, frightened in the other direction. Sylphie screeched towards them, making the monkeys pick up their pace even more.

"I thought you said the wildlife wasn't that aggressive?" Carmen asked as she snapped the small sharpened wooden spear she had caught.

"Monkeys are assholes," Jake just answered, shaking his head as he motioned for them to move on.

His assessment did prove to be correct, and luckily the monkeys didn't make Jake commit another monkey genocide. They weren't attacked at all for the next hour or so as they slowly made their way through the Grand Mangrove River, though they did have a few times where they had to diverge their path.

The biggest danger didn't come from the roots or hidden in the lower layers of the canopies but could be found down in the river below. Incredibly powerful beasts roamed down there, but they luckily seemed to primarily compete amongst themselves.

Jake had taken out one of the Prima fragments again. He hadn't merged his three into a key in case it made it harder to track the energy signature of Primas. He wondered if he would find another monkey, but he and the others hadn't encountered any of the fuckers besides in the outer perimeter of the Grand Mangrove River.

By now, they were perhaps a third of the way to the center of the danger zone – a sixth into the river as a whole - and the levels had already grown significantly. Jake saw several beasts around level 170 in the waters below, and he could feel the presence of a C-grade somewhere further in. Maybe more than one.

"Are we avoiding C-grades?" Carmen asked.

"Do you have confidence fighting one?" Jake countered.

"Alone? No. But with you and Sylphie, maybe we can take one down if it is on the weaker side," Carmen assessed.

"In that case, I am up for giving it a shot," Jake nodded. He did believe they had a chance, and Sylphie seemed to also agree.

As they kept moving forward, Jake felt several presences five hundred meters or so in front of them. "Be careful. Potential ambush ahead."

Carmen's face turned more serious, but she didn't change her pace. Jake and Sylphie also followed as their guard was up. Soon enough, they reached the area Jake had noticed, and his guess had proven true.

A torrent of water fired out from the river below, making Carmen block as she was blasted up into the leaves and branches above. At the same time, Jake was forced to dodge as a pink appendage shot towards him, barely missing as it smashed into a root, breaking it into splinters before retracting again to its source.

Sylphie also dodged her attack as Jake saw the beasts that had attacked them. Three large and fat frogs were hidden just a bit below the river's surface as they launched their ranged attacks again, Jake barely managing to identify them.

[Acidtorrent Frog – lvl 191]

[Pummel-tongue Frog – lvl 194]

[Acidtorrent Frog – lvl 192]

Two green and one brown frog. Jake checked on Carmen and saw her skin had been seared by the acid, but she didn't seem to care as she shot down at one of the frogs. Jake also pulled out his bow as he prepared to engage.

This would prove to be the first fight of many, as clearly, the natives of the Grand Mangrove River didn't see the three of them as anything but prey, all trying to turn this mangrove into a man-grave.

Chapter 456 - Bend!

Frogs in all shapes and sizes, birds that ambushed with pecks nearly as fast as Jake's arrows, and a plethora of other annoying animals hounded Jake, Sylphie, and Carmen as they made their way deeper into the mangrove. The first frogs they encountered were a good indicator of what they would face.

They were all specialized creatures adapted to their unique environment. They all made use of the many ambush possibilities offered by the dense branches and leaves above or the river below. Granted, Jake was the worst kind of opponent for them as the current him would never fall into an actual ambush, but some attacks were difficult to deal with even if you knew they were coming.

The mangrove was also more than a little annoying fighting in, especially for an archer like Jake. The creatures made full use of the winding roots for cover or hid away underwater to avoid his blows. Sylphie didn't care much and was able to maneuver well enough to sometimes even take advantage of the environment herself. Carmen could do the same, just hiding away behind cover until her opponent was forced to get close or give up.

Jake still managed pretty well with melee attacks and could land some arrows here and there, but the deeper in they got, the more his archery fell off. When they reached their first target within the mangrove, his archery felt borderline useless.

The first target was a Prima Arnold had already scouted out before. It wandered with a small flock in this part of the mangrove and was a terror to most wildlife. When Jake finally saw it, he could get why. It was a bird with incredibly long and slender legs, a smallish body, a long neck, and an even longer beak. Identifying it, he confirmed it was indeed a Prima.

[Spearbeak Ibis Prima – lvl 190]

Its most notable feature was the beak. It was long, almost to the point of looking impractical, but Jake soon saw why that didn't matter. The two humans and hawk made a plan as they engaged the Spearbeak Ibis Prima and its flock that consisted of seven more ibises, each of them around level 180.

"Same tactic as always?" Carmen asked before they engaged.

"Will try," Jake said, a bit miffed at how it usually went. He felt like his opening salvo of Arcane Powershot often ended up just missing or being fired way too early as the opponent either noticed him or was just moving already, and with cover never more than ten or so meters away, most beasts could quickly escape his arrows.

The opening attack did go as expected, but Jake was forced to switch his target to one of the followers of the Prima as the damn Ibis walked behind a large root just before he released the string. The arrow tore off one of its legs and made it fall into the river below. Sylphie attacked the Prima together with Carmen but were pushed back as it was joined by the others in its flock near-instantly.

This was also when Jake learned the reason for the long Prima beak. Rather than fight, it escaped behind a root, but it still pecked forward as its beak simply bent around the root and pecked Carmen in the shoulder, sending out a shower of blood.

Jake and the others had fought one other group of Ibises before and knew they were all fast and had powerful attacks, but they had hoped to take advantage of their low durability. The ibises walked on water like it was nothing and could even run and kick off roots to launch themselves around at incredible speeds and even use their wings for further speed and maneuverability while in the air.

The Prima took this to an entirely new level as their group of three fought a foe that had truly made the environment it lived in its own.

There was never a moment when it was exposed as the Prima switched between the trees and dove under the roots all the time. The bird was only about two and a half meters tall, but the beak could extend to be more than fifteen meters when it pecked forward, truly proving the name Spearbeak.

"I can't get close," Carmen said as they all retreated a bit and hid behind a mangrove tree. "I go for the weaker birds?"

"Alright," Jake nodded as he looked up at some of the branches above where Sylphie was hanging upside-down. "Help Carmen finish them off. I will try to handle the Prima for now."

"Ree!" Sylphie agreed.

"Sure that is a good idea?" Carmen asked. "If I can't get close, can you?"

Jake shook his head. "Maybe... but that isn't why I want to handle the Prima alone. I see an opportunity."

Carmen stared for a moment before nodding firmly. "Got it."

She understood the sentiment even without Jake having to explain.

The words Carmen had said about him sucking at attacking had echoed in his mind all throughout this travel through the mangrove. He honestly didn't notice it when he fought the beasts... at least not before now. Usually, he would get chances to counterattack or at least use Gaze to get an opportunity, but this damn Ibis didn't give him the chance to.

In some ways, the Ibis fought similarly to Jake when he used archery. It always tried to keep itself at a distance and attack with ranged attacks. The difference was that the Ibis had solved one of the biggest issues: line of sight. Arrows could only fly in a straight line for obvious reasons, and a peck could also normally only go straight... but the Ibis Prima clearly didn't subscribe to his logic.

Jake observed the beak bend at impossible angles as it pecked forward. Every bend was uniform, and that somehow allowed it to retain all its power. One would think a strike curved into a crescent would be weaker when it hit, but for the Ibis Prima, it clearly had no negative effects.

In order to get a good one-on-one fight, Jake summoned dozens of arcane orbs and exploded the area to force the Prima away from Carmen and Sylphie as he pursued it. The long-legged bird didn't seem to care as it allowed Jake to chase, perhaps happy itself to finally get rid of Sylphie, who had managed to land a few scratches with her superior speed.

Jake shot off arrows as he chased, missing every single one. At the same time, he was forced to block or dodge the spear-like beak repeatedly. Their fight was incredibly basic, with one person just shooting arrows and the other pecking while dodging and flying through the mangrove forest.

Seeing the Ibis Prima had given Jake inspiration. The beak was a solid object, yet it seemed so everchanging. He didn't actually want to make his own blade somehow long and bendy... no, it was the concept behind what the Prima did that intrigued him.

Soon enough, the two of them were several kilometers from Sylphie and Carmen. Jake kept trying to land a hit and accomplish what he was attempting to do, but something was missing. Missing to do what one might ask?

Controllable arrows.

It was something Jake had theorized a long time ago. He could do telekinesis, so why couldn't he control his own arrows mid-flight? The problem was that arrows in flight tended to be quite resistant to being affected by, well, anything.

Jake trying to influence the trajectory would often just result in him forcing it to slow down. This would make it not hit as hard, if at all. Slower objects were obviously easier to dodge.

He had even looked up some books on archery while in the Order. He saw several guides on controlling mana bolts and tried a few of those out, but it always came with the caveat of reduced power for any piercing attack.

There were methods, though, just none that Jake found fitting. Some were simply because Jake found himself in quite an unfortunate situation with his arrows in particular: they liked to destroy stuff due to his arcane affinity. This included any "strings" of mana Jake wanted to attach to the arrows.

He had also tried to change the arrow design, but that hadn't worked either, as his arrows just flew too fast. The passive destructive abilities of his arcane arrows also helped alleviate the effects of wind resistance or any other resistance for that matter. This was awesome for making arrows go fast and straight, but not that good if you wanted them to do anything else.

Other books recommended simply bending space or manipulating time to make the arrow's flight unpredictable, but for obvious reasons, that wasn't quite doable for the current Jake. No, he would need to find another way... because there had to be a way.

The fight with the Prima continued, and finally, something happened that changed the situation. Jake jumped away from a beak spear as suddenly another flew for him. He managed to bend his body, but he was confused because the first peck hadn't fully retracted yet.

Then a third came, but this one was too fast as Jake was pecked in the chest, sending him flying back with a hole through his right lung about the size of a fist. Jake just stared as he had no idea what had just happened. How could it have two beaks at once? Three?

Despite his surprise, he still managed to stabilize himself and avoid any follow-ups. The Ibis Prima had entered open space to pursue him, and now Jake truly saw how it attacked. Before, he had thought the break actually extended, but it wasn't quite like that. In fact, he seemed to have misunderstood the creature entirely.

Every time the Ibis Prima attacked, it pecked forward and sent out its beak at such a speed it fired off a mirror image of sorts that looked like the physical beak... a mirror image so "real" it actually appeared like a physical object in his sphere and to all Jake's senses.

Before every attack, the Ibis Prima slightly shifted its head, and Jake felt the sheer level of focus that went into the attacks. The beak was extended and curved, always at a consistent angle based on the starting position of the Prima's head. There was never more than one bend either.

He finally understood why he had taken inspiration from it. It was a beautiful technique. He saw the straight beak be aimed towards him once more, but it suddenly seemed to bend as it came from an angle, forcing Jake to dodge away, but not before he loosed an arrow to counter.

The arrow floundered as it flew at an odd angle and crashed into a tree. Jake was not undeterred as he shot again, with every arrow just harmlessly hitting roots or falling into the river below. The Ibis Prima had already hidden away again and used the cover of the trees to counter as Jake just shot his arrows into said trees.

By now, Jake was fully focused. He analyzed the Prima's every move as he tried to mimic what it did in his own way.

Bend, Jake thought as his arrow bent mid-air and cracked into small crystalline pieces.

Bend.

The arrow flew off to the side even if he had fired it right in front of him, smashing yet another innocent root.

Bend!

As the string moved, the arrow seemed to slightly turn, but as it was loosed, the arrow lost its course and once more did nothing.

Bend!

Jake's eyes opened wide as he focused. He released his arrow but, at the very end, also infused a large wave of Willpower into it, infusing the arrow with a bit of his intent. It merged with the arrow and bow effortlessly, just like all his prior attempts. When the arrow was pushed forward by the string, it seemed to bend until it was finally let go and did exactly as Jake intended.

In a glorious crescent, it traveled around the massive root the Prima was hiding behind, and he heard the beast cry out in surprise as it was hit on the right wing.

Jake had tried to do it like the Ibis Prima but found it impossible. The Ibis Prima retained that connection between itself and the beak all throughout the attack, something Jake could not do. No, he had to find a better way.

He did try and realized fully controllable arrows weren't something he could do. He would lose momentum if he tried to control them too much... so what if he didn't guide them? What if he just gave them a slight nudge and changed their fundamental trajectory, still making them fly "straight," but defined that as a "straight arc."

Or, the easiest explanation: he changed the trajectory before he even shot it. He re-defined what a straight line was using his own Willpower, just like the Prima had. Rather than try and "program" the arrow to follow an advanced trajectory, he just infused this one intent, making it shoot at a certain angle, following a simple vector.

The blow was still predictable... it bent predictably. This did perhaps seem like a flaw, but it was quite the opposite: it preserved speed and momentum.

Jake smiled as he heard the notification that signified he had progressed his archery skill, but he saved looking at it for later. For now, he had a Prima to kill. The beast quickly adapted as Jake began whipping arrows around the roots at awkward angles.

What was perhaps most surprising was the lack of any magic or mana involved in the process. It looked like Jake was just firing arrows like normal to any outside observer, but they all flew at different angles and bent around the roots. Granted, this did result in them traveling a further overall distance, making the time it took to hit the target longer. This would be a flaw under normal circumstances, but in this kind of environment? Well, there was a reason why the level 190 Ibis Prima could dominate any opponent it found.

Getting his spirits up, Jake attempted to fire an Arcane Powershot and used the same technique. The arrow did bend slightly, but when he released it, it only diverted by a few degrees, passing the root the Prima hid behind, flying into the distance before it exploded upon impact with another mangrove tree.

Okay, doesn't work with Arcane Powershot.

The attack was just too fast and too powerful. Jake could not infuse enough intent into the attack to make it do as he wanted... but he did have an attack that would work.

Jake dodged around as the Ibis Prima began adapting and counterattacking. Neither party was ever within the line of sight of the other even as they exchanged blows. Jake was attacked several times as he did the mental calculation before he fired his bow once more.

A single arrow bent around a root, but just as it did, it split into five. Jake repeated this as he fired another arrow from the opposite side that also split. The Ibis Prima was forced to retreat backward but was still caught in the explosion that came from ten explosive arcane arrows colliding.

Jake took this opportunity to sprint forward and give chase. He shot off two more arrows as the Ibis Prima prepared to jump away, but suddenly it stumbled when its foot hit the water, making it get hit by another arrow.

The beast looked confused and then terrified. It had clearly been too distracted to notice what had happened to it. That first arrow Jake had hit hadn't just been another regular stable arcane arrow, but one thoroughly soaked in Jake's new and most powerful Hemotoxin.

Wounds had accumulated on the Ibis Prima. Wounds that would typically have already healed. It had noticed too late as Jake was upon it, ready to deliver death.

Jake jumped to the right as he shot to the left, making the arrows curve around to hit the Ibis Prima. In mid-air, he charged Arcane Powershot, and when he made it around the network of roots and landed his sights on the bird, he used Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

The Ibis froze and barely became able to move again to try and block the Arcane Powershot with its beak, sending it reeling back and bleeding from its head. Three more arrows had also hit it from Jake's curved shot, and by now, the Ibis Prima only thought about escape. Something Jake wasn't going to give it.

It was time to finish this as Jake finally pulled out his final weapon. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter emerged from his inventory, and the Ibis Prima instantly fled. Jake just looked as it escaped behind a net of roots. Jake didn't care as he released the finisher.

The arrow bent around several trees as it struck the Ibis Prima that had already lost its senses. It fell forward into the river as Jake got the kill notification.

You have slain [Spearbeak Ibis Prima – lvl 190] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level

Jake flew forward and quickly swooped up the Beastcore and the fragment the Prima had dropped as he also checked and saw he had gained levels. Plural.

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 154 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Class: [Avaricious Arcane Hunter] has reached level 155 - Stat points allocated, +10 Free Points

'DING!' Race: [Human (D)] has reached level 162 - Stat points allocated, +15 Free Points

Jake was surprised at seeing two levels. He wondered if it had to do with the skill upgrade, but skill upgrades didn't tend to give him class experience. The fight had not been overly dangerous, even if Jake did have a few holes in his body by now. In fact, he would say that overall, this Prima was on the weaker side, being a one-trick pony.

It was also entirely possible he had just been mega-close to a level-up already and now just barely passed the threshold to gain two.

"Got what you needed?" Carmen asked as she finally went over together with Sylphie. Jake knew they had been observing from afar to not interrupt his fight and take away Jake's chance to get the inspiration he had been seeking.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jake said.

“So?” Carmen asked.

Jake just smiled and nodded as he checked out his newly upgraded skill.

Chapter 457 - The Depths Of The Grand Mangrove River

Jake’s attachment to archery didn’t exactly stem from anything logical. Sure, one could argue the fact that his Bloodline gave Perception made it an obvious choice, but Perception was a stat highly beneficial to nearly all classes and professions. Heck, Arnold had said himself that Perception was his highest stat, and he didn’t even use a gun... or any weapon for that matter.

Many types of magic were also based on Perception. Jake could become a melee fighter with a focus on the stat too, or do so many other things. Some would maybe even be more effective as there was a dissonance between his Sphere of Perception and the fact that he preferred to stay at long range to land arrows.

So, why did he focus on archery anyway? Well, because he liked it. It had been the first sport he had gotten into. It was linked with many positive memories of his life. Times he went to tournaments or the archery range with his father, memories of his brother cheering whenever he hit a bullseye. When he got introduced to the system, he had instantly known he wanted to do archery once more.

This didn’t mean he wouldn’t also do other things. He was fully aware he was a bit of a Jake of all trades, but archery was still a centerpiece of those trades. With all of that in mind, it only made sense to upgrade his archery skill, even if said archery skill also pointed out Jake’s vast toolbelt of fighting methods.

[Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)] - An Archer's best friends are the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. Unsatisfied with merely becoming an expert, you have sought beyond mastering common bowmanship, and do not shy away from using magic to enhance your technique. You seek to cross all horizons with your arrows, and your target shall be pierced, no matter the distance, no matter the means. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception.

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[Archery of Expanding Horizons (Epic)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. As your horizons expand, you realize flaws and build upon a foundation to make that expansion everpresent. You do not shy away from mixing archery with magic and making your arrows arbiters of your will. Your arrows will cross all horizons and bend over any obstacle to pierce your target, with only your own will limiting the possibilities. Allows you to apply your will to control the trajectory of arrows before releasing them. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception. Arrow trajectory control based on Willpower.

Jake read over the improved skill a few times. Out of all the ones he had, this one had quite a bit of flavor text, which probably made sense considering its role as a general archery skill. When he had gained the skill, Jake had also surprisingly gained some instinctual knowledge, making him more aware of how it truly worked.

When he fired a bending arrow, Jake infused it with a small pack of Willpower along with the usual energies he threw in. This pack of Willpower would work on the arrow to effectively nudge and push it in a certain direction with a constant force, making it follow the trajectory Jake intended. This was also why something like Arcane Powershot didn't work well with it because the pack of Willpower he would have to infuse into the arrow was above what Jake could do at his current level of power.

Due to the Willpower being a part of the arrow upon firing, this did also mean he could copy it with Splitting Arrow. The packet of Willpower would remain within the arrow even when it was split. Looking at the skill, he also became more and more certain... true arrow control was a possibility in the future. Guided arrows. Just thinking about it, countless ideas entered his head for future improvements, but all of those were for the future. For now, they had more targets to hunt.

Jake briefly explained to Sylphie and Carmen about his upgrade, got his congratulations, and then they took a quick break to chug down potions before moving on.

The map given by Arnold stopped giving any useful information about a third of the way into the mangrove, meaning the entire central part of the Grand Mangrove River was a complete mystery. The central part was also the most dangerous area.

According to the map, the entire river was about two hundred kilometers wide and didn't have any significant places where it became more narrow – in fact, it was wider in most places. There were also safer places to pass than others, but the mangrove forest was everpresent, showing how utterly massive the ecosystem was.

This did perhaps seem overly huge, but one had to remember that the forest Haven was placed on the outskirts of extended for thousands upon thousands of kilometers into the distance. Arnold hadn't even been able to map a small part of it yet, and it was likely the largest forest in the region of the planet humans currently occupied.

"Are there more Primas nearby?" Carmen asked Jake as their group took a small break up amongst the branches and leaves of the mangrove trees.

Jake had a fragment in his hand as he searched for similar energies but shook his head. "There was one, I think, but the energy is faint. It either moved or was killed. One thing is for sure, it is no longer in this area."

"Ree?" Sylphie asked.

"Yeah, it could be connected," Jake agreed.

They had noticed a general lack of beasts in the area, at least above the river. Down in the deep water below, an entirely different world still existed, separate from everything else. Some creatures did live on the edge, such as the frogs that did dive a bit below water or other beasts that used the river to ambush foes, but these were not considered part of the true river. No, those creatures lived deep beneath, likely kilometers down.

"Do you think a C-grade swept through?" Carmen asked, a bit concerned.

"Doubtful... I don't feel the lingering aura of one. That doesn't make it impossible, though, as it could just be one that is good at hiding its presence," Jake said.

"Guess all we can do is move on," Carmen sighed as they did just so.

By now, they had already agreed to just try and make it through the Grand Mangrove River as peacefully as possible if there were no more Primas. It wasn't really a good place to hunt, even with Jake's archery upgrade. Some annoying opponents also fled underwater if they got in trouble, betting on surviving the deep-river creatures over facing Jake, Carmen, and the little murderbird.

They kept going forward as the general mana level in the air grew. An extreme level of nature, water, and wood affinity also dominated the air, making them all a bit more on edge. It was normal for the mana density and affinity to grow and change based on the environment, but this case was out of the ordinary.

It far surpassed what was found within the tunnel with the Earth Elemental Prima. High mana density didn't really mean much for humans besides affected mana regeneration and sometimes slightly stronger or weaker attacks based on the affinity of said mana, but one type of creature it did affect significantly was monsters.

Sylphie seemed to enjoy being there, at least. Mana density could help beasts level faster merely by absorbing it, and it would also lead to beasts and other creatures naturally spawning at a higher level, including anything born from eggs or even living births – hence why rituals were often used to nurture eggs and pregnant animals. It also resulted in more natural treasures appearing, and those that did appear were stronger and would grow in rarity and power faster.

Most notably was perhaps the “level” of the treasures and materials spawning. Two flowers could be uncommon rarity, but one would be far more suited for E-grades and the other for C-grades. They could have the same name, but the amount of energy contained within the one for C-grades would be far more powerful.

It worked like this for all kinds of natural treasures and herbs. A D-grade would not benefit from treasures in low-mana areas suitable for E-grades unless it consumed ludicrous amounts. In the same vein, then a C-grade would also not benefit much from treasures suitable for D-grades. What did this mean? That often, mana density in an area could be used to determine the level of creatures one would find there.

In all ways, beasts benefitted from higher mana density areas, which is also why they loved being in them, and the stronger beast got, the more this became almost required to keep progressing for all the reasons stated above. Hence, high-mana areas tended to be dominated by and become the territory of powerful monsters.

And the mana density in this area of the Grand Mangrove River was enough to support not just D-grades... but something above that. Jake could feel that there were C-grades ahead. He could not pinpoint them, but he felt their presence, and soon enough, they would enter an area where he knew there were some.

“Careful,” Jake said. “And if you have any stealth skills, use them. If not, just try to stay low profile. If we are going to get into fights, let’s be the ones starting them.”

Carmen and Sylphie both agreed as Sylphie quickly asked Jake if he wanted her to make a big whirlwind to hide them. She only sulked a little when he said no.

They snuck through the mangrove quietly. At times they heard noises off in the distance and felt the reverberations of energy as powerful entities clashed, but they tried to ignore it and moved slightly away from that direction. Jake would check it out if he was alone, but with Sylphie and Carmen, he didn’t want to take the chance.

Facing C-grades shouldn’t be done half-arsed, and if Jake had to face one, he didn’t want it to be within this mangrove. Any C-grade able to make the Grand Mangrove River their home had to have adapted to the environment and be masters of using it to their advantage, making fighting them there too reckless, even for Jake.

So they wanted to just pass by. Humans had passed before, according to Arnold. C-grades shouldn’t bother with a small group of three... but Jake had made one miscalculation. They maybe didn’t bother

with humans, but if there was one thing other beasts enjoyed, it was consuming Beastcores... especially from more powerful beasts. Killing a D-grade wouldn't give a core worth much, but what if it was a beast of an even higher tier that simply hadn't grown up yet?

The Records contained in the core would lack quantity, but the quality would be supreme. Hunting these beasts was often seen, which was why dragon hatchlings were protected by their brethren, and beasts of powerful heritages were so tight-knit.

Jake and Carmen weren't currently traveling with a dragon hatchling but something that was perhaps even more precious to an ambitious C-grade: a Sylphian Eya.

That is when Jake saw it. Almost a moment too late.

"Dodge!" he yelled as suddenly a thin line of water moved across the mangrove. They all somehow managed to get some height as the needle-thin wave of water passed. Jake's eyes were open wide as behind and in front of them, thousands of roots had been severed in two by the water cutter, the mangrove trees now only held up by their branches.

And this was only the beginning.

Bullets of water rained upon them from off in the distance, most of them aimed at Sylphie. They all dodged back as several trees were shredded, and Jake didn't hesitate for a moment as he went all out. Arcane Awakening fully activated as he had already spotted their attacker more than two kilometers away through the path it had created with its own rain of bullets. It was hidden well, but not well enough... not that Jake was sure it mattered as he managed to land an Identify.

[Torrent-Tongue Frog King – lvl ???]

It was a fully-fledged C-grade. Jake communicated this to Sylphie, and Carmen clearly already knew as she also activated several boosting skills. The frog in the distance fired off a few more attacks, but suddenly the attacks stopped.

The frog had disappeared below the surface of the river, but Jake had managed to use his Mark on it the moment he saw it. He felt its movements as it moved at a ridiculous speed underwater towards them.

“Below!” he yelled again as they all spread out and sought up towards the branches of the mangrove trees for cover.

He used Pride, Scales, and Wings as he triggered every single skill he could. Jake quickly began charging an Arcane Powershot and fired where he believed the frog would emerge – a guess that was right on the money.

The frog leaped up from the water just as Jake fired. It got hit by the arrow but didn’t seem to care as it went straight for Sylphie, ignoring both Jake and Carmen. They were not the food it wanted.

“Ree!” Sylphie screeched as she summoned a green shield and fired a blast of green wind to counter the frog leaping towards her, trying to gobble her up. Together with Jake’s arrow, it managed to throw the frog off-course as it smashed into the branches above, but their relief was short-lived.

The entire body of the frog exploded as it sent bullets of water flying out, striking the three of them. Jake managed to rapidly form a barrier of mana, and combined with the natural barrier from Arcane Awakening and Scales, he shrugged it off as he fired off a barrage of arrows.

Once more, he was ignored as the river below seemed to come alive. Torrents of water flew up and enveloped Sylphie in a bubble of water as the frog kept attacking her. Jake flew forward but was smashed back by the frog shooting a blast of water his way, making him fall into the river.

Jake got out of the water, bleeding from his chest, as he went for the frog again. The beast was nearly upon Sylphie as Carmen appeared at its side and punched it hard, sending it slightly off-course. She followed up with a combo as she hit it over a dozen times in rapid succession, but Jake could see it wasn't doing as much as Carmen would have liked.

The frog seemed more annoyed than anything as it released its tongue and wrapped it around Carmen's waist. It swung her around and smashed her through more than ten trees before it finally let go and tossed her into the distance.

Sylphie had broken out of the water prison and looked like she was about to go all-out together with Jake, but at that moment, they both felt something. The frog did, too, as it froze and abandoned all its current plans.

But it was too late for it.

A white form suddenly shot out of the river below, not giving the frog any time to react. It reached the beast in a second as Jake saw two shining fangs sink into the amphibian's body. Jake didn't even take the time to think as he made use of this opening to run towards Carmen as he mentally commanded Sylphie to follow him.

They were getting the fuck out of there, that was for sure.

Carmen had been flung five hundred meters away after being smashed through two more trees, and she looked more than a little beat up. She looked relieved when she saw them, but her eyes opened in fright soon after, and Jake knew why.

He stopped on a root as he slowly turned around, seeing the same white form rise out of the river. He also felt the aura of the frog was gone along with the Mark placed on it. It had been killed within only a few seconds. He looked at the beast before him and its familiar form.

[Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake – lvl ???]

The beast had a long and slender body. It looked to be around thirty meters long with an entirely white, almost albino look, especially with the two red eyes that looked like gemstones. The head was only about the size of Jake's torso, and it truly was a thin animal... but that didn't mean Jake would underestimate it.

Even standing there, he felt it. Within the snake was venom at a level far above anything Jake had ever faced. He was instantly aware that his Palate would offer little help. This was no simple C-grade, and Jake was confident this creature was on a whole other level than anything else he had ever seen, surpassing even the Termite King by quite the margin. It was likely a mid-tier C-grade.

Jake's only focus now was on escaping as the snake regarded their party of three. Carmen was heavily injured, and Sylphie seemed scared and leaned on Jake for support. The thought of summoning the Fallen King using his mask appeared, but before he had to do anything, he heard a voice as the snake extended its tongue that seemed to vibrate in a way that produced it.

“What brings one who walks the Path of the Forefather here?”

Chapter 458 - Making \U0022Friends\U0022

Jake stared up at the white snake that, in turn, regarded him, waiting for an answer to its question. It had mentioned something about a Forefather, and the hamster wheel in Jake’s mind spun as he put two and two together... the snake had to be talking about the Malefic Viper. It did confuse him a bit, though.

The snake didn’t have any Blessing as far as Jake could tell, and he couldn’t see any connection between the C-grade and the Viper at all. Well, besides them both being highly venomous snakes. Also, why had the snake come to begin with?

One thing that did put his mind at ease was the lack of hostility. The snake had helped them and now seemed friendly and curious. Considering that was the case, Jake decided it would be wisest to be honest about what they were doing there.

“We are simply passing through and had no plans of getting into any fights, but the frog attacked us,” Jake answered truthfully.

The snake regarded Jake and then tossed Sylphie a look. “To bring a young one from such a heritage through this area is unwise.”

“We realize that now,” Jake nodded. He still had no idea why the snake was so friendly, though. At least not for the next half a second before he felt a certain snake god send down a message.

“Divine teacher coming in with a quick lesson because this isn’t really anything taught anywhere as it is considered pretty common knowledge. I got shit-all to do with this particular snake. At least not directly. Without going into a lengthy explanation, then I am in some ways connected to nearly every single

snake in existence due to how Records work, and while I may not know of this snake, it clearly knows of me simply due to its heritage. Beasts have heritages like humans do, and this one may walk one related to me. This all leads back to how we ancient beasts more or less raised the Records of our entire races and hence became known as Forefathers. So yeah, the snake can see you walk a similar Path as herself. Good luck making a new friend!”

Jake got the entire message from Villy within a few seconds as he got a better understanding of what was going on. Currently, Jake still had his scales summoned and his wings out. He didn’t look very human, and the snake potentially didn’t even think he was one.

It was a bit risky, but he wanted to dispel that illusion right away as he dismissed his scales and wings, returning to being more human. Normally you could barely see the scales, but Jake currently had quite the gnarly wound on his chest with his armor entirely tattered from absorbing the blow, revealing his upper body.

When the scales and wings disappeared, Jake felt the snake be surprised as she moved her head closer.

“Human?” she asked, perplexed.

“I apologize for any misunderstandings, but even if I am human, I too walk the Path of the Viper – your Forefather,” Jake explained to the female snake. He wanted to make it clear he was still her “kin,” so to say, as he really didn’t want the snake to turn hostile. Jake was unsure if he could escape himself and certain Carmen would be unable to unless she had some item to help her. Sylphie was also a big question mark. No, better to try the diplomatic approach for now.

Also... the snake had yet to turn antagonistic, and she even seemed disinterested in Sylphie despite clearly being aware of the hawk’s heritage.

“I was merely surprised,” the snake answered. “I sensed the blood in the river and came as I feared one of my own had been attacked, but I see now it was you. It is interesting to see a human with the blood of the Forefather... are you a descendant of some sort? No, you are a pure human... tell me, how do you walk the Path of the Forefather?”

Jake’s mind blanked for a while as he had just discovered a giant gap in knowledge. He had believed himself to be the ignorant one – in his defense, he usually was – but clearly, the snake before him was also unaware of many things considering common knowledge. She didn’t seem to have any experience with Blessings and possibly even the way humans worked with their classes, professions, and races. Which... well, it made sense she didn’t.

If he assumed the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake was a native of Earth and had only awakened true sapience in C-grade, how would she have learned? Jake did know that when an animal would awaken, sapience was deeply related to their intelligence before. Reptiles tended to need C-grade at the very least, while some smarter animals would awaken it far earlier. Hawkie had already been damn smart at E-grade, and Sylphie had been a smart little bugger from birth. He also knew beasts had inherent knowledge based on their Heritages. This was likely how the snake even knew of the Viper, but that knowledge hadn’t covered this it seemed.

“Are you familiar with the concept of Legacies and Blessings?” Jake asked the snake.

The snake looked at him a bit with her deep red eyes before answering. “Legacies... yes. Heritages and Legacies are closely related, correct? I have heard of Blessings, but I am uncertain of its effects. A competitor of mine speaks of possessing a Blessing, so I assume it is beneficial?”

“They are, but they also come with some expectations. Tell me, what do you know of your Forefather?” Jake asked, wanting to make sure they weren’t speaking past each other.

“An ancient snake who rose to unrivaled power and sent echoes throughout existence as he embraced eternity. I am not certain what more you expect me to know?” the snake asked, and Jake could sense a bit of annoyance but also expectation.

Jake just smiled as he manipulated his Shroud of the Primordial. His Blessing that was otherwise suppressed to the level of a Lesser Blessing flared as it grew to that of his True Blessing. He had a hunch that proved true as the snake recoiled a bit as she stared.

“What are you?” she asked with fright but also an even stronger sense of curiosity.

“Gods have the ability to give out Blessings to those they want, creating a bond between themselves and the blessed individual. This usually just resolves in the blessed one getting access to the Path related to the god, and the gods themselves gaining a presence among mortals as well as some other benefits I am not entirely clear on,” Jake began as he explained. “In my case, I am very closely related to the god that blessed me. Said god naturally being the Malefic Viper, also known as your Forefather.”

The snake seemed to take a moment as she absorbed the knowledge, giving Carmen time to also chip in. She had been hanging back and had clearly been on guard in case things went south. In fact, Jake saw now that she was holding some golden medallion of sorts behind her back even as she spoke.

“What Jake said is true. Gods bless all kinds of creatures and races, and Jake and the Viper just happened to be highly compatible, so the Malefic One made Jake his Chosen. Ah, a Chosen is like a prophet or something and is the highest level of Blessing possible, more or less making Jake the most important mortal in existence from the viewpoint of the Viper,” Carmen explained. Perhaps overexplained.

Jake could feel her nervousness. He understood why, as the C-grade was far above what any of them could handle. Even Sylphie was hiding away. In her anxiety, she had just opened the floodgates and had spoken, wanting Jake to look as good as possible without really thinking much.

For the first time, Jake felt a tinge of hostility from the snake.

“Most important? A human?” the snake hissed as she raised her head a bit. “A D-grade human being deemed more important than any other snake-kin in existence? I only came here out of curiosity, not to be made a fool of.”

Carmen froze as she. “I just meant that-”

“Hey!” Jake interrupted Carmen as he stared up at the snake. “Is that really so hard to believe?”

The snake sneered once more as she stared him down. “The Forefather would never view a human as more worthy than any of his kin. On account of you carrying some part of his Legacy, I will let you go, but don’t believe I-”

“Are you calling me a liar?” Jake interrupted the C-grade, getting a frightened look from Carmen, who had just begun to look relieved after the snake said it would let them go.

Jake released his own presence as he stood in opposition to the snake. She glared at him as she subconsciously retracted her head a bit in front of his Bloodline-powered aura. However, he wasn’t done yet.

“Villy. Beam me a Blessing.”

“Jake, I can’t just go around casually giving out Blessings to any random creature you meet,” Villy promptly answered. Jake had known the god had looked on with interest, and now it was time to make himself useful.

“Yes you can,” Jake shot back.

“True. Alright, I guess this little one isn’t so bad.”

“Get your head down here,” Jake commanded. “You did help us, so I guess some kind of compensation is only right.”

“What are you planning?” the snake sneered as she showed her fangs. Jake felt the venom within them and got even more sure that he would probably be in for a very bad time if any of that entered his body or even touched his skin.

“Repaying the favor and setting the record straight. Why, are you afraid some measly D-grade human can harm you?” Jake taunted the snake. He believed he had read her right, and he turned out to be correct as she reluctantly lowered her head, her curiosity winning out over her cautiousness.

Jake placed his hand on her snout as his hand glowed green. He had asked Villy about giving the Blessing before, but he vaguely felt that he didn’t need to when he began infusing his energy. Need to ask, that is. He felt a connection be formed and his ability to give a Blessing without Villy’s consent or input. He

could only give a low-level Blessing, but it opened his possibilities and implications that Jake wasn't quite sure what to think of.

He didn't need to use this new discovery this time as he felt Villy bless the snake by using him as the conduit. A pulse of power went through his hand and entered the snake, and he saw the crimson eyes flash dark green for a moment as the snake froze and just looked dumbstruck.

A second turned to five as Jake just stood there with his hand on the snake. None of them moved, and only a good six or seven seconds after it turned awkward, the snake finally reacted as she retracted her head in a sudden yank.

The more than thirty-meter long C-grade snake just looked down at Jake as she swayed slightly, and Jake saw what he could only interpret as an embarrassed blush as she spoke:

"Please don't be mad..."

Meira went through the library as she searched for a specific book she had been asked to find. Well, she needed to find a book with a topic she had been asked about. She was sure she had seen it before, she just wasn't entirely clear on the name, but she had skimmed its description briefly a few months ago.

As she was looking for the book, she saw one of the tables in the library and the books that lay scattered all over it. She hadn't touched it because it had been left like that by her Master. He was a bit messy, but she remembered hearing a teacher of her explain how some people were able to comprehend chaos and didn't need order. Perhaps her Master was the same and simply didn't need to put things in boxes and organize them in order to remember things.

Meira finally located the book she was looking for and checked the index. She soon enough found the section she had been thinking of and quickly went towards the entrance hall again, where she activated the gate. She walked through it and appeared inside a small study where a group of three were already waiting for her.

“Took your time,” Nella said once she finally saw Meira.

“Apologies, it took longer to find than expected,” Meira apologized as she handed over the book.

“Don’t make dallying a habit, or your sponsor might drop you,” Nella scoffed as she took the book and opened it.

“Chapter eight,” Meira added, getting an annoyed scowl. She didn’t mind; it was normal. Nella was a true member of the Order after all, along with the two others.

“Don’t be so hard on her,” Izil commented. Meira liked Izil. She was even nicer than the others. It was probably because they were both elves, though Meira naturally couldn’t compare to a student hailing from the Altmar Empire.

“Hey, little elf, got any Whispersnite Fruits left?” Utmal, the final member of their group, asked. She was the child of a dwarf and an ogre and identified as a half-ogre. This made her about the size of a regular human or elf, even if she had a very powerful constitution.

“I already began the incubation experiment with half and planned on using the rest in case it fail-“

“Wait, I’m confused,” Utmal interrupted. “Did I ask? I don’t care, just don’t fail and give me yours. I ain’t spending Credits on more than what we were given.”

Meira was a bit uncomfortable but agreed nevertheless as she summoned the three uncommon rarity fruits and gave them to Utmal, who swept them up while shaking her head and muttering something about Meira being slow. She was slow sometimes, so that made sense.

“Shouldn’t have rushed into the experiment and ruined your own fruits,” Izil commented.

“Now, let’s not fight,” Nella stopped the two before they began bickering. Meira was glad she did as she didn’t like it when the two got into fights, especially not when it was related to Meira herself.

Nella was the leader of their group and the one with the greatest background. She was also the sole scalekin of their group and had two B-grade parents. She had been born at D-grade but still needed to study to build up her foundation and would likely reach C-grade within not that long simply by growing fully up. It still took half a century to grow to be a fully-fledged C-grade, but at least she wouldn’t need to do anything besides just reaching the threshold and doing the Evolution Awakening.

She had a good status, and Meira wanted to be sure to get on her good side. Izil was the one with the second-greatest background as she came from the Altmar empire. Meira didn’t know who her parents were or anything as she didn’t talk about it like Nella did, but she had to have a good status if she had come to the order, right? In any case, she couldn’t offend them and make trouble for her Master.

“Meira, you should make your sponsor give you some more Academy Credits to pay for the next level of this course,” Nella suddenly added.

Meira was a bit meek as she answered. "I have not been given permission to use the credits for anyone but myself."

"I am sure you can figure something out," Nella smiled. "If not, just ask for some actual Credits or contribution points and treat us to something nice to compensate, alright?"

"That would be hard..." Meira said as she tried to explain herself without revealing anything about her Master. She already felt a bit bad about lying about having a sponsor, but technically her Master was a sponsor, so it wasn't really a lie, right?

"Oh, come on," Utmal sneered. "Just spread your legs a bit wider, and I am sure your sponsor or whatever will gladly reward his little who-"

"Utmal!" Izil butted in.

"Fine," the half-ogre said as she raised her hands and continued ignoring Meira.

Meira threw Izil a thankful glance but just got a helpless look and a shake of the other elf's head in return. Meira wasn't sure how to respond to that... but at least they weren't fighting anymore, and for the next half an hour, no one really said anything bad. In fact, they didn't even talk about or with Meira at all. Meira knew that the situation was a bit strained, but she would keep doing her best, and she was sure she wouldn't give her Master trouble when he returned. She just hoped she was doing okay in the meanwhile.

This was her first time making friends, after all.

Chapter 459 - Port City Changlun

Carmen knew she had messed up when she accidentally spilled a bit too much to the snake and ended up offending it. She was ready to use the talisman she had prepared to hopefully temporarily distract the snake enough for them to make an escape, but she was relieved when the snake said it would still let them go.

And then Jake decided to piss off the C-grade even more by acting all offended himself. She nearly wanted to smack him over the head and drag him away while apologizing, but a few moments later, she could only stand there dumbstruck.

She knew people who had high-level Blessings or a class or a profession related to their Patron could give Blessings with the help of their gods, but this usually only happened after a long process. Not just casually when Jake decided to one-up the snake by proving himself by giving it one.

The situation after that only made it worse. Carmen still didn't get at all how they had gotten to where they were currently.

Jake, Sylphie, and Carmen were sitting on a small wooden barge as a large brown snake that had to be well over a hundred meters long dragged it across the Grand Mangrove River. Now, this would usually be hard due to all the roots and trees and whatnot, but the snake got around all this by just fucking bulldozing through and creating a path.

How did it do this, you ask? By being another god damn C-grade. After Jake had given the snake the Blessing, the white Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake seemed to have an entire shift in personality and began acting all shy and careful. The damn snake had then nervously asked them if they wanted an escort and transport through the rest of the river, which Jake had accepted.

The C-grade had then somehow summoned not just one but five god damn C-grade snakes, leading to their current situation where they sat on a barge constructed by a C-grade snake able to manipulate wood while being escorted by a total of six C-grades.

But this wasn't even the worst part...

"Are you sure?" the snake asked nervously as she swam alongside the barge.

"You already apologized enough, and this is more than enough to repay the misunderstanding," Jake once more tried to assure the C-grade. He had to admit that he hadn't expected what was currently happening to take place. It turned out the Alabaster Crimsoneye Snake wasn't a sole operator but had a small crowd of C-grade snakes following her around – likely the kin she talked about earlier.

"But–"

"I said it's fine," Jake repeated as he tried to calm down the snake. "I was the one returning the favor for the save from the frog."

"Okay..."

Jake had made quite a few miscalculations. He had thought the C-grade Alabaster snake had to be some kind of old entity and probably at least have the age of someone, well, adult, but it appeared he had been a bit off the mark. The snake had just been acting all mature before, and only now did Jake realize he was dealing with an overgrown teenage C-grade snake.

She had found and consumed a natural treasure that had allowed her to rapidly grow and, at the same time, accepted a quest of sorts. A quest that clarified a lot of things when she finally described the details of it. Jake had known these special natural treasures had appeared on Earth, allowing beasts rapid growth, Mystie having found the Mystbone, a far less potent special natural treasure.

These more special natural treasures also came with limitations. It had allowed some of the creatures of the Grand Mangrove River to reach C-grade but at the cost of limiting them to the river and ocean beyond. This limitation was only temporary, and she didn't know when it would end. All she knew was that the natural treasure she had consumed was still being digested, and if she left the restricted area, it would begin acting up, and if she was outside it too long, the treasure could potentially end up killing her.

This explained why no C-grades had attacked any cities or caused any true trouble so far. Jake knew the system had restricted them, but only now did he know the details. This was perhaps also part of the reason why the Termite King had not pursued Jake more than it had – it had gone beyond its restricted zone.

"Excuse me again?" the snake asked Jake after only giving him roughly a minute of silence.

"Yes?" Jake asked. He really didn't wanna be mean to the snake... it felt like talking to a teenager talking to her favorite pop idol.

"Is there, like, anything I can do to help? Even if I am a bit restricted, I can maybe sneak out and-"

“No. Just no. Focus on yourself. Remember, the Path of the Malefic One is about embracing freedom and striving for more power through your own Path. Rather than thinking about how you can help me, think about how you can help yourself and gain more power. Then, when the restrictions lift, you will be able to expand your horizons even more. By then, you can decide for yourself what you want to do in an open multiverse of possibilities. And the more power you have, the more possibilities,” Jake explained.

“Actually acting like my Chosen for once,” Villy couldn’t help himself.

“Hey, this is as much my philosophy as it is yours,” Jake countered.

“I had it first and called dibs before your universe was even born,” Villy joked back.

Jake just smiled a bit at their brief exchange as the Alabaster snake seemed to have gotten his message.

“Okay, I will keep doing my best and improving,” she said with conviction.

At least he thought she got it, but she seemed a bit... too determined? Either way, it wasn’t bad to want to get stronger.

Their party kept traveling through the Grand Mangrove River as the snake did ask some more things related to the Malefic Viper, and Jake also knew the other snakes were listening in with interest. He hadn’t spoken directly to any of them as the Alabaster snake had said they weren’t that good at speech yet. Jake was pretty sure they were just shy, though. For every second he spent with them, he became more and more assured they were just a bunch of C-grade teenagers with all the teenage angst. At least socially. When it came to their abilities as beasts?

They ran into two C-grades when they passed the midway point of the river, which allowed Jake to see two birds more than twenty meters tall getting ripped apart by four C-grade snakes, their barge-dragger, and the Alabaster snake hanging back. The Alabaster snake explained how they didn't really spend much time at the surface due to most stuff being weak outside of certain areas.

Besides that, nothing bothered them as the rest of their trip through the danger zone was a breeze. It turns out that being escorted by a group of C-grades, including a mid-tier C-grade considered one of the most powerful in the entire Grand Mangrove River, meant not many beasts dared make a move.

When they reached the final parts of the river, the Alabaster snake had them all stop as she looked at Jake with a bit of regret. "We can't go much beyond here without leaving the restricted area... I can go a bit further, but--"

"You have done enough," Jake said as he smiled at her. "Thank you for the assistance once more."

"Ah, uhm, my pleasure!" the snake said, embarrassed. Jake knew she still felt bad about questioning his identity and all that, even if Jake was long past it.

The other snakes also all bowed their heads as they seemed almost scared of Jake. Even the one who had been dragging their barge using vines bowed. It hadn't looked back at him even once throughout their entire journey and even now had its head halfway hidden underwater. This made it look a bit silly when it tried to bow gracefully like its brethren.

Jake smiled at them all once more as he spoke a final farewell before heading off with Sylphie and Carmen, with Sylphie giving them a “ree!” in thanks too. Carmen was a bit quiet but did nod in their direction as they took off.

They had been dropped off at the outskirts of the Grand Mangrove River, and it only took them twenty minutes to reach shore once more, exiting the danger zone altogether.

Only when they were out of the mangrove did Carmen speak. “That was... something.”

“Hey, it went pretty well, and we got out of the mangrove ahead of schedule,” Jake said jokingly.

“We nearly got killed by a C-tier snake,” Carmen shot back.

“Nah, we were never in danger. She was a real softie, that one,” Jake said dismissively.

“The first thing the snake did was to kill something when we met.”

“Details, details,” Jake jokingly said. “In all seriousness, yeah, it got a bit risky. I think we should avoid any danger zones. At least ones with unfavorable environments.”

“Agreed,” Carmen said. “Let’s reach the port city already?”

“Let us,” Jake said as they took off once more and traveled towards the port city of Changlun.

On the way, Jake kept the Prima fragment close and tried to scan for any energies but found nothing. Only a bit over a day later did they reach Changlun, and Jake had to admit, he had underestimated the place.

Jake and Carmen stopped atop a hill overlooking the plains leading up to the city, and both just stared a bit. In front of them was plenty of farmland with large crystal pillars spread throughout for kilometers leading up to the city itself.

The city had a wall more than twenty meters tall surrounding it, and from the looks of it, this wall even extended into the ocean, defending them from any maritime threats. When Jake had first read about Changlun, he thought it was a small place, but seeing it in person made it clear this was no minor settlement. There had to be at least hundreds of thousands living there.

“Damn,” Carmen said. “This is quite something.”

Jake nodded as he considered the placement of the city a bit more deeply. Changlun was quite an isolated city. To one side, it had the Grand Mangrove River that cut it off from everything else, with the river itself leading into the ocean. Due to the layout of the shoreline, there wasn’t even that much land area to the other side. It was like Changlun was placed in its own little cut-off plain.

“It looks like it goes on forever,” Carmen continued. Jake was confused for a moment before he realized. She wasn’t speaking of the city but what lay beyond it. The vast ocean.

“Yeah,” Jake nodded once more. With his Perception, he could see all the way to when the water fell below the horizon with not a single thing in between. It just kept going for thousands upon thousands of kilometers. The oceans covered around seventy percent of pre-system Earth’s surface, and he had no reason to believe this had changed. With how big Earth was now... it was hard to imagine just how humongous the body of water truly was.

Much less to imagine the creatures dwelling within. The Alabaster snake had said that the oceans were entirely open to all C-grades, and it made sense. There were no enlightened species to protect, making the open oceans a true hunting ground for all. There had to be so many C-grades dwelling deep beneath. Heck, he felt like there were even C-grades pretty close to the shoreline. They still seemed to keep a safe distance, though, probably due to the aforementioned restrictions.

“Ree?” Sylphie asked.

“Yeah,” Jake repeated.

“Ree, ree?” Sylphie continued.

“There was a teleporter in Changlun, right?” Jake asked Carmen to confirm Sylphie’s question.

Carmen looked a bit zoned out before finally answering: “Uh, yeah. There should be. Just two jumps, and we should make it to the other continent. We need to stop by an island about halfway before teleporting all the way due to the distance.”

Jake nodded. He was aware of many of the intricacies with long-range teleportation gates and knew that even with the favorable conditions offered by the ocean, a mid-way point was probably for the best. In

the same way that a barrier like the Grand Mangrove River could disrupt teleportation, then a path without any obstructions – such as over an ocean – would offer no issues and make the process far more manageable.

“Let’s head in,” Jake finally said after they had stood there for a good while. They barely managed to get down the hill before Jake sensed someone approaching. A second later, he felt several gazes land upon them, making it clear they had triggered some kind of security measure. Jake was surprised he hadn’t detected it, but then again, he was certain there were plenty of ways to make trip alarms he didn’t know about.

“Incoming,” he said casually, getting a nod from Carmen.

Jake spotted them a few moments later as three cloaked figures approached. The one at the front was a bearded middle-aged man wielding a bow, instantly making Jake think he couldn’t be that bad of a guy. He also had a decent level.

[Human – lvl 142]

The man stopped together with his two companions a good hundred meters away as he regarded them. “Lord Thayne and miss Carmen, I assume?”

“That would be correct,” Jake confirmed, not really that surprised they knew they were coming. Their going wasn’t a secret, and Jake knew both people from Valhal and Haven had been in talks with them about when the teleporter was up and running.

“Aight. Just one thing, the boss said he wanted to invite you for a visit before you head off,” the man said.

Jake thought it would only be polite as he agreed, and Carmen didn’t care either. There was just one thing. “Before that, can you point us in the direction of a hotel or something? I need a damn shower after spending days within a damn mangrove.”

“Aye, just follow me back, and I can show you some of the fancier places,” the man nodded.

Jake and Carmen followed the man as he led them through the plains and the farmland as they went towards the city, getting a brief history lesson on the way.

“Changlun was founded by a party of five from the Tutorial. We began recruiting everyone interested nearby while fortifying the city. Ah, why build so close to the ocean? Because while that big puddle is a bit dangerous, it is also filled with good stuff. Parts of powerful beasts sometimes wash up on the beach, natural treasures are plenty in the coral reef just a few hundred meters out, and the ocean is also like a big infinite mana battery able to power all the stuff the crafters need,” the man explained.

That were just the major points, but it was clear Changlun was not made without thought. After they entered, they saw the well-paved roads, clean streets, and modern-looking buildings. It did look a bit industrial, but otherwise, everything looked nice. The main building material was a kind of white limestone bricks, making the city have an interesting color scheme.

They were led into a hotel, where they quickly booked rooms and got washed up. They naturally got separate rooms, and Jake had fun playing with Sylphie in a bathtub as the little featherball loved splashing him. He did toss her out as he showered, though, as it wasn’t proper for a young lady to be present.

After that, he met up and had some food with Carmen before they headed back to the hotel again and decided to have a good rest while arranging for the archer to meet them the next day. Jake and Carmen had agreed on getting a good rest before heading to the other continent as they settled in, and for the first time in a while, Jake got a good night's sleep with a bundled-up bird lying on his stomach.

Chapter 460 - Crossing The Great Pond

Jake woke up the next morning to a bird nipping at his hair. Sylphie clearly hadn't been able to sleep as long as he had – assuming she had slept at all – and had gotten bored. Shaking his head to get her off by scooping her up as she put on a fake struggle.

"You're a little bully, aren't you?" Jake teased with a smile as she looked up at him.

"Ree!" she answered defiantly.

"Excuses," he chuckled as he let her go. She flew a few rounds around the room as Jake used his spatial storage to get on all his armor. Just in time for Sylphie to finish her morning exercise and landed on his shoulder. Apparently, she had decided that today was not a bird-on-head day.

Being up and about, Jake knocked on the wall to Carmen's room, quickly getting a knock in return. They had no plans of staying in Changlun more than that single night and promptly headed out to meet this boss their escort mentioned. Jake was a bit interested as the presence of a boss contradicted the narrative of a party of five founding the city.

However, as Jake and Carmen met up with the escort and went toward the waterfront, Jake began to understand. He and Carmen were led into a pretty well-sealed-off room where half of it was water, with an underground connection leading straight into the ocean.

“Seems like we will be meeting more C-grades,” Jake chuckled, getting a surprised look from both Carmen and their escort. The escort due to Jake figuring it out and Carmen due to, well, surprise. The archer, knowing the gig was up, said his farewell as he headed out.

The surface of the water within the sealed-off bunker suddenly churned as Jake saw a figure rise from it. A humanoid form of pure water soon took shape as Jake used Identify but got nothing in return. This was just a summon of sorts, or perhaps remote manipulation.

“I welcome you, Malefic’s Chosen and warrior of Valhal,” the creature that Jake assumed to be an elemental said.

“Hello there,” Jake just said, wondering what the presumed elemental wanted.

Carmen just waved, equally restrained. The amount of mana he felt from the apparition wasn’t extreme, but it did carry the faint aura of a C-grade. It only seemed to be early-tier, though, not quite matching up to the Alabaster snake or even the Termite King.

“I apologize if I disturbed your travel plans, but I believed it would be a waste to not at the very least make your acquaintances,” the elemental said. The more the elemental spoke, the more Jake became certain it wasn’t any usual elemental, primarily due to its level of intelligence.

Elementals were notoriously stupid, and even if they awakened some sapience, they tended to be a bit on the childish side, often having the mental age of a child at most. Not in the same vein as Stormild, who just had a childish nature, but more like Sylphie and her general naivety due to her genuinely young age.

So, if an elemental displayed high levels of intelligence, it often stemmed from it either being a powerful variant or related to an affinity that naturally lent itself to high intellect. Assuming this was a water elemental of some kind, Jake assumed it was the previous option.

"It's all good," Jake just answered the elemental. They didn't really get to say anything more as Jake felt six people enter the bunker through his sphere. It was the archer from before walking with five other men. For a second, Jake wondered if this was some poorly planned ambush, but he didn't feel any sense of danger coming from them, and they clearly didn't even try to hide their approach.

Carmen and Sylphie also noticed them as the three turned around. The five men all looked to be in their late thirties to early forties, with the one in the middle wearing a white robe. Jake vaguely felt the space affinity float around the man, making it clear he was a space mage like Neil. His level was also pretty good.

[Human – lvl 151]

The four with him were also all between 145 and 150. It didn't take a genius to guess this was the party of five that had founded the city of Changlun.

"I believe it is only proper we also greet the Chosen and the warrior of Valhal," the space mage said as he bowed. The others mimicked the motion as Jake nodded in acknowledgment. "I am sure you have questions about why we are working with a C-grade monster, but I assure you it is nothing malicious."

"No, I really don't," Jake just shrugged to the group's surprise. "But let me guess, the elemental helps protect the city and give you natural treasures and materials from the ocean, and in turn, you assist the elemental through a variety of means. Probably things such as giving land-bound treasures the elemental can't get due to the restrictions C-grades are currently imposed with."

In fact, he would argue this fit pretty well with the entire Unusual Unions theme from the World Congress. Of course, to Jake, this wasn't really unusual but just logical. Why would humans and monsters not work together when it was mutually beneficial?

His deduction also seemed to prove correct as the elemental responded. "It appears we underestimated the insight of the Chosen. I apologize for our hubris, we merely wished to avoid any misunderstandings, and I would personally prefer to not get a mark on my back but retain my and my follower's friendly relations with humanity."

"Ah, no worries," Jake just dismissed it. "You just keep doing you, and as long as you don't act like an asshole, I don't see why we would have trouble. Well, some humans might dislike you, but I am sure you and your pals can handle that."

"I can't really speak for all of Valhal, but we wouldn't just begin hunting down an ally of an ally without reason," Carmen added.

"I thank the Chosen and the warrior for their honesty," the elemental said. "In that case, I shall not delay your travels any longer. Godspeed."

With those words, the summoned figure of water was dispelled as the water collapsed and became one with the rest of the ocean once more. Jake wasn't sure if this entire conversation had been necessary, but he assumed the elemental was just the careful sort.

"Lord Thayne?" the space mage said. "I just want to clarify once more that we are allies with the elementals, and my companion here even shares a Patron god. I believe that such an alliance can bring

great benefits to humanity and Earth in the future. Even if we are not directly aligned with Haven or the Order of the Malefic Viper, we have no desire to stand in your opposition. No, we wish to try and remain neutral and friendly with all, no matter what happens.”

“I said it is fine,” Jake said. He hadn’t noticed the shared god, but now that he scanned a bit, he saw one of the men gave off a faint aura similar to the elemental. It didn’t have to mean they shared a Patron, just that they shared some parts of the same Legacy.

Carmen also seemed to honestly not give a shit. They had never planned to make this into any kind of diplomatic mission, so this entire thing was just a sidetrack. This did turn the situation a bit awkward as Jake broke the silence.

“You have made a nice city,” Jake said, doing the most cliché thing you can when visiting someone – complimenting their home.

“Thanks,” the space mage said with a smile. “Now, let me lead you to the teleportation chamber.”

They happily accepted as the space mage led them through the city while making small talk. This particular teleportation chamber was placed underground and quite far toward the sea. The mage explained it was for safety reasons and because they used the powerful mana of the ocean to power the teleportation. In fact, the type of space magic deployed by the mage wasn’t the same branch of space magic as Neil’s.

No, the City Lord of Changlun somehow mixed water and space magic. This led to travel over water being far faster and easier, even potentially allowing underwater cities with working teleportation gates. He even said it would be easier for him to teleport to an underwater settlement through water than teleporting through the air.

The island they were supposed to teleport to was roughly a hundred thousand kilometers from Chunglun, making this the longest teleport they would ever do. This was only possible due to the unique talents of the space mage to borrow the water affinity mana given off by the ocean.

Meeting this man and hearing his explanations was a reminder of the hidden talents all over Earth. He clearly had his head on right and was, without a doubt, a far more talented mage than Neil, at least from a technical standpoint.

When they got to the teleportation chamber, they saw there were only three circles active. One to the island and two leading to smaller cities inland in the other direction than the Grand Mangrove River. The man did explain that he hoped to get past the blockage that was the mangrove, but currently, it was beyond his abilities.

“Thanks for the talk, and good luck with everything,” Jake said as he, Sylphie, and Carmen stepped onto the teleportation circle.

“It was my pleasure,” the man said just before the party of three teleported away.

Jake felt his vision shift, and for a moment, he felt like he was one with the water all around him. An image of the endless ocean flashed in his mind before he suddenly found himself standing on a new teleportation circle. The teleportation had gone more smoothly than expected except for one thing.

“Why are we wet?” Carmen asked.

“Ree!” Sylphie complained as she shook her feathers to get the water off her. Jake was also surprised as they were all utterly soaked from the teleportation. As he began considering if it was a side-effect of the type of space magic used, he had it confirmed.

“I apologize for them still not having fixed the issue with the teleporter,” a female attendant said as she entered the hall they had been teleported into. She was only E-grade and didn’t seem to recognize them at all. “May I know your business on Saint Helestras? It is unusual for visitors to come outside of the travel window.”

The travel window she mentioned was something that had been established to avoid constant people coming through. It was to make administration easier, and there was an hour each day for people to use the teleporters, with it being off-limits at all other times besides special circumstances.

“We are merely traveling through and get to... what was the place called again?” Jake asked Carmen.

“Pebblerock or something,” she answered.

“Puddlerock?” the attendant asked, a bit confused.

“That one,” Carmen nodded affirmingly.

“I will still need to know your order of business and file out a visitor’s pass and register your arrival,” the attendant said apologetically. “This is all following basic protocol and for the safety of everyone.”

Jake sighed a bit inwardly as he knew this was obviously just a half-truth. If the name of this island – Saint Helestras – didn't make it clear, then this city was one established by the Holy Church. The fact that the Church was in charge of an island that was fast developing into a central travel point between the two continents was a bit concerning, but it was the kind of concern Miranda would deal with.

"No need for that," Jake just said, in no mood for some annoying screening process.

"I must insist on performing the required interviews or-"

"No," Jake once more said. "And tell the guards to stop hiding. What are they doing anyway? Trying to cosplay the Court of Shadows? Doing a real shitty job if so."

He had already felt seven people hidden within a side room behind a barrier and some fancy-ass light magic that naturally didn't work versus his Sphere of Perception. They realized hiding was useless when he called them out and exited the room with their guards high. Not that it mattered... Jake didn't even need to use Identify to know none of them were even halfway a threat.

"Comply with regulations, or we will have to take you into custody and-"

"Mate," Jake cut him off. "Rules apply only to the applicable. Now point me in the direction of the teleportation circle to Puddlerock and stop wasting my time. We will be gone before you know it."

"Sir... these rules are imposed by the United Cities Alliance, and we have to follow them or-"

“Actually, no need,” Jake cut her off again as he began walking towards a teleportation circle. They had tried to hide it, but Jake had seen them toss it a look when he mentioned Puddlerock. He knew how the teleporters worked already. As he went towards it, he felt the guard take out a token, but Jake tossed him a look as the man froze due to Gaze of the Apex Hunter.

“I wouldn’t,” Jake said as he and the others stepped on the platform and activated it. To the bewildered looks of those present, they were whisked away as finally, the group of three made it to the other continent across the great pond.

The teleportation was as smooth as the last one as they appeared even more drenched IN seawater within the port city known as Puddlerock. A downright terrible name, but what could be expected of a city part of the United Cities Alliance? Even Jake didn’t like the name and found it too damn generic, and that was coming from a guy naming a hawk Hawkie and his own city Haven.

Jake and Carmen were once more approached by people the moment they appeared. A man and woman both wearing what looked like police uniforms very reminiscent of what actual officers wore pre-system.

“May I see your travel passes?” the man asked.

“Ain’t got any,” Jake just said as he and Carmen began walking out of the teleportation building. Jake saw this one was also placed relatively isolated and had plenty of barriers defending it.

“Sir, I need you to cooperate,” the female officer said.

"Never been good at that one," Jake shook his head as he turned to them. "Fine, I guess we do need some directions. Carmen, where to next?"

"Well, there should be a guy called Clinton who used to travel with the people we are tracking," she answered.

"Clinton. Got it," Jake nodded as he turned to the officers. "You guys love your administrative stuff, so where can we go look up where this guy lives?"

The two just stood there frozen, both incredibly tense due to the hawk sitting on Jake's shoulder, menacingly staring the two poor officers down. Luckily for them, they didn't need to do anything as Jake felt a new presence approach rapidly.

The man teleported into the room as he appeared right between the two officers with a bright smile on his lips. "Welcome to Puddlerock! Excuse the silly name; I wasn't the one who decided on it. A pleasure to meet all three of you."

The young man wore silver armor and had two blades strapped to his back. He smiled confidently as he stood there, and Jake could see why. He was level 157 and didn't look like a chump at all. Moreover, Jake was certain the guy was blessed by some god. It was just a feeling, but a feeling was good enough for Jake.

"Hi there. I take it you got some clout in this city?" Jake asked the man.

"Considering my old man runs the place, yeah," he answered as he looked at the officers. "Shouldn't you two be leaving or at least show some respect? We are in the presence of quite the personages."

The officers looked frightened as they bowed before nearly running out of the teleportation hall. By now, a few more people had also appeared in the lobby that housed over a dozen teleportation gates. "Go somewhere easier to talk?" the silver-armored young man asked.

"Sure," Jake agreed as they headed off towards some public office. Jake and Carmen got a quick look at the city but had little interest as they were focused on the task at hand: tracking down Carmen's family.

And probably a few more Primas along the way. Just for good measure.