

THE PRIMAL HUNTER

Chapter 141: Mana Bolt

Jake sat on a small cloud away from the large continent. The bird perched in a tree beside him. He was breathing heavily still from his nearly empty pool of mana and low stamina. Even his health was only at around half.

The cloud elemental was far harder to deal with than he had predicted. Luckily the hawk did wonders against it. Its blades of wind cut off parts of the cloud elemental, with another blast of wind dispersing the cut-off part into nothing.

Even then, it took the two of them nearly half an hour before the elemental became unable to regenerate parts of its body and finally died. Or dispersed... or whatever elementals do.

Jake felt pretty damn fucking useless after the long fight. All he could really do was toss weak bolts of dark mana at the elemental to distract it while dodging its blows. If the elemental hadn't been so stupid as to focus on him over the hawk, he wasn't even sure they would have won.

He did throw a mana potion to the hawk during the fight, so he had made some kind of contribution. The hawk didn't even seem very condescending after the battle. Maybe surprised at Jake's many means to stay alive.

It made him reflect on the massive skill disparity between beasts and humans once more. Even the dungeon bosses he fought never had more than a handful of skills he was aware of. Humans, on the other hand, had so many.

Granted, many skills of beasts you never discovered. So maybe beasts just had a lot more passive skills or skills that buffed other parts of them. Or perhaps they just had fewer skills and more stats. Maybe they were slightly inferior in the skill department by the system's design. Who knows?

Probably Villy. Gotta ask him next time. Or maybe he could just ask out loud, and the scaly god would hear him. He had been spying on him at random times these days, after all. At least he had been nice enough not to have any more viewing parties.

"Hawkie, let's just stick to hunting birds and leave those damn clouds alone for now, yeah?" he asked, looking up at the bird.

He was pretty sure it understood him as it blinked its eyes a few times in a row in response. At least he believed it understood as it was clearly brilliant. The only question was if it understood him due to its intelligence or if the translation skill he got worked with birds. Though he doubted it as he had yet to hear anything speak that wasn't humanoid.

As for why he called it Hawkie... well, he just got tired of thinking of it as 'the hawk,' or when he occasionally talked to it, he wanted to give it some kind of name. Granted, Hawkie was a shitty name, but he had never claimed to be good at naming things.

Closing his eyes while sitting and resting on the cloud, he entered meditation. But this time, he didn't focus on pure recovery or summoned his usual strings of mana, but instead, he cupped his hands in front of him.

Despite his plan to avoid the elementals, it didn't mean that he was satisfied with the situation. He wanted to create a tool to fight them.

He had Sagacity of the Malefic Viper that helped him. He had been practicing controlling and using mana continuously ever since he got the ability to sense it. Yet, he found himself so disappointingly useless when he had to use it in combat.

Looking back, he was beginning to regret not just picking up the Dark Bolt skill at some point. Maybe instead of the still useless Hunter's Tracking skill. Not because of the Dark Bolt itself, but because of what he could potentially learn from it.

Something was missing from his mana attacks. He knew that his spells had to be more powerful even without a skill being used. He saw the many birds fire off basic-looking bolts of mana to kill the elementals, and he, for the life of him, didn't understand what separated his from theirs.

The amount of mana packed within the bolts wasn't the issue. Even when Jake used more, it barely did anything. When he made the mana into dark-affinity, it at least did something, if still incredibly ineffective.

Though he did have one way of attacking with pure mana. The enchantment on his gloves fired off a melee blast of mana. But even that was useless with his current predicament. What he did to use that was just to pour mana into the gloves, and it would fire out the mana in a blast of kinetic energy.

Touch of the Malefic Viper didn't serve to help him either. He understood how that skill worked, and it was clearly fundamentally different. It didn't use mana to attack but to fuel the poison it released upon touch.

He did briefly consider if he could somehow pour the effects of Touch of the Malefic Viper into a ball of mana and throw it, which is when he learned how futile that thought was. Unless the skill changed entirely, that would never work.

The skill required touch, as the name suggested. For a connection to form between the two entities involved - him, the poisoner, and his target, the poisoned. Not that he knew how to in any way replicate the effects of the skill without actually using it. He was fully aware of how far above his understanding it was, being a part of the Malefic Viper's legacy and all.

Had he gone wrong in his entire approach to manipulating mana? So far, he had focused on making those strings. Practiced lifting stones and other objects through mana and otherwise just used it to move things or attach himself to something.

He remembered how he had attached himself to a ceiling during the Forgotten Sewers dungeon. How he could cover his feet in mana to walk on water. He was proud of those achievements, but was his philosophy behind doing so flawed in some conceptual way?

Doubt only kept spreading in his mind as he sat in meditation. The effect of increased concentration from the skill upgrade was doing as much harm as good. If he was wrong in his approach to using mana, what about his way of using stamina? His alchemy?

Was there anything he could be genuinely sure of? He knew that even when the system gave a skill, it didn't necessarily mean one was on the right track. When he failed and exploded his own arm by overloading it with stamina, he was rewarded with a skill choice - one that was just terrible.

He quickly tried to quench his doubt concerning alchemy first. Gods had observed him doing it, and he had gotten a strong profession-upgrade. He could make powerful potions and had acquired so many powerful skills. Even if his path in that regard was suboptimal, it was still good enough.

Borrowing from the confidence in his alchemy, he thought about all the methods he used mana there. Brewing potions and concocting poisons were reliant on the skills associated with those actions. He wasn't even sure if it was possible to do either without the skills. If it was, that too was way beyond his paygrade.

Touch of the Malefic Viper he had already gone over.

Sagacity of the Malefic Viper helped him understand some things better, but it didn't come with any knowledge or sudden enlightenment on how to use mana offensively. It would help him, but in the end, it was just a supplementary tool.

Blood of the Malefic Viper was out too. It transformed his blood to do harm, but everything that skill did was also just far too complicated. He knew it had weird interactions with the vital energy in his body, but that was just what his instincts told him.

The wings didn't really provide any hints either. Even the ability to burn the blood in the wings was entirely based on Blood of the Malefic Viper and his Alchemical Flame.

Speaking of the Flame, that too didn't really help anything. All it did was to create a transparent flame of pure mana. Jake had tested its offensive might long ago, and it was pretty much non-existent. The flame produced heat, which could be viewed as offensive, but it was a skill clearly made for crafting and not fighting.

Like the difference between heat in a furnace and an explosion, it was far too stable to be viewed as any kind of attack.

Then there was Palate of the Malefic Viper. It was a skill associated with knowledge of alchemical ingredients he consumed while also amplifying the effects of his creations on himself. He couldn't see how that could... wait.

His thoughts wandered to the Trial of Myriad Poisons. When he was within the vat of poisons, they invaded his body repeatedly - to the point that he struggled with the pain and staying conscious. But more importantly, he replayed his efforts to absorb the toxins.

Back then, he had sought to break down the ingredients. Rip them apart with his mana to absorb them easier. He had tapped into the natural effects of the skill and helped it make the process go faster. A process that was innately tied to that of destruction.

The mana he had used back then wasn't the same gentle type as what he formed his bolts with. If his normal mana was like a serene lake normally, this mana had been a roaring maelstrom. Both were mana in its purest form, but one was peaceful while the other sought to destroy.

Opening his eyes, he exited meditation. He stood up as he lifted his hand and formed a ball of mana. He felt its serenity. He understood exactly how stupid he had been.

Mana was peaceful by nature. Its default form one of balance. If it weren't, the world would fall apart. It dominated the atmosphere and the air around him - the many affinities not changing that at all. To put it in other words... mana didn't have any inherent intent. It simply was.

The same was true for the mana he formed. The only difference being that it carried his own signature. His own 'Jake-affinity' if one will. When he threw a bolt of mana on anyone, all it did was to impact them with a bit of foreign mana temporarily. It wasn't even a proper attack. It barely held any kinetic energy, which was only because of exactly how much condensed mana there was.

Only his dark mana had some real effect. It was not because that was a proper attack either, but because of the innate qualities of dark mana and its ability to consume other mana types.

His use had been crude and borderline useless.

In his hand, the ball of mana formed into a bolt once more. He remembered the first time he saw a mana bolt being used during the tutorial's first day. He remembered how it had exploded upon impact and left a small burn mark.

The bolt in his hand began to slowly change into a blueish color. *Had the other mana bolts ever been transparent?* he asked himself. The answer, of course, was no.

Something in his mind had just clicked. Was it truly this simple? He wasn't even sure exactly how he had made the mana in his hand change. He just tried to mimic the feeling he got when he sought to destroy and refine the poison in his body and directed his mana into the structure it had been back then.

He began pouring more mana into the blue bolt in his hand. Its color remained unchanged, but he felt its power increase, and he knew it would explode upon impact with something. As a mana bolt was supposed to.

Jake had changed the construct and the purpose of the mana in his hand. No longer was it just a ball of mana thrown together, but a weapon created with intent.

The thought of trying to mix in the dark-affinity was quickly dispelled. Jake was already reaching as he was. The bolt in his hand was turning unstable by the second as he held onto it. A constant drain on his mana to keep it from either exploding or dispersing.

Looking out into the vast cloud continent before him, he spotted another Cloud Elemental - this one only at level 47. Around half the level of the one he had fought with the hawk earlier.

Turning to it, he said to the hawk: "Hey, I am going to do this one solo. I need to test something."

The hawk just looked at him like there was something wrong with his head. Hadn't he said not long ago to leave those cloud elementals alone?

“No judging,” he chuckled as he saw its gaze - briefly reflecting on how funny it was that understanding the thoughts of Hawkie was easier than that of other humans.

Spreading his wings, he leaped off the cloud and glided down to the massive one below. Before even touching the ground, he threw the bolt he had been making in his hand - straight into the Cloud Elemental he had set his sights on earlier.

The bolt flew even faster than the ones he had thrown earlier. It hit the Cloud Elemental right in its chest, but this time it wasn't just harmlessly absorbed. Instead, it exploded in a blue explosion, pushing the elemental back and leaving a large hole in its cloudy body.

It quickly healed itself, but Jake wasn't discouraged. Quite the opposite. He felt a revitalized belief in his path. He had stumbled for a moment, sure, but it wasn't something he hadn't quickly fixed. It couldn't even be said he had really gone wrong. He had just been missing a piece of the puzzle.

Channeling mana into his two hands, he quickly formed two more bolts of mana - the speed confirming that his mana practice indeed hadn't been wasted at all. Throwing them both, two more explosions battered the elemental forcing it to reform its lost parts.

With a jolly smile, he kept bombarding the defenseless elemental a few more times before it became unable to heal. After the final bolt blew it up, the entire elemental dispersed, leaving only a small orb behind.

****You have slain [Cloud Elemental - lvl 47] - Experience earned****

From start to end, the elemental was unable to even move towards him. Each bolt was more potent than the one before it as he familiarized himself with forming them.

Mana practice on a lake with stones and forming strings had been useful. But nothing was better than exercise during live combat. His fighting instincts and innate desire to compete on full display as he pushed himself to continually improve.

He didn't even hesitate as he moved his gaze to get another elemental. This one being eleven levels higher than the one he had just slain.

Above, the hawk stared down at the crazed human as his hands crackled with mana, and he threw bolt after bolt at the elemental. It nearly felt bad for the poor things as they became fuel for the human's newfound power.

It recognized the bolts of mana. It knew how to use them too. A fundamental skill for any creature of the caster-archetype. Even those like itself that were only partially focused on the path of magic.

Yet his bolts were slightly different - not the first ones, mind you. But the ones he was beginning to throw now. They were changing from the basic construct to something more intricate and complicated. A rate of improvement that made the hawk doubt if this was indeed the same human that still looked like a newborn chick whenever he stupidly flapped his wings.

Chapter 142: Look at Me, I'm the Mage Now!

Power crackled in the air as three blue bolts appeared - all of them looking like small crystals as they floated above his head. He fired them towards the Cloud Elemental with a thought as it was still struggling to reform the parts of its body that were already missing.

But his bolts weren't its only problem. Just as its arm reformed and tried to counterattack, a blade of wind cut it off, and a gust dispersed the cut off arm. And right in time for another three bolts to hit it square in its chest, forcing it back even more.

Jake could only cackle at the ease of the fight. It had been going on for nearly ten minutes now, but it had been entirely one-sided. The hawk and himself worked in concert to keep the elemental suppressed and in a constant state of recovery.

Less than two minutes later, it failed to heal itself, likely having run out of mana or whatever resource it used to keep itself alive.

****You have slain [Cloud Elemental - lvl 91] - Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 85 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

Jake smiled at the level, happy to feel the sense of progression not just in his skill level but stats too. He was looking forward to his next skill selection for his class very much - his recent progress as a mage sure to be reflected.

He wasn't the only one that leveled up. Hawkie had also been blessed with a level at some point since their meeting a couple of days ago.

[Galesong Hawk - lvl 91]

"You good to keep hunting?" he asked, taking out a mana potion to chug down. The hawk glanced at him before motioning with its wing towards the now empty potion in his hand.

Not sure which one it wanted; he just took out both a stamina and a mana potion. It selected the mana potion by blowing it out of his hand and into its talons like it did every time he fed it.

"I am beginning to suspect you just keep me around as a free potion-dispenser," he laughed as he put the two now empty bottles away in his spatial storage - Hawkie neither confirming nor denying his heinous accusation.

The two of them quickly found their next target, this time not going for an elemental but a group of birds hunting one. While it wasn't very honorable to interfere in a fight in progress, Jake had come to accept it as commonplace in a place like this.

He and Hawkie had been attacked plenty of times already in the middle of their fighting. And they were even considered pretty lucky with their high levels scaring off most potential attackers - their ability to deter opportunistic beasts growing with Jake's proficiency in magic.

It hadn't even been half a day since he killed his first elemental solo with his bolts. A few hours in, he questioned himself why he even formed them in his hands. With the help of his ever-present Sphere of Perception, he could easily see all around him and better observe the mana in the air.

This also meant that he could easier form mana wherever he could 'see.' So he began forming singular bolts of mana in the air while at the same time making them in his hands. Over the course of the day, it became him only making free-flying bolts that he kept suspended above his head.

It meant that he could keep his hands free. His initial genius plan being to fire off bolts of mana while also using his bow. A plan that looked fine on paper, but in reality, proved more than a little challenging to pull off. No matter how much he tried, he couldn't focus on doing both things at once, so whenever he attempted to fire an arrow, the mana bolts would fizzle out.

He could still fire an arrow, summon and shoot bolts of mana, and then fire an arrow once more without any issue. The problem was that gathering a mana bolt still took a few seconds. And while that doesn't sound like long, he could quickly fire off several arrows in the same period. It also wouldn't exactly serve as any type of surprise attack when the enemy could clearly see the bolts form.

Which is why for now, he stuck to going full mage. Besides, he hadn't stopped working to improve his attack method even after summoning three bolts at once. He wanted to do more and do them faster. As well as a plethora of other improvements, all at the same time.

Mana bolt was a basic form based on a basic skill. An excellent starting point for sure, but it was just that: a starting point.

The only reason he stuck to the bolts, for now, was because of their simplicity. It allowed him to focus on substance over form. Focus on the nature of the mana within each bolt instead of the structure of the attack itself.

He carefully kept refining the offensive mana within to make it more effective. He wasn't sure exactly how the bolt's power was determined, but he was confident that the mana's quality mattered. Other than that, the quantity of mana used clearly played a part too. The intelligence stat also had to play a part somewhere if his guesses were correct. Which he was pretty sure they were.

So far, he had felt his bolts continuously improve - even with the same amount of mana spent for each bolt. It was due to how well he used the skill, the methodology behind the bolt. Like how he improved his ability to craft potions to make one of better quality, he could make a mana bolt of a higher quality.

The improvements had been constant so far. Jake's mind was entirely focused from start to end. The only breaks being his one-sided banter with Hawkie while consuming mana potions to keep him going.

Moving his attention back to the present, he summoned his bow for the first time since his failed attempt to use it in concert with mana bolts dozens of fights ago - their target the aforementioned group of birds.

Quickly he smeared the arrows in his own blood to poison them. The birds were fighting an elemental at a level that even Hawkie and he hadn't tried yet.

[Cloud Elemental – lvl 99]

The birds were three nearly identical ones - all of them only slightly larger than Hawkie. They looked like crows except for one minor detail: they were all on fire, and vortexes of flames spun around them as they whittled down the elemental. Their levels not to be scoffed at either.

[Flare Crow – lvl 92]

[Flare Crow – lvl 95]

[Flare Crow – lvl 94]

Jake exchanged a glance with Hawkie before he began channeling his Infused Powershot. Mark of the Ambitious Hunter already applied to the target in his sights.

He focused on the skill and the build-up of stamina and mana. He tried to think of a way to improve it but found that whatever the system helped the skill do was already better than his current comprehension of offensive mana.

Besides, the way it supported Infused Powershot was different than a mana bolt. It served more to 'buff' the bow during the attack than the attack itself. The arrow would naturally be affected during the process, hence increasing its power even further.

How he had managed to upgrade the skill while in a pinch back in his fight against the first Alpha Badger was still a mystery to him. A confluence of enlightenment, luck, and talent had formed the skill that became the cornerstone of his victory in the tutorial.

A cornerstone the unlucky Flare Crow was about to become very familiar with. Now even further enhanced by another skill in his repertoire.

The level 95 crow - chosen as it was the strongest - picked up on the incoming Galesong Hawk but didn't appear very fazed by it. That was when it suddenly felt itself freeze. It felt the gaze of an Apex Hunter pierce into its very soul.

In the middle of flight, it just began falling in the direction its momentum was already taking it. But it barely managed to be affected by gravity before an arrow soared through the land of clouds.

Jake stood surrounded by mist kicked up from when he released the arrow as it penetrated the crow. Its small size was only serving to worsen the damage. It pierced straight through its body, leaving a hole the size of an arm. Which is to say nearly half of its body had just been obliterated.

It fell down as Jake was already charging his second shot. All of the other crows were now fully aware of the danger that had just set upon them. They had been aware of the hawk but hadn't realized the real threat was the lower-level human in the background.

They were ready for the second arrow to come. But their readiness was meaningless before Gaze of the Apex Hunter. The attempt to dodge by the weakest crow thwarted as it too found an arrow embedded in its neck. The shot's power significantly weaker as Jake hadn't had time to charge it for as long. Weaker, but still lethal.

At least he thought it was lethal. What happened next forced him to reconsider that assessment, however. The first crow that he had believed dead for sure exploded in an inferno of golden flames - the flames scorching the area over a hundred meters around it.

The one hardest hit by this wasn't Jake, who stood at a safe distance, or the Hawk that had yet to make it into its range, but instead the Cloud Elemental. The other crows didn't appear affected by the flames at all.

Less than a second later, the second crow that he had shot also exploded in flames. He had thought it was some kind of suicide skill for a moment, but when he saw a figure rise out of the inferno, he understood it wasn't.

The crow was now no longer a small bird but had grown tenfold in size. Its wings were blazing like a phoenix reborn as it soared into the sky. Swiftly followed by the second crow that had undergone the same rebirth of flames.

Both were now heading towards Jake, completely ignoring both the elemental and hawk. Hawkie tried to intercept them but was instead attacked by the third crow's breath of flames, forcing it to erect a barrier of wind around itself.

He was on his own, with two giant flaming behemoths flying towards him, leaving everything in their wake scorched. The clouds below being burned by the golden flames as they lingered and spread. The fire clearly not ordinary as they even could set the clouds and Cloud Elemental on fire.

Jake wasn't fearful as he covered his entire body in dark green scales. His sense of safety immediately increasing as he raised his bow once more. No way he would make their attack easy on them.

He fired another Infused Powershot at the highest-leveled crow in the lead. Despite its body appearing to be made of pure flames, it was still flesh and blood below the inferno. The arrow penetrated into its body and went out the other side, leaving a wound behind that closed itself as quickly as it had come - the damage caused by his initial Powershot also nowhere to be seen.

Whatever the skill that caused their transformation did, it included healing their body at an incredible pace. Their size and flames both buffed to a great degree.

One more arrow was all he managed before the first crow reached him – this arrow also penetrating through the beast and leaving a wound that healed as quickly as it had come. It was as he expected.

Dismissing his bow, he pulled out his dagger and sword. The air shimmering around him as Limit Break activated at 10%, all of his stats instantly experiencing the boost. He was ready.

He felt the heat before the impact. The licks of the golden flames upon his body moments before the massive beast smashed into him beak-first, trying to impale him as he burned up. But it didn't go as the crow planned.

With a swift sidestep, he dodged the beak narrowly. Its flames seared his clothes but failed to burn them entirely. The scales beneath keeping out the heat as his entire person caught on fire.

His shortsword was cleaving a long wound along its side as it passed him, nearly dismembering one of its wings. This was also the time where he confirmed another of his suspicions.

The beast had grown in size and overall power, but its body was significantly weaker. Its toughness lowered as his attacks all did far more damage. The crow may have felt like that didn't matter due to its flames healing it frequently, but Jake knew it couldn't be sustainable.

Its mana was constantly draining - every wound taking a considerable part of its limited pool to heal. The constant consumption of mana would have likely not been an issue against most foes as its damage output was high. But to fight Jake was another story.

Barely ten seconds had passed since Jake's initial attack. The crow had been too caught up in its counterattack to notice the issues its own body was currently experiencing. Its mana drained far quicker than the damage it took warranted, and a rotten smell began spreading in its nostrils.

Rot. It was rotting on the inside, forced continuously to expend mana to heal itself. A nefarious poison had taken hold of its body, and no matter how much it tried to burn it

away, it failed over and over again. The first arrow introduced the poison into its entire body in moments, and by now, it was too late already.

With fright in its eyes, it struggled to quickly kill the winged human. Its comrade having now also arrived. The second crow had been inflicted with less poison than the first, but the effects would begin showing soon.

Perhaps they held a hope that the poison would lose its effectiveness with the death of Jake. Something he had no intention of allowing them to find out.

He, too, had noticed the poison spreading within them. Sense of the Malefic Viper informed him that while they were attempting to purge their bodies, it spread nearly as fast as they did so. Maybe they would make it if they disengaged now and focused on healing, but the thought didn't even occur to them based on their reckless attacks.

A third explosion of golden flames was seen as the third crow was forced into using it by the hawk in the background. Yet even with its transformation, it failed to land any attacks on the hawk. It tried to, but every time it even came close, the hawk flew away while continually bombarding it with blades of wind.

Both fights had turned into ones of endurance, and Jake and Hawkie were both winning. The only outlier being the Cloud Elemental that was still waving its giant arms around from the golden flames consuming its body.

Jake too burned, the heat building up. He saw even the energy his body emanated due to his consuming stamina catching on fire. The golden flames being way different than simple flames.

An explosion forced him back once more as the first crow was in full desperation mode. It consumed mana like crazy to make the inferno surrounding it larger and hotter. Upon landing on the cloud, Jake took another step backward, teleporting tens of meters out of the fire.

He quickly took out his bow once more and fired another arrow, splitting into a dozen in mid-air. Being clumped up and massively grown in size, the two crows were both hit by a handful of arrows each. Only one of them carried even more poison, but all of them exacerbated their desperation.

The two beasts retaliated, one with a breath of fire and the other a colossal fireball. Jake stepped to the side, tens of meters passed with a single footfall, as he fired another Splitting Arrow. He had no intentions of facing them in melee any longer as he had enough issues dealing with the fire still lingering on his body.

This kept up for a few minutes as the two crows desperately tried to lock him down and burn him up. He was repeatably dodging and firing an arrow here and there.

In the end, the second crow turned out to be the first to succumb to the poison. After a final attack that forced Jake to sacrifice one of his wings to block its attack, the crow died - the flames dying out with it. Less than a minute later, so fell the other crow.

At the same time, Hawkie was beginning to struggle. Without any poison, the last crow appeared to be outlasting his hawk friend. Jake saw that a few of its feathers were now burned at their tips, and he had a feeling Hawkie wouldn't like making too much contact with those flames. It also looked like both its mana and stamina were running low from the constant need to dodge and fire off attacks.

Jake came to the rescue with a fully charged Infused Powershot. Freezing it with Gaze of the Apex Hunter to make sure the blow landed where he wanted it to.

With the fight now a two versus one, the last crow died in less than half a minute. Hawkie using a skill to lock it down in a dome of wind as poisoned arrows pelted it to death.

The only remaining enemy was a Cloud Elemental at death's door. The flames of all three crows having burned it during the fight after it was already severely weakened due to the fighting before he and the hawk interfered.

It still took them a few minutes to finish it off, with Jake doing most of the damage using his mana bolts. Hawkie was taking a breather, only occasionally firing a few blades of wind here and there to keep it down.

After it all, they both took to the air and returned to the same small cloud island they had come from. Exhausted, Jake entered meditation as the hawk also closed its eyes to rest.

Chapter 143: City Lord

Meditating on the small island of clouds sat Jake with the hawk lying beside him, wings out to its side. It hadn't even bothered to perch itself on the crystal tree behind them, too exhausted to care about its dignity.

Jake had used Identify on it on their way to their little island and seen that their struggles had paid off for the bird. It had gained yet another level in only one fight.

[Galesong Hawk – lvl 92]

He, too, had gotten plenty of gains. Not counting the sheer satisfaction he earned from the first excellent fight after exiting the tutorial, of course. By looking through the notifications, he had also managed to land himself another level.

****You have slain [Flare Crow – lvl 92] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Flare Crow – lvl 95] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Flare Crow – lvl 94] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****You have slain [Cloud Elemental – lvl 99] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level****

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 86 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 78 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points****

The level was unexpected as he had just gotten one in the fight before it. Then again, he was still quite a few levels lower than the ones he fought. Even if his experience was lessened due to fighting with the hawk and the damage the crows had already done to the elemental before they interfered.

He also had to remember his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter, increasing his experience when fighting enemies above his own level. As always, he used the skill almost instinctually on any target he faced. He felt a bit bad to admit it, but upon meeting Hawkie for the first time, he had marked it.

Closing the menus, he chose to focus on recovery for now. The flames were extinguished with the death of the crows, but his body was still a mess. He'd lost more health than he had thought, and his stamina and mana reserves were also severely drained.

After waiting a while longer, he opened his eyes and drank a healing potion. He also placed a healing, stamina, and mana potion by his side for Hawkie to take. He wasn't afraid of it drinking all three at once as even beasts innately knew not to.

Meditating once more, he felt the hawk open its eyes a few minutes in and take the healing potion, as it had also clearly lost quite a few health points during the fight.

The brief respite continued for a few hours as he downed a few more potions, and Hawkie finished off all three of its brews meanwhile. Both back in near top form, he turned to the hawk with a questioning gaze.

“Ready to go again?”

It looked at him for a moment before shaking its head. Jake was confused but saw its look turn towards the ground far below them. That is when he remembered the hawk’s tendency to leave every day for a few hours.

What it did, he could only speculate on. He wanted to follow, but every time it had denied him. And he wasn’t curious enough to ruin their partnership to discover its secret.

Today too, it motioned for him not to follow. He just nodded in acknowledgment and said:

“I will remain here then. I assume you can find me again?”

To which he got a brief nod and an annoyed gust of wind, questioning how *he* dared question its sense of direction.

Jake just laughed it off as he saw the hawk jump off the cloud and soar downwards. As it disappeared from sight, he too got up and summoned his wings. Hunting with the hawk was safer and more manageable, but it wasn’t good to become reliant on others. Besides, he felt like experimenting with his newfound magical abilities some more.

And the innocent Cloud Elementals were perfect just for that. An adolescent part of him also immensely enjoyed the fact that each of them turned into a small orb of condensed cloud-mana when they died. It felt like he was getting loot from his hunts. Loot that was useless to him currently, but which he was sure to find a use for at some point.

Even if he didn't, it was fun to collect things. Hawkie seemed to like them too, so he could just give them to his feathered friend. He still had many random things in his spatial storage that he didn't have any use for. Two different kinds of water with a magical affinity, just to mention some things he questioned himself for collecting more than a few times. So chances are the orbs would just be thrown in a corner and forgotten.

Touching down on the continent of clouds, he quickly located his target and began charging up three bolts. The poor Cloud Elemental didn't even know what hit it as it suffered the assault of the three bolts. Followed by another three. And then three more.

Miranda sat staring into empty air, looking lost to any outsider. In reality, she was reading a system panel that was part of her profession as Principal City Lord. Before the profession, the system had been minimal with giving out any kind of information on anything, but it usually gave something.

Knowledge related to a skill would be given upon getting it. This profession, however, was different. The knowledge it came with directly was minimal, and instead, it opened up an entirely new part of the system to her.

A lot of information viewable only by her as the city lord, related to a city's functions. Several panels that she had specific new skills related to. Other panels she felt were there but currently inaccessible for her. Likely because she lacked the required skill.

Mark joined her the day before to talk over the new city-system, the young man showing much vigor, to begin with. However, that vigor quickly deteriorated when he came to understand precisely how limited her power as a city lord was.

He had believed she could create things like she was in a real-time strategy game. The reality, however, was far more disappointing. While she could give specific properties to buildings and areas, she couldn't create anything per-se.

A city required citizens. It needed others to create the city. If not, what would be the meaning of having builder professions?

There was a lot of hidden information in the many panels of information, however - conclusions she could reach from the pure conjecture of what was written.

First of all, merchant-type professions existed. Despite the many individuals she met during the tutorial, she had never heard of that before. Then again, trading and bartering wasn't exactly a practice she saw anyone engage in. It was viewed as shameful to try and take advantage of others in their time of need.

She also came to understand more of another part of the system. Credits or System Credits being one such thing. A currency used by the system, given to everyone in the tutorial, with excess tutorial points remaining after buying rewards from the tutorial store.

And as she couldn't see how anyone could buy something for their exact number of points, everyone had to have at least some credits. The thing is... the credits were indeed just a currency. They weren't like tutorial points and couldn't be used to buy stuff from the system. And if they could, she wasn't aware of how to get access to such a store.

As an economics major, however, she understood the importance of a strong currency. Paper money had long moved away from being bound to the value of gold and was before the system more digital than ever. As some economists have said, the faith in money is the most prominent religion on Earth. The dollar or euro only having value because people believed it did.

With the presumed collapse of every single country and government, so had that illusion of money collapsed. Paper money now worth nothing more than the paper it was printed on. All the money people had in stocks or bank accounts, gone for good with all electronics and nearly all objects related to technology removed by the system.

So for the system to provide a currency was a godsend for any kind of trading. It was a guarantor far more reliable than any entity before the system. An omnipotent system that she couldn't see simply disappearing from this new world.

It should also simplify trading quite a lot. And with the money being a part of the system itself, it couldn't as easily be stolen. There was no bank account to hack or financial system to exploit. However, she was sure that someone in the multiverse had still found ways to exploit it.

The masked man - whom she had still forgotten to ask the name of - told her of how insignificant Earth was in the vast multiverse. How they were just fledglings before a world larger than they could possibly comprehend at their current level

For someone or something to find a way to exploit the system's currency was a given. But a part of her made her want not to try for fear of retaliation from the system itself. She still wasn't quite sure if it held any kind of ego or not, especially after meeting the humanoid entity in the introduction and tutorial store.

Shaking her head, she returned her attention to the menu before her. It was describing the possibility of taxation in a city. Several types of taxation, none of which she had unlocked the ability to deploy yet. Not that she had any intention of doing so.

Though the thought was a bit funny. To tax a 'city' consisting of one in-progress lodge, a bunch of trees, and two chairs. Oh, and a waterfall and pond that she naturally would have to charge a special tax to gain access to!

Honestly, there was just too much to take in. So far, Miranda felt like she barely scratched the surface and hadn't really used any of her new skills quite yet. Only to try and better shape the area affected by the Pylon of Civilization and to read information.

She had come to realize that these Pylons were the cornerstones of the new settlements on Earth. Possibly their entire universe. They allowed access to so many systems, and there was even a whole 'diplomacy' tab that was still grayed out in her menu.

She had already long ago gone through the current menus she could see, and most of them were barebones so far. The first was the City Overview:

City Overview

City name: N/A

Population: 4

City Owner: [?]

City Lord: Miranda Wells

City Tier: Earl

Not much to see now, is there? she thought. The city didn't even have a name yet. The population only showed 4 as, for some reason, the system didn't count the masked man. She knew he was the owner, but even the system didn't display his name there.

It was rather useless so far, but she was sure it would expand. However, the part about City Tier was at least a bit informative. From the owner, she received the title of Nobility: Viscount. So her guess was that his current title had to be Nobility: Earl. Not that she had any idea if that was good or not, or what it even meant.

Next was a map of the city. It was rather bare, too, just showing the area affected by the Pylon. It was a handful of kilometers in each direction from the Pylon, 200 meters up, and a hundred meters down. All of these only rough estimates, though.

After that was a panel, she was really looking forward to exploring in the future.

Quest Panel:

Current City Quests: N/A

Current Open Quests: N/A

Current Contracted Quests: N/A

Current Compulsory Quests: N/A

It was a system to design quests. One Miranda sadly didn't have the required skill to interact with yet. The current menu only displayed current quests, and there was, of course, none as she was the one meant to create them. There were still far more unknowns regarding the system than there was solid knowledge, but she was looking forward to the possibilities, nonetheless.

After that came several more panels, all of them useless currently. Some were about giving people official positions, assigning land, voting, military, creating districts, defensive measures, etc. It was just a colossal bundle thrown at her at once.

****'DING!' Profession: [Principal City Lord of Earth] has reached level 46 - +18 free points****

The notification startled her out of her thoughts. It was already the fifth one gained since getting the profession only a few days ago. Meaning she had obtained nearly two a day. She wasn't sure why she got them, but she wasn't one to argue with a good thing either.

She just wanted to reach 50 as soon as possible and gain a skill - hopefully, one to make quests. She had a feeling that could benefit both herself as well as the others. It would also help to legitimize her position to any new potential citizens.

Of course, for that, she would need citizens to begin with, which in itself was quite a struggle considering how their 'city' was located far into a forest surrounded by beasts. Her and Hank's family finding it was a miracle in itself and more up to her intuition skill than anything else.

Taking out a small notebook that she got from the masked man, she looked over her written plans for what to do if other humans came. She was a meticulous person by nature and preferred having plans in place beforehand.

Several scenarios were described based on the size of the group of survivors as well as their strength. She was fully aware that if there were too many or if they were too strong, they would have to bluff or deceive them somehow. At least long enough for the City Owner to return.

Speaking of which... nobody knew where the hell he left to. Hank had asked him to give them space to work, and somehow, he interpreted that as a request to disappear entirely.

A complete failure in communication, to say the least. She just hoped he was here if other humans came. She had a feeling they would need him.

Hank said that it would take around a week to make the lodge, so she sincerely hoped he understood that as a request to return in a week. She had a lot of questions for him. One being his name.

As she scribbled down, her gaze wandered to another part of the system. One she could only see due to her proximity to the Pylon.

Initiate the process to claim ownership of Pylon of Civilization?

Requirements to claim ownership: Slay the current City Owner OR be uncontested in your claim for at least 30 days while maintaining the support of at least 51% of the total population.

Warning: City Owner will be warned upon initiation of the process.

She stared at it for a few seconds before dismissing it once more. Trying to hide the menu away entirely. Her intuition skill was screaming at her that should she accept it, things wouldn't go well. It was good that they were building the owner's house on top of the Pylon if others could start the process too, though Hank and the others had yet to say anything.

Sighing, she returned to her notebook as she began scribbling down notes. She held a meeting with Louise later that day to help her draw up plans for at least the semblance of a city layout. Doing so was putting the cart before the horse for sure, but she had a feeling they wouldn't be a 5-man city for much longer.

Well, more a wish than a feeling. Miranda missed other people a lot and had always been the very social type, so she looked forward to anyone coming. She just hoped they were nice.

Chapter 144: Not Again

The life of a Cloud Elemental was truly sad. Their only comfort being low intelligence, making them unable to comprehend exactly how much it sucks. For them, living more than a dozen hours was an outstanding achievement. Managing to actually fight back and slay an attacker even more so.

Birds hunted them every hour of the day. All of them long familiar with the elemental's attack methods and defensive measures. And now, even a winged human had joined the fray to hunt down the poor elementals.

Jake fired off the bolts of mana like never before. But not from floating orbs above him. Instead, he stood with his bow held high as he shot an arrow that exploded with the power of dozens of the old mana bolts.

Hawkie had been gone for nearly half a day. He wasn't sure what his feathered friend was doing, but Jake hadn't been idle during that time. With only himself and weak Cloud Elementals to fight, he had plenty of time to reflect on his method of attack.

He had come to realize that not using his archery was a real waste. So he came up with a new plan. To combine the two somehow. And after only a few hours of testing, he had come up with the current attack.

Taking out an arrow, he formed the shape of the mana bolt around it. He poured mana into and around it, making it crackle with energy - to call it a normal mana bolt was no longer accurate. After he had formed the bolt entirely, he channeled Infused Powershot and fired it.

It all added up to a mighty explosion of mana as the arrow pierced into the cloud elemental. Just in time, too, as the arrow was just about to break apart from the excess mana. The elemental that had been the target nearly broke entirely apart as it struggled to reassemble itself again.

He didn't wait as he nocked another arrow and began creating another mana bolt around the arrow. It took a few seconds to form it entirely, drew the string, and fired it off, resulting in another explosion.

In retrospect, it wasn't actually that much more useful than just firing off pure mana bolts. Jake could make more and fire them faster without first forming them around an arrow and firing them. Overall damage per second would likely even be higher just firing pure mana bolts.

But for the first arrow, it was well worth it to form it and use Infused Powershot to improve it further. Only against elementals, though, due to one fatal flaw with the method.

It didn't work with his poison. He had tried first to coat it in his blood and then form a bolt of mana around it but found that the poison eroded the mana. He then tried just using a poison he had concocted, but this time the mana interfered and made the poison less effective.

He then had the brilliant idea of using Touch of the Malefic Viper on an arrow to infuse it with poison. He even mentally slapped himself for not doing it earlier. That is until he actually tried to do it. The arrow barely made contact with his hand before it just broke apart and turned to ambient mana.

In essence, it didn't work. Besides, when Jake turned an arrow into a mana bolt, it exploded on impact due to how unstable it was. This wasn't exactly a good way to poison anyone and would instead just ruin the arrow's poison even if it worked.

So he decided to use his mana bolt arrows against elementals and poisoned arrows on everything else. Of course, he hoped to one day combine the two, but it seemed far away and something the system didn't particularly like. Maybe he could get a skill at 90.

He felt a bit in a hurry to level up, but on the other hand, he wanted to keep pushing the still unexplored potential of his newfound proficiency in utilizing mana in combat. At least until his current rapid progression petered off.

Also, he kind of didn't want to engage too powerful Cloud Elementals without Hawkie. He needed the bird to ensure he could actually kill them, considering his still lackluster damage output. He was an archer and not a mage, even with his mana bolts. It could get a bit dicey, and he had missed out on a few kills due to other birds swooping in and interfering.

Luckily Hawkie had returned when he made his way back to the cloud island. It was perched on the tree impatiently staring at Jake as he arrived.

With a slightly apologetic nod, he sat down and entered meditation to top himself off right away so they could return to their hunt. He didn't need more than half an hour to get back in top form once more. Mainly because of the potion he drank, but excessive consumption of alchemical products was a hallmark of his recovery process by now.

The next days were relatively uneventful compared to what Jake was used to. They killed Cloud Elementals, fought off asshole groups of birds trying to take advantage of them, acted like assholes by taking advantage of other groups of birds, and so on - the usual stuff that happens on a cloud island the size of a country.

Every day Hawkie would leave for anywhere between a few hours to half a day. Jake spent this time either experimenting with mana or solo hunting a bit. He was lucky that he had stocked up on so many potions that he didn't have to brew any.

His bolts of mana had improved hour by hour, and by now were far more potent than the ones he started with. Their shape now resembled small lightning bolts as they crackled with energy floating above him.

Their killing did unavoidably result in a lot of experience earned. Jake ended up gaining another three levels even if he didn't find the fights that interesting.

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 87 - Stat points allocated, +4 free point****

...

****'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 89 - Stat points allocated, +4 free point****

****'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 79 - Stat points allocated, +5 free point****

Just one more level, and he would unlock another skill. He was very expectant, of course. Two days ago, his progress in the mana bolts significantly stagnated as he began to run out of ways to improve them. For now, it would just take hard work and time for further improvements.

Compared to the first mana bolt he threw with his hand like a plebian, he now shot off crackling bolts of pure unadulterated pain like a true mage. The only minor issue with them being their innate instability

He wasn't sure why they were like that; they just were. Perhaps it was due to his desire to continually pack more power and destructibility in them, or maybe it was due to his starting point with forming the bolts, to begin with.

It was the thought process of turning mana destructive after all. Jake always had more focus on improving destructibility over stability. Not that he held any regrets towards

that. That path felt more natural for him to begin with. The mana closer aligned to his so-called 'Jake-affinity.'

He hadn't noticed the small purple wisps of energy that had begun appearing in his bolts... the same kind that emerged during the Trial of Myriad Poisons when he sought to destroy and break down the poison in his body. Each of them far too minute for him or anyone but the strongest of gods to detect.

Hawkie had also progressed steadily, gaining only two levels, though. He didn't see any notable improvements in his hawk's fighting abilities, but it had gotten faster and a bit stronger. The underlying toolkit remained the same, consisting of wind attacks and swift movement.

Either way, he was satisfied with his progress, and the bird didn't complain either. The only ones that really had a right to complain were the cloud elementals, whose sole existence was to die within hours of being born.

They had traveled quite far into the cloud island too. Surprisingly that didn't really result in the levels of the elementals or the birds increasing; there wasn't even more of them. However, it allowed him to get a better look at the giant crystal tree that was the epicenter of the entire thing.

It was truly massive. Lightning crackled between its branches and the small trees below as it stood there menacingly. Using Identify on it didn't yield any result, meaning it likely wasn't a monster. It also felt far too big to be useful in alchemy.

The pressure it gave off was enough for the two of them to keep a safe distance, though. Neither of them interested in getting hit by a wayward bolt of lightning.

He was a bit surprised to see that some birds didn't have the same reservations. But upon further inspection, he came to understand why. They were monsters of the lightning-affinity and thrived in an environment filled with volatile energy.

This didn't mean that those birds were safe close to the tree, however. They faced powerful competition from other monsters trying to monopolize the powers found there. A few of these competitors making Jake and Hawkie retreat in a hurry. Especially two that seemed exceptionally competitive.

One was a giant bird, a commercial airliner's size - a wingspan tens of meters wide. Its body covered in feathers colored a deep black with small blue patterns here and there. Lightning crackled in its wake when it moved, as it kept away all other birds in the area by frying them completely. The pressure the giant bird gave off, making it clear it was a step ahead of all the other beasts.

[Thunder Roc - ???]

The second competitor looked a lot like a Cloud Elemental, but instead of the fluffy white body, this one had a dark gray one with thunder crackling within. Its body flashed with electricity every few seconds as it sat on one of the tree's larger branches. Absorbing the lightning mana as far as Jake could tell.

In size, it dwarfed even the gigantic Roc - a skyscraper of lightning and death. It too in the D-tier.

[Storm Elemental - ???]

These two were what dominated the center of the sky island. Throughout the week, he had seen the two face off a few times, but they appeared unable to properly wound the other. Both were relying on lightning attacks while at the same time being mostly immune to it.

So they had reached a semblance of balance as they kept to each side of the tree. Other birds and elementals were competing below, sometimes trying in vain to reach for the crown where most of the lightning mana was condensed.

He couldn't help but throw Hawkie a glance the first time they saw the two of them. Hinting if they should give it a shot sometime soon. To which he got a bewildered look back as if he was the biggest idiot the hawk had ever seen.

Not that he didn't understand why. The two of them were clearly far above their level. They should still both be in the early D-tier, but of course, that didn't mean they were something the two of them could handle.

As always, he couldn't help but compare them to the King of the Forest. He imagined how the King would fare against these creatures. The version of the King before being stabbed by a tusk, weakened by the bead from the Nest Watcher, and blown up by the corrupted moonstone.

And the conclusion he reached was the mental image of the Roc being torn apart by the golden claw. The elemental ripped into countless pieces by telepathy as a shockwave of mental energy crushed both of their souls to nothingness.

At least, that is what his intuition told him would have happened. He was perfectly aware that he had never truly seen the King in his prime; all the extraordinary items weakened him to a ridiculous degree. What he did remember, however, was his fully powered Infused Powershot being blocked like it was nothing.

Returning to the real world, he was currently flying back towards their little cloud island once more for a round of meditation and drinking potions. Their daily routine became more and more habitual as Hawkie didn't even have to ask for a potion anymore.

Just as he entered meditation, he was thrown out of it by a system message.

Quest Received: Contested Pylon of Civilization

City Lord Miranda Wells has initiated the process to take control of the Pylon of Civilization. If left unchecked, you will lose ownership.

Time Remaining: 29 days, 23:59:59

Quest Reward: Retain control of Pylon of Civilization.

Penalty upon failure: Loss of ownership of the Pylon of Civilization. [Nobility: Earl] downgraded to [Nobility: Viscount]

He stared at it for a while, bewildered. *What the hell?* He was confused. But the confusion quickly turned to anger as he stood up abruptly, startling Hawkie. But what startled Hawkie more was the aura he currently gave off.

Bloodlust filled the air in an almost tangible aura. His eyes were blazing with the yellow sheen from Gaze of the Apex Hunter. To say that he was pissed was an understatement.

He had been told to stay away for a week. Nine days had passed. Nine fucking days and they had tried to pull a fast one on him. Two days over their agreed upon time was all they had bothered to wait.

Only two scenarios were in his head. Either they believed he had died and had decided to claim the Pylon for themselves. Fine, he could accept that. He was still going to kill them, but he could buy it.

The second option was that they just didn't give a shit anymore. That they didn't care about Jake's rightful ownership of the Pylon and had come to believe that he wasn't powerful enough to defend it from them.

"I have some shit to deal with. Be back later," he said as he leaped off the cloud island and began descending. He could feel the Pylon and made a beeline for it. Hawkie just sat there frozen, unable to respond to the sudden wave of bloodlust he was giving out.

His anger was only growing further as he flapped his wings faster than ever before. He had believed in Miranda and his intuition that told him that he could trust her. He was

angry at himself but even more so angry at her. Even if she thought he was dead, did she have that little respect for him? That little trust? Even if he was dead, couldn't she be bothered to wait for a man a couple of days?

He had given her a powerful profession. A title. A future in this new world. She had seemed genuinely thankful... and this was his thanks?

He had saved all their damn lives not even two weeks ago. Not that he thought he owned them or anything, but he expected at least a modicum of respect - from all four of them.

It doesn't matter now, he thought as he sped up even more. Limit Break active at ten percent to go even faster.

He had shown trust, and they had thrown it right back in his face. He wasn't some meek person who would just let that fly. They had chosen their own fates.

His only regret being his own naivety. Hadn't he learned already? From Andrew and his first and only girlfriend. From Caroline and her betrayal in the tutorial. Every time he had chosen to trust someone, they had broken that trust.

Descending like a meteor, his bloodlust grew as not a single beast dared get in his way.

Chapter 145: Visitors

It had all started four days prior.

The house's construction was pretty much done, and Hank was considering making some simple pieces of furniture. They also had a sit-down to talk about plans to make a few more buildings elsewhere for themselves.

That is when Miranda got pinged by her skill that others had entered the Pylon of Civilization's area of influence. Other humans. She was immediately filled with a paradoxical feeling of both concern and anticipation.

Concern about how many they were, their intentions, and their strength, and anticipation at the potential of having more citizens join the city. Maybe begin to actually to make it worthy of being called a city.

She notified Hank and the kids as they talked over what to do.

"Louise and Mark should go hide in the cellar of the house," Hank started out with. At Miranda's request, the cellar was rather well hidden, and you wouldn't find its entrance without looking around for it. Which is to say they had put the pelt of an animal over the hatch.

"Not going to happen," Louise said adamantly. "We both evolved too. If they want a fight, let's give them one!"

“We should avoid fighting if we can. No matter how strong or how many there are,” Miranda sighed as she tried to calm down the fired-up Louise. The system clearly hadn't fixed the illogical mind of the young woman.

“I don't want to hide either,” Mark said a bit meekly.

Hank chose to concede as they quite frankly didn't have time for the discussion right now. “Fine, but no fighting unless absolutely necessary. And keep quiet.”

They spoke a bit more, all gathered around the house still, as they waited for the arrival of whoever was to come. The skill Miranda had that made her aware they were here did nothing more than that. It just gave her a vague feeling that someone had entered.

Not how many, not how strong, or where they were now. Miranda wasn't even sure if she could feel it if they left the area again. So all they could do was to wait in trepidation.

Luckily, or perhaps unluckily, they didn't have to wait long before someone arrived.

A hooded figure was hiding at the entrance to the valley and peeked out from behind a rock.

She saw the four people there, in front of a wooden lodge. The large bearded man with an axe over his shoulder, a woman, a young man, and a young woman all wearing robes. Two casters and a healer from what she could tell.

A quick Identify of all four showed that none of them were overly high leveled while they were all E-grade. The woman and the man being the highest leveled individuals at 33 and 34 respectively.

She quickly retreated to her group, waiting a few hundred meters away at a small clearing within the forest. As she walked out from behind a tree, exiting stealth, the group turned towards her, a young man in the lead.

“That was fast. Did you find anything?” he asked with a slight smile.

His face was pale, and his eyes seemed a bit listless despite his smile. He was wearing a robe with golden runes and a small chain around his neck, with the necklace itself hidden beneath his robes. But even with his weak appearance, she knew that he was by far the strongest in their party.

They were a group of five that had met and survived the tutorial together - from level 0 to where they were today without losing a single member.

The party consisted of herself, Eleanor, the archer of the group. Next was their defender, Christen, the only other woman on the team. She was currently sitting in a chainmail set resting against a log with their healer Silas tending to a large wound on her stomach - a particularly nasty one that was resisting his healing quite effectively.

Then there was Levi, their weird magic swordsman who didn't quite fit into a role. He was initially a medium warrior but began picking up more magic skills and eventually evolved into a hybrid class at 25.

Last but not least was their leader Neil. The sole caster of their party and a weird one at that. He was specialized in kinetic magic, or more accurately recently, space magic. Displacement, teleportation, whatever the hell struck his fancy, he somehow figured out how to do, which is also how they had arrived where they were in their current state.

"I saw four humans. I didn't detect or see anyone else. They have constructed a lodge in the valley, and from the looks of it, know that we are here. At least they are on guard," she answered after a brief pause.

"Their levels, and were there any clue as to their classes or capabilities?" Neil asked further.

"Strongest two at 33 and 34, with the one at 34 wielding an axe, and the other wore the standard caster robe from the tutorial. The last two looked like teenagers, one of them a healer and the other a caster. Both also E-grade," she explained.

Neil looked a bit troubled at the answer. "This doesn't make any sense. Why would we be taken here if they are so weak?"

“Maybe it has something to do with the area? Have you noticed how we haven’t encountered a single monster or beast since coming here?” Levi theorized. “Perhaps we are within a protective barrier of some kind.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier just to ask those four? With their levels, they aren’t a threat,” the defender Christen asked, as her wound was beginning to close up nicely.

“At this point, I don’t think we have much choice. Even if there is truly nothing here, we should have created a lot of distance between them and us,” Neil said, a bit resigned.

They had teleported there with the help of Neil and a particular item in his possession. Teleported a vast distance, likely hundreds if not thousands of kilometers. This wasn’t the first teleport either, but one of many they had been forced to perform ever since returning from the tutorial.

“Let’s go then; they didn’t look like bad people,” Eleanor said. She had her bow draped over her shoulder and her quiver on her back. If Jake were here, he would recognize the quiver as identical to his own. Also upgraded to uncommon-rarity from a token.

In fact, all five of them had gear at a level Jake hadn’t encountered on anyone except himself. Not a single one of them was wearing their starting gear, and those that were had upgraded versions. More surprising was perhaps their levels.

At the front was Neil at level 52. Followed by Christen at 48, Silas and Levi both at 47, and herself lowest at only 45. She said ‘only,’ but that was only in comparison to the rest of her party.

“Yeah, get moving, guys and gals,” Christen smiled as she stood up. Silas just shook his head as he wasn’t entirely done healing the wound yet. Then again, perhaps it was best her natural regeneration did the rest of the work for now.

The five of them walked through the narrow passage leading into the valley. The first sight meeting them was the idyllic lodge positioned right next to the pond with a waterfall - and the four people standing in front of it, clearly on guard.

Hank was in the lead, and the moment he saw them, he felt a sense of dread. He had identified the woman in front and seen her level at 48 - fourteen entire levels above his own. And a quick glance at the other members of the group of five made it very clear exactly how outmatched they were - especially the young man in the golden robe whose level he couldn’t even see.

The two groups stared at each other for a while before Neil stepped forth and broke and silence.

“Ah, this is awkward,” he said with a light smile. “We come in peace. So no reason to be that tense, I would just like to ask a few questions, and then we will be on our way.”

“If we can help, we would be more than happy to,” Miranda answered.

“Thank you. First of all, what is up with this place? The absence of monsters is quite something. And did you build that lodge behind you?” Neil asked courteously.

“The lodge was indeed made by us. My comrade here is quite the builder,” Miranda said, nudging at Hank. “As for the particularities of this place, while we have noticed them, I cannot tell you the reason why it is-“

“Lie,” Silas interrupted.

“Not a good start, lying in the second sentence,” Neil chuckled. “For transparency, my friend here happens to have a skill that can discern lies.”

Miranda felt a cold shiver run down her spine. If that was true, it threw off 90% of her plans for this interaction. That is already calculating in the fact that they were at a level of power far beyond them. *Damage control*, she thought.

“I am sorry, I mean that I don’t know *exactly* why this area is as it is. Only that it is related to the owner of this land. The lodge behind me is also built for him, and this entire valley was already his home when we found it,” she explained. If lies didn’t work, she would have to use truths only. A bit creatively, perhaps.

“The owner, you say. Who might this owner be?” Neil continued.

“I do not know. Not even his name is known to me,” she answered, praising the fact that she had forgotten to ask his name time and time again. “What I do know is that he is powerful and from what I could tell human.”

“From what you could tell? What makes you think this mysterious owner isn’t human?”

“I strongly suspect he is human, but since Identify does not work on him, I couldn’t confirm. His level of power also making me doubtful of his humanity, to begin with,” she said, expanding on her prior explanation. Deciding to let the mysteriousness of the masked man play to her advantage.

“Doesn’t work?” Neil asked, a bit confused. “As in, not at all?”

“No, not at all. It just returned a single question mark,” Hank said, cutting in.

Neil frowned his brows. He had only encountered that phenomenon once. It was the entity that had rewarded him the object leading to their current precarious situation - the same entity that was the namesake of his class.

He would have to get to the bottom of this. “Where is this person now?”

“He left four days back or so. We don’t know to where. But I believe he will return within the next three to four days due to it being the deadline set for finishing his new lodge,” Miranda said.

She very purposefully tried to make her answers fulfilling to avoid too many follow-up questions. She wanted to, at all cost, avoid any mention of the Pylon. Luckily, she was the only one aware of it.

“I see... exactly how strong would you reckon this individual is?” Neil asked as he looked to be in deep thought.

“Strong enough to make me not tell you out of fear he will retaliate when he returns,” Hank cut in once more. Giving an answer way better than Miranda had thought up.

“We understand,” Neil answered with a smile after throwing a glance at Silas. Getting a nod in confirmation that neither Miranda nor Hank had lied since the first part.

What ensued next was a few moments of staring at each other. Only interrupted when Christen winced a bit and grabbed her stomach in pain. It was rather subtle, but Miranda and Hank both noticed it.

“Are you injured?” Miranda asked, with a bit of genuine concern. Far from enough to overcome her wariness, however.

Neil looked at Christen for a bit, getting a small nod. “We ran into some trouble coming here. A particularly nasty curse happens to have inflicted her, and it takes some time to heal.”

Miranda nodded in acknowledgment. It wasn't like the woman's injury was any kind of chance for them. If a fight broke out, they would lose for sure. Just one or two of the five could very likely wipe them out. The only positive thing currently was that she didn't feel like they intended to.

"Anything that will come to bite us in the ass later?" Hank asked, not-so-courteously.

"Hopefully not," Neil dismissively said before turning to Miranda once more. "As this area is the safest we have come across so far in our journey, I would like to ask permission to stay here. As the owner isn't around, would you be able to allow us to stay?"

"I..." Miranda began quickly remembering the living lie detector. She could allow them to stay, so... "The final decision is up to the owner, but I am unable to stop you from staying if you wish to."

"Great," Neil laughed after Silas said nothing. "Do not hesitate to ask us for anything. We truly do not come with any ill intent. I believe working together would be of interest to both parties."

"I agree that working together is preferable to standing in opposition to one another," Miranda smiled in return.

She reached down and took a small satchel out from beneath her robes. One everyone recognized as the one that contained potions at the beginning of the tutorials.

“Take this as a proof of goodwill,” she said, tossing the satchel to Neil.

Neil didn’t catch it per-se but instead stopped it a meter or so from his body, making it float in mid-air. Clearly still cautious despite how friendly he had acted. With a thought, he opened the satchel and saw a handful of similarly familiar bottles within.

He chuckled a bit internally at the gesture. The potions were excellent back then, but he wasn’t sure how much they would really do with everyone well into the E-grade. The only interesting thing was how the hell they had managed to save the potions throughout the tutorial.

That is until he tried identifying a few of them almost on instinct and noticed something was off. One of each type was of common-rarity.

“I would feel bad accepting your reward from the tutorial like that,” Neil said.

He had concluded that the woman had used her tutorial points to buy these potions - a natural decision and not the first instance of people doing so he had encountered. But it did make the gesture appear far more genuine.

“Don’t misunderstand; those were made by the owner,” she quickly explained.

“Made?” he asked, a bit confused.

Like Miranda, he had believed the potions to be a product of the tutorial. A system-created item to assist them, not unlike the upgrade tokens.

“He has many mysterious means, the creation of these potions just one of them,” Miranda answered, doubling down on the mysteriousness of the City Owner once more. Silas was not protesting either, as it was the truth as far as she knew.

“... I will keep that in mind,” Neil answered, this time a bit more tentatively. His four companions were also surprised at the thought that people could make those potions.

“Well then, to a prosperous future,” Miranda said with a small bow and a smile.

Chapter 146: Familial Conflict

“It’s hard to believe,” Levi said as he stared at the blue bottle in his hand. “How do you even make something like this?”

“How do you shoot magical blades at people, and how does Neil teleport us thousands of kilometers at a time?” Christen scoffed before continuing. “And how does Silas heal wounds in seconds, or Eleanor’s arrows appear from thin air or-“

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. No need to be a bitch,” Levi said, handing the potion back to Silas, who was keeping them for now.

“Sorry I hurt your feelings, me being a bitch has totally nothing to do with my stomach being constantly on fire,” she said sarcastically.

“Sorry...” Silas apologized meekly. He was still trying to heal it, but all he could do was to keep it in check as the power of the curse slowly ran itself out.

“It isn’t your fault,” Neil cut in. “We didn’t know they had made an alliance and got overconfident. Hopefully, this mysterious ‘owner’ can help us.”

“I still don’t like trusting some unknown person we don’t even know is human,” Christen sighed.

“We can’t keep running either,” Levi said. “And there is no way in hell we hand the orb to them. Not like they are going to let us live either way.”

“Won’t this ‘owner’ want the orb, though?” Eleanor asked. “I doubt we can keep it hidden if we actually need his assistance.”

“Let’s just hope he isn’t interested then,” Neil smiled. “In the meantime, we shouldn’t idle. They are for sure on our trail, so not preparing would be foolish.”

“So we are staying here?” Silas asked as he was channeling what little mana he had recovered into Christen’s wound.

Neil looked at the two and saw the wound that still appeared to have small embers burning in it. “Christen is not in any shape to travel like she is now, and I used the last remaining ingredients I had on the last teleportation circle. We may be able to outrun them still, but is that really a way to live? So, yes, we are staying. For better or worse.”

At the current time, they had created some distance from the lodge and the four other survivors. A discussion was in order on how to move forward. But in the end, decisions nearly always fell on Neil to make.

“Should we involve those four?” Eleanor inquired.

Neil nodded once more. “I think it would be wise. They must have some rapport with this ‘owner,’ so having a working relationship at the minimum would be preferable. They may also be able to provide further assistance and help with preparing for the inevitable arrival of my cousin’s group.”

“Speaking of assistance, why don’t you take a swig of one of these little wonder-bottles?” Levi asked Silas, who was clearly out of mana again.

They already used Identify on the potions, and it had returned the same message as back in the tutorial.

[Mana Potion (Inferior)] – Restores mana when consumed

[Mana Potion (Common)] – Restores mana when consumed

It didn't show the values, and in their eyes looked identical to the ones they consumed back then. The only difference was the common-tag on some of them, so these were likely of higher quality.

"They could be poisoned," Silas said a bit hesitantly.

"That would be a shitty assassination attempt. Even if it worked, we would just wipe them out," Levi said with a big laugh. "Don't worry, if you die, I promise to take revenge for you!"

"Screw you," Silas joked as he took out the potion. "Here goes nothing."

Silas felt the liquid enter his body as a flood of mana spread throughout. Far more mana than those shitty mana potions provided during the tutorial.

He sat staring into thin air for a while after drinking it as he checked his status.

“Holy shit.”

“What? Is anything wrong?” Levi asked, concerned about his earlier jokes becoming a reality.

“It gave me more than 2200 mana,” Silas said, still in disbelief.

“What!? That’s like my entire mana pool,” Levi exclaimed in shock.

Neil, Christen, and Eleanor also looked on with interest. Christen and Eleanor didn’t really use mana, but if the mana potions were that good, chances are the stamina potions were too. Neil, on the other hand, began to see possibilities he hadn’t considered before.

“And there are no side-effects?” Neil asked.

“None. Works just like the tutorial ones. I can tell there is the same one-hour cooldown too. This is just crazy,” Silas calmly explained as he collected his thoughts.

“Well, I think making a partnership with those four is pretty much settled now. Especially if they got more of these potions,” Neil laughed. Perhaps they would be able to put up a defense by the time *she* arrived after all.

After that, they returned to the lodge, where Miranda and the others still sat. They agreed to work together as Neil also came clean about their reasons for coming there.

Their tutorial had been more like Jake's than Miranda's. A smaller number of people put in an archipelago of islands with bridges connecting each one. Each island had a general level-range of beasts and other types of monsters.

The five of them knew each other before the integration. Christen and Silas were childhood friends, while Neil and Levi went to the same class in university. Eleanor was a friend of Christen as they lived in the same university dorm.

All of them were only in their early to mid-twenties, and Neil was the oldest of the bunch.

But there had also been others. Neil's cousin, a woman named Abby, had also entered. She had joined with a group of her own friends and her father, Neil's uncle.

In the beginning, they had teamed up with this group. Their teamwork turned out to be immaculate as Christen took the front and tanked, Eleanor scouted and made ranged attacks, while Neil and Levi provided most of the damage, with Neil also learning supporting skills later on. Silas was the group's designated healer.

All had gone well till they encountered a particular island. This one contained no monsters of any kind, but instead a large crypt, which they had entered with a large group of nearly two hundred people. There they found a unique challenge dungeon. All casters below 25,

which was all of them as it was still only the first week, got the chance to enter it. They pretty much all did in their unbridled naivety.

As was customary of a challenge dungeon, you either win or fail. It was designed for one to win it, but something unexpected happened. Two people managed to, against all odds, beat the challenge dungeon. After a month, Abby and Neil both walked out of the door, the only two victors.

Both had gotten a new and powerful class. Both had upgraded it to an even more potent version at 25 too. From that point onward, they came to dominate the tutorial. Both were higher level and more powerful than anyone else. Their parties benefitting from this too, as their levels soared in concert with their own.

After the challenge dungeon, Neil and his cousin had split up. Each was going their own way to find and hunt more beasts. By some miracle, or perhaps by design, they reached the final island simultaneously, when only a single day of the tutorial remained.

There they had entered a new area together. Within, Abby and Neil, as well as their respective companions, encountered the 'final boss.' The disciple of the one who had given them the legacy in the challenge dungeon. The one who had given them their class was long dead, with only this one disciple remaining behind as an honor to his old master.

The disciple had been D-grade. More potent than they could possibly handle. Luckily, he wasn't there to fight them. He offered them yet another trial. One they could try with their parties of five.

Abby, at this time, had come with a group of several hundred people. An entire army she had at her command. Of course, she protested at the limitation of only five people, but the disciple insisted, and even the headstrong Abby didn't dare cross the D-grade disciple.

Once more, Abby and Neil had competed. Which was when the disparity between the two became apparent. Not in their personal skill, but the skill of their party.

Neil had only ever been with his party of five. Be it luck or fate that they had decided on that from the start, which meant that he had an immense advantage throughout the trial. Their party even cleared two dungeons prior, and all managed to get good equipment.

On the other hand, Abby had put herself and her father before everyone else. In personal power, she was above Neil. Her father was also slightly stronger than any of Neil's party members. But that was it. The rest who followed her were far from powerful individuals.

This resulted in Neil winning in the end. Abby was walking out with only her and her father surviving. As a reward, Neil was granted the Orb of Kallox. Named after the one they had inherited their class from. The item that would come to be the reason for their current predicament. And upon sharing its properties Miranda and Hank understood why.

[Orb of Kallox (Legendary)] – An orb made by the space mage Kallox in his final days. Left to his disciple to grant to any worthy inheritor of his path. The orb was made by condensing a microcosm to physical form in the shape of an orb. It is nigh-indestructible by any being below B-tier. Due to the very life of Kallox being consumed in its crafting process, it contains insights into his understanding of the concept of space. The orb contains a spatial storage that is able to house non-living objects. Can store a large amount of space mana.

Requirements: Inheritance Class of Kallox obtained.

“I was foolish enough to show Abby too. I was naïve and excited at having gotten it and believed she would share in my excitement as we would move forward into this new world together,” Neil said with regret. “Outwardly, she did appear to do so. Until we returned from the tutorial, and the Disciple of Kallox was no longer there to interfere. That is when we found ourselves surrounded by her army of followers and a demand to hand over the orb and all our equipment.”

“I thought you were family...” Louise said as she had also gotten invested in the story.

Neil smiled sadly. “So did I. I naturally refused and even offered that we could both study and use the orb together. This wasn’t good enough for her. So she, along with all her followers, tried to kill us.”

“How did you manage to escape when surrounded by hundreds of people?” Hank asked.

“By luck mostly. We managed to take advantage of their bad formation and break out even without my space magic. After that, we ran for half a day, being pursued all the time. We managed to shake them off for the better part of a day, just enough time for me to set up a teleportation circle and take us hundreds of kilometers away.”

“Teleportation circle?” Miranda asked. She had a good idea what it was, but confirmation was always preferable.

“A type of formation to transport us a far distance. But each one consumes ingredients, and I have to use the stored up mana in the orb to power it. And before you ask, I am all out of ingredients,” Neil explained.

“But if you teleported away, how did they find you again?” Hank pressed.

“The orb and my class. Abby can track me anywhere I go, and these four idiots refuse to leave me,” Neil said, referring to his friends, who all just smiled goofily. “We kept teleporting a few times, the last one taking us to this forest.”

“So, to sum it up, an army of people far stronger than you is chasing you down to kill you, and now you have led them here to kill us too?” Miranda asked rather directly.

“I guess?” Neil answered a bit sheepishly.

“And exactly how long do we have before our imminent demise?”

Neil felt a bit of sweat on his back from the woman’s intense glare as he answered. “Three days at minimum, a week at most...”

“Great...” Miranda said with a big sigh. “Brilliant plan. Why exactly did you choose to teleport here, to begin with?”

“I... we encountered others on the way. One group we encountered was absolutely massive. Far stronger than us or even Abby’s by a mile. We are talking thousands. A priest or something led them,” Neil explained.

“He did some weird shit, and suddenly I had these coordinates in my head. He told us that we would find, and I quote: ‘salvation and our fated path.’ Yeah, I don’t get it either, but for some reason, I believed him. Silas’s skill also said that he didn’t lie.”

“Sounds a bit too convenient, don’t you think?” Hank asked, more than a little skeptical.

“I perfectly understand your doubts. I was doubtful, too, at first, but he was just so damn convincing. I can’t properly explain it,” Neil said, unable to put it into words properly.

“Why didn’t you stay with them if they were such a big group?” Miranda asked, equally skeptical of the entire story.

“We tried, but he refused us. He said that joining them would not end well for either party. That our paths were not found within his fold.”

“Sounds like you met a lunatic or a conman,” Hank scoffed. “And if I am right, that lie-detector skill can probably only confirm what the one speaking thinks is true, and not some universal law. Am I right?”

Silas looked briefly at Neil, and when he got a nod of approval, he too nodded. That was indeed how the skill worked. In other words, if the speaker didn't believe they lied, it wouldn't register as a lie.

"Maybe, maybe not. But he was strong. Real strong. Not just in level but in spirit. He was also surrounded by equally powerful people who all seemed keen on protecting and listening to him," Neil continued defending his action of believing a random guy.

"Doesn't matter right now," Miranda finally cut in. "What matters right now is what we plan on doing about the people coming here to kill us. We can't just count on the 'owner' showing up."

"I agree," Neil said, more than happy to change the subject. He proceeded to explain a few of his plans, but it was clearly something that would take more time to plan properly. It also quickly became apparent that every single member of the 5-man party had evolved professions.

"So, who was this guy?" Hank asked, bringing the topic back to the mysterious guide.

"I never got a name," Neil confessed, "but everyone referred to him as the Augur."

Chapter 147: Unbalanced

Miranda sat on the small stairs leading up to the lodge. She watched the intricate patterns drawn on the ground by Neil as he was still trying to improve the magic circle – a massive formation covering tens of meters all around the lodge.

Hank was working with Christen to make him a better axe. She was a blacksmith and was more than happy to help when he asked. Though Miranda was pretty sure the young woman just felt terrible about the situation she had put him and his two kids in.

Silas meditated as he did most of the time. He had managed to finally get rid of Christen's cursed wound the day before and was now able to rest for the first time since she got the injury. Mark had chosen to accompany him, as he had been following the man around to learn how to be a better healer.

Louise had spent most of her time making pits and overall warping the environment around them. She had a skill that allowed her to do some minor terraforming, but it was good enough to improve their natural defenses with enough time.

Eleanor hadn't been seen for days. She was the de-facto scout of their party and had left to keep track of when the incoming party would come. They knew the direction they were coming from, and she had a few skills to locate people while keeping herself hidden.

Levi was the most useless of the bunch, just swinging his sword in the air, trying to get in every second of training possible. Maybe hoping for some miraculous last-minute skill upgrade or perhaps just a level. Whatever the case, the sense of urgency and desperation was tangible.

It was the fourth day since they arrived. The enemies could come at any point now. The time had been fruitfully spent overall as they had more or less prepared as well as they

could in this time. Especially Neil, who had put down the large formation to defend them, had made many preparations. The lodge was to be their final stand.

The building was constructed by Hank, and his skills enhanced it. It was far more durable than regular wood and could perhaps offer some form of protection from weaker attacks. They knew the other side had many people, so hopefully, it could block some of their ranged attacks at least.

Miranda hadn't yet shared her role as a City Lord. Nor even mentioned the existence of the Pylon. It wasn't her place to do so. And she still didn't entirely trust the party of five. Their cooperation was forced due to the circumstances.

But if their claims proved to be accurate, then maybe doubling the 'city' population was possible. She had already gotten three more levels in the profession and reached 60. This had earned her a few glances as they were surprised her race-level had gone up by two so fast. They hadn't asked her, though. Likely they were too focused on trying not to die.

Upon leveling, she had also earned another skill. She had been offered the one related to creating quests but had decided to go with one that was a bit more immediate. Its functions were pretty simple. It was a purely defensive skill that allowed her to create a barrier in a small area.

She had chosen to share the functionality of this skill with Neil. Neil's barrier was meant to do basically the same, but his used space-magic, while hers used pure mana. But from what she had gathered... hers was borderline impenetrable on its own already. As long as it held that was... and it could only be used around the Pylon.

So they had two defensive barriers and a lodge created by an evolved builder. Bunkering down did seem like a possible tactic if all they had to do was buy time. The problem was they weren't sure if buying time would lead to anything.

The City Owner hadn't appeared for several days. In fact, it had now been nine whole days since any of them saw him. Miranda knew that he still lived as he was listed as the city owner... well, with a question mark, but still.

All they could do was hope he returned in time.

Time slowly ticked by as they trucked on with their final preparations. Miranda had a weird feeling of both wanting them to come and get the torturous wait over with and for them to be as delayed as possible. Somewhere, deep in her heart, she still hoped that they could negotiate.

It didn't sit right with her to hand over Neil and his party, but if that is what she had to do to protect Hank and his children, she was willing to do so. Reluctant, but willing. She had made a promise to help keep them safe to Hank's wife, and she had never fancied herself a liar.

Her wish for the wait to be over came true not long after. Eleanor dashed into the camp, yelling, "They are coming!" as all the tension that had built up came fully to the forefront.

Christen immediately stopped the hammer and threw it to the ground. She hadn't taken off her armor once since the wound had healed and was already ready to fight. Neil stood up from his kneeling position as he was also mentally preparing himself for what was to come.

Silas exited the lodge with a worried expression while Levi simply stopped swinging his sword and turned towards where Eleanor had come from. His gaze was showing that he was ready.

Hank, Louise, and Mark all went to the house as they had planned beforehand. Louise had been given the task of pouring mana into some runes Neil had placed inside the house to strengthen it further, while Mark was their backup healer. Hank himself exited soon after with his axe over his shoulder. Concern apparent on his face.

“They already have eyes on us,” Neil said as he stood beside Miranda in front of the lodge, all the others behind them.

“I can feel it,” she said. And she could. She had felt that people had entered the area of the Pylon earlier. Soon more pings came from her skill, signifying several more people entering.

With Neil’s group, she wasn’t able to distinguish how many they were. She still couldn’t, but the fact that several pings came once must mean that several groups had entered - that, or one massive group too big for even her vague skill to recognize it as one.

They heard them before they saw them. Several voices were heard as well as the sound of marching. Making it clear they didn’t even put up the façade of trying to hide. Their scouts, without a doubt, already having relayed that only nine people resided in the valley.

From one of the entrances, Miranda finally saw them. In front was a relatively small woman. Or teenager. She didn't look any older than 18 or 19, but the system had made telling age quite a bit harder. Beside her walked a man with a shaved head and black beard. His appearance was very similar to the girl at his side.

She, like Neil, wore an embroidered robe of excellent quality. She also wore several pieces of jewelry and appeared to float a few centimeters off the ground. Overall she gave off an immense sense of danger, and it wasn't hard for Miranda to recognize her as the infamous Abby.

"Nice place you found yourself, cuz," she said, with a big smile as she looked at Neil and the idyllic waterfall and pond behind the lodge.

"Would be a waste to ruin it, wouldn't you agree?" Neil fired back with a similar smile. However, Miranda could feel his anxiousness.

"I don't know about that," Abby said, her smile instantly gone. "Where is the orb?"

"With me as always," he said, taking it out from beneath his robe. It was a small black marble that, at first glance, was utterly unimpressive. He had fixed it on a chain to wear it around his neck, though it wasn't recognized as a necklace by the system.

As they spoke, Miranda couldn't avoid noticing the other people also appearing all around them. She saw quite a few standing on the cliffs above looking down on them, while others jumped down to surround the lodge. She counted more than a hundred.

“So you aren’t going to run this time?” she asked, her gaze still cold. “My offer still stands. Give me the orb and all of your equipment. The same goes for your comrades, too, of course.”

At this point, Miranda was tired of being ignored as she cut in. “Excuse me, miss, while I don’t mean to cut into your family dispute, I would like to point out that you stand on another’s land.”

“Shut the fuck up, you fucking whore before I rip your head off,” she roared at Miranda entirely out of nowhere before just as swiftly returning to having the smile she had before. “I am speaking to my dear cousin here and not you.”

Miranda was utterly taken aback, and so was Hank and the others observing from the house too. Neil’s party, on the other hand, didn’t appear that fazed.

“She is speaking the truth, though. This land and lodge are owned by someone else,” Neil said calmly. They had already discussed earlier to try and drag out time as much as possible. Not that they knew it would help anything.

Miranda still had a slight hope that the City Owner would feel it when so many intruded upon the area.

“Oh really? So where is this owner of yours?” Abby sneered, clearly not taking him seriously. “Just cut the bullshit. Orb and all your stuff in a pile on the ground within the next minute. The same goes for your new friends too.”

Neil hesitated at this sudden ultimatum. The plan of buying time was not working at all. Miranda was completely unable to string together any semblance of a plan. The other party far too hostile and unstable to argue with.

“You just want all of us to strip, and then what?” Christen cut in, clearly annoyed. Her stomach was still aching slightly even after the wound was healed.

“Got the curse fixed, it looks like. Dad can be a bit heavy-handed,” Abby laughed. “And well, you strip naked, and then if I feel like it, I will let you live. I am sure that a couple of the guys would be inclined to let you keep your head.”

“Abby, don’t joke like that,” her father said in a playful tone.

“Oh shut up, old man, you can have her.”

Miranda felt the gazes of several of the men land on her body, but she didn’t feel any lecherous intent or lust, just... pity. The worst offender being the damn father who had his eyes on her from the very beginning. Hank’s head turned red in fury as he barely managed to hold himself back from going on a futile rampage as the man even threw Louise in the lodge a quick look.

“What the hell happened to you...” Neil sighed with genuine sadness in his eyes.

“A lot of things, cuz. None of which is any of your damn concern. And by the way,” Abby said, raising her hand. “The minute is up.”

An explosion sounded out as the very space in front of Neil and Miranda was torn apart. But just as quickly as it shattered, it was solidified again by Neil, who also raised his hand, a white glow emanating from it.

Both were still forced back. However, Miranda could see that Neil was outmatched. The attack also served as an opening shot for all hell to break loose.

Levi was the first to move. He was clearly already prepared to go.

“Acceleration

,” he internally muttered as he sped forward, **“Imbue Blade: Fire,” “Imbue Armor: Wind.”** His blade was enveloped in an inferno of flames, and his body turned into a tornado as he soared forward.

A magic swordsman. One of his own design with explosive strength unmatched by any other in their group.

Simultaneously, as he charged forward, a barrage of arrows was launched at Abby by Eleanor. She simply raised her hand and erected a barrier, but it was just a distraction. It gave Neil enough time to use another skill as Levi was teleported to the top of the cliff. Amid a group of low-level archers and casters.

Christen also charged forward, her target being the man at Abby’s side. The one who had inflicted the cursed wound on her in their last clash. And he happily met her once more as

he drew a red scimitar from his scabbard. Glowing veins covered it soon after as he used a skill to make it into a cursed blade.

They smashed into each other as their strength matched the other. It looked like an equal battle at first sight, but it truly wasn't. Christen was a Heavy Warrior focused on strength and toughness. The man a hybrid who used not only his physical stats.

Silas was forced to support her as the scimitar moved in unpredictable patterns, forcing her to block with her shield repeatedly. Silas was trying to assist in healing or redirecting blows whenever possible, but even then, it was barely even.

Neil and Abby also engaged in a duel that looked like they were just staring at each other. But the space in between them shimmered and cracked, and it was as if reality itself was slowly being shattered.

Eleanor had tried to keep assaulting Abby but found herself the main target of the hundreds of people surrounding them. They all avoided the two other big battles as they headed for her, forcing her to run away.

Hank suffered the same fate as he tried to keep enemies off him. His level was at the high end for sure, some of the attackers not even being 25 yet. But the sheer number made him unable to fight back properly, and the wounds on his body kept getting more numerous.

It took only a few minutes for the result of their skirmish to be made clear. Christen took a nasty cut to her cheek as she screamed in pain. Silas tried to help but had also found himself the victim of the many attackers.

Neil was bleeding from his orifices as he still struggled to keep Abby in check. In turn, she looked relatively relaxed as she enjoyed the carnage around her - the result of the battle clear from the beginning in her eyes.

The only ones who had managed to damage her camp were Eleanor, Hank, and Levi. Hank and Eleanor in the process of defending themselves mainly. Levi was the only one who had done any real damage, having killed nearly a dozen people before his many enhancements ran out of power, and he also found himself overwhelmed.

“Retreat into the lodge!” Miranda yelled as she dodged a fireball flying her way.

None of the ones fighting hesitated to do as she said. As it was planned, everyone besides Levi was right outside the protective formation.

Levi, hearing the call to retreat, activated **Acceleration** once more as he sped up significantly, practically flying towards the lodge.

“Oh no, you don’t!”

Abby saw this attempt to retreat and raised both hands towards the fleeing swordsman. Neil did the same as he tried to help his comrade.

All Miranda saw next was everything looking... skewed. Space itself shifted as if two planes of existence tried to overlap with Levi right in the middle.

The next thing she felt was her face being covered in liquid as space returned to normal once more. The lower body of a human still remaining where Levi was just moments prior.

“AAAARGH!”

Turning almost in slow motion, she saw Levi’s upper body on the steps of the lodge. His entrails on the ground as he was bisected from the stomach down.

Chapter 148: Incoming

Everything was buzzing as she acted almost on instinct. A transparent barrier instantly covered the entire lodge, followed by another bubble overlapping with hers only moments later.

Silas charged forward with his healing already on full display to keep Levi alive. Hank quickly came over to the screaming man and forced a healing potion down his throat, quickly flooding his body with vital energy.

“Well done, Neil, I wanted to rip him apart from mouth to asshole. Nice tilting of the axis there at the end,” they heard Abby’s voice say as she walked up to the barrier separating them.

The calmness in her voice stood out, as she didn't appear phased at the barrier's appearance at all. But as she examined it closer, she noticed something a bit off.

"One of space, and another of pure mana? Great, good job wasting my time more than necessary," she said with a bit of annoyance. She could detect the two barriers blocking her from getting to her desired orb, and while the one of space mana was manageable, the one of mana was quite a bit more tricky.

On the inside of the barrier, the outlook in their situation was far from favorable. Abby had even hoped for a second that the annoying magic swordsman would die but was surprised to see his wounds close instantly.

It was a bit eerie to see the entrails on the steps slowly retract themselves as new skin covered the lower half of his body, making him look like a bilateral amputee. That is until small bumps slowly began growing out beneath him, clearly indicating the regrowth of his entire lower body.

Abby just stared at it in fascination as she wondered exactly how powerful the potion they used was. That or the healer had gotten significantly more competent compared to their last meeting.

What was perhaps even more annoying than the swordsman not dying was that she could clearly see the guy still scream and the others in there talking, but she couldn't hear quack. But at least they could listen to her based on their reactions. *It must be that damn barrier of mana.*

They dragged Levi into the lodge, and all quickly collapsed on the ground. Only Miranda was staying outside, keeping an eye on Abby and her army of invaders.

An army that was quickly reorganizing. After the attempt to kill Levi failed, they didn't have any clear plan of action. Hundreds of people just stood looking questioningly at Abby and her father.

The bearded man began yelling out instructions, and it went more or less as they had anticipated. Everyone backed off, Abby included, as ranged attacks started winding up. Soon after, a barrage of spells, arrows, and other attacks hit the barrier.

This was where the two barriers' power became apparent, as every single attack was repelled, not leaving a single sign of damage on either. The two barriers were complementing each other just as much as Miranda and Neil had anticipated.

The barrier of mana made by Miranda blocked the magical attacks flawlessly. It could even take in a portion of the atmospheric mana to keep itself healthy for longer. And as the attackers were all relatively unskilled, they released a lot of extra mana into the air for the barrier to absorb.

Then there was the space barrier, which similarly blocked all physical attacks without any issue. It was a nearly impenetrable defense. Based on the furious look on Abby's face, it even quickly became apparent that she was unable to break the space barrier.

There was one problem, however... time. The many attackers outside didn't damage the barriers, but they were slowly whittling them down. It would disappear on its own after some time, but it wouldn't last more than a day or so based on the current rate of attacks.

Inside the cabin, the atmosphere was more than a little bleak also.

“I thought you said you could keep her busy for a while,” Hank said to Neil as he also drank a healing potion.

“I thought I could... but she has gotten even stronger since last. At the end of the tutorial, she was only a bit stronger than me... if she had been this strong back then, we would have never escaped in the first place... damn it,” he said, cradling his head as blood dripped onto the floor from his eyes and nose.

Hank just sighed as he sat down on the floor. Thinking it a bit of a shame that they were spilling blood all over the newly constructed lodge. A whimsical thought, considering that more blood would likely soon flow within. *The second those shields go down...*

Everyone looked listlessly at the ground, only the two healers doing much of anything. Neil especially looked utterly lost.

“I... I’m sorry...” he cried. “I got you all into this mess... if only I hadn’t...”

“Oh shut up,” Christen scoffed. “We chose to stick by you, so don’t go all pity-party on us.”

“But you forced us into this,” Hank shot back. “We didn’t need this shit.”

Christen, despite her usually quippy mouth, didn't have any response to that. They had dragged Miranda and the family of three into it against their will.

On the steps outside the lodge, Miranda sat and stared at the ground, deep in thought. All of them stared back at her, too, as the others were hidden from sight within the lodge. Making her the center of attention.

"May I ask your name?" she heard as she looked up to see the bearded - Abby's father.

Miranda just shook her head, as she didn't care much for the man's words.

He said, smiling lightly. "I believe this entire thing can be rectified. My daughter is a bit wild, I confess, but she is not the monster you have in your mind. Neil is the reason she is like this. Once he is gone, things will get better."

Miranda once more just shook her head but couldn't help but look back towards Neil.

"You see, Neil has always been the wonder boy of the family. Perfect in nearly everything. This took quite a toll on Abby. She finally came to believe she was his equal only to lose in that final unfair test. It broke a small part of her to lose once more like that. We are only seeking to set things right here.

“So please excuse her crude words. As I said, she usually isn’t like this. And I can promise you that if you choose to join us, you and your comrades will be safe. I am Donald, by the way. Widower even before the system.”

Miranda didn’t much care for his name but wondered why the hell he bothered to include being a widower. Seemed like absolutely useless information to her.

Seeing her remain silent, Donald kept talking. “Please don’t waste your life on protecting someone you have only known for a few days. I swear that you can find a place with me. Find safety. You have seen what my daughter can do. I doubt she can find any equal among humanity in this world.”

She was a bit taken aback at his words more than anything. The wording was just off, and she couldn’t help but look confused up at him.

His smile deepened as he looked down on her. She once more felt the disgusting sensation of his gaze going all over her body. “I believe you would be pleasant company. That we could both find some happiness in this new world. Together.”

At this point, warning bells would go off for anyone, no matter how oblivious. To call the vibe the man was giving off creepy would be an understatement.

As she was still thinking about what to say, her facial expression had clearly revealed her thoughts. The look of absolute disdain and disgust showed only a moment, but it was enough for the man to notice.

“I am offering you a good thing here,” he said, a bit colder than before. “Don’t throw it away for silly reasons.”

Miranda made a faux look of apology, and that seemed to be enough for the man to do a complete 180.

“No problem at all,” he said, practically beaming. “As long as you serve me well, all will work out. I am sure the heart shall follow.”

He isn’t even trying to hide it anymore... she thought, attempting to hide her disgust as much as she could. Where the hell did he get this confidence from? Oh... right. The threat of being able to have her killed at any point.

“Landed yourself another whore?” Abby asked, walking over. Her voice around a tenth as disdainful as the thoughts Miranda held for the man she asked.

“Language,” Donald said, with a tone so bogusly stern it was insulting. Miranda was finding it more noteworthy how he only saw the words themselves and not the insinuation of the words the bad part.

Miranda stood up and went into the lodge as she heard Abby yell behind her to ‘take down the damn barrier’ but ignored it.

Once inside, she looked at the people there. Louise had poured all her mana into the mana barrier; Neil was just staring into the ground.

“Can we try to make a run for it?” Eleanor finally asked, breaking the silence.

“How far will we get? And if you haven’t noticed, we aren’t exactly in a state to run. One of us even less than the others,” Christen sneered. Instantly feeling bad afterward for getting mad at her friend. “Sorry, I just...”

“I know...” Eleanor smiled sadly.

“Christen, Silas, and Eleanor,” Neil said, looking up. “Try to escape. Take Miranda, Hank, Louise, and Mark with you. I will stay here and attempt to keep them occupied... I may be able to buy a few minutes if-“

“Ah, fuck it,” Miranda finally said, disrupting the sad atmosphere. “We all agree that getting killed by that bitch Abby and her creep of a father is the worst, right?”

“Well, yeah, but,” Christen said, confused.

“Great, all in agreement? Then I am going to do something idiotic.”

“What?” Hank asked, confused.

“I am taking a gamble. Chances are, even if it works, we will die anyway,” she explained. “I am going to do something that will very likely anger the ‘owner.’ Not sure what his response will be, but I doubt getting killed by him will be worse than what those animals out there want to do with us.”

“You had a chance to call him all along?” Christen asked, a bit of anger in her voice. “And will he even be able to do anything? If you haven’t noticed, there is an entire army out there, along with a pissed off overpowered space mage.”

“Hell if I know,” Miranda said, having already thrown caution to the wind. “So let’s give it a shot.”

She opened the menu with her mind and saw the prompt appear - the Pylon right beneath them.

Initiate the process to claim ownership of Pylon of Civilization?

Requirements to claim ownership: Slay the current City Owner OR be uncontested in your claim for at least 30 days while maintaining the support of at least 51% of the total population.

Warning: City Owner will be warned upon initiation of the process.

The last sentence was what she gambled on. Without hesitating any longer, she initiated the process, and a quest appeared as she expected.

Quest Received: Contested Pylon of Civilization

City Lord Miranda Wells has initiated the process to take control of the Pylon of Civilization. You must retain control of the Pylon for the remaining duration OR slay the current City Owner.

Time Remaining: 29 days, 23:59:59

Quest Reward: Become City Owner of [Unnamed]

Penalty upon failure: Unable to initiate a new process for control at least 10 years. The City Owner may determine additional punishments.

Smiling, she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She wasn't sure if it was her intuition skill or perhaps just wishful thinking, but she was pretty sure the owner was on his way. The barrier protecting them would stay up for a while longer... hopefully long enough.

She had been so stupid. Despite the owner's words and the constant warnings from Neil and his party... she had still believed she could solve this situation diplomatically. That she could negotiate and reach a positive outcome for everyone involved.

Boy, had she been naive. There was just no negotiating with some people. In retrospect, she should have called the owner back days ago... *I just hope it isn't too late. If he takes more than a day...*

Walking out of the lodge once more, she saw both Abby and Donald standing in pretty much the same place as last. Abby still appearing to study the barriers while Donald waited patiently. Based on his look when she exited the lodge, for her.

Even before going to the edge of the barrier, she made it so they could hear her. Everyone inside the lodge had already quieted down - all waiting for whatever was to come.

"I am happy to see that you have come to your senses. You will not regret becoming mine," Donald said when he saw the smile on Miranda's lips. He had taken it as her surrendering herself. He could already feel the heat build-up in his stomach as his eyes went over her body.

A bit of a waste, he thought. He was going to enjoy her. Enjoy her, and once she was his, end her. Such was his path, after all.

Abby allowed him to act as he did because she was already used to it. She was the only one to know that he was not a widower by chance but by choice. No, she had helped him get rid of her. Half of the insurance money was hers, now wasn't it?

Now his determination had carried over to the new world. His path was recognized by the almighty system. His depravity turned to power. Through the death of others he had

claimed as his own, he could empower himself further. Dozens of innocents having already fallen victim to his ways.

“I must apologize,” she said with a mocking smile. “I already have an ‘owner.’ Wait, that came out wrong... a boss... yeah, let’s go with that.”

Her somewhat delirious words made him frown, and even Abby glanced over with interest.

“I told you, right? This land has an owner. And I just tripped the homeowner’s alarm, metaphorically speaking.”

“What the hell are you on about?” Abby said, having already forgotten the whole ‘owner’ talk. Taking it as hubris from the very beginning.

“Just ignore her and get the damn barrier down,” Donald frowned. Disappointed and angry. Turning to Miranda. “I tried to be nice. But I guess you like it rough.”

Miranda just scowled at the creepy guy. His face was becoming uglier to her eyes by the second. She would have to at least manage to land a punch on his ugly mug before she died. Just as she was considering if a kick would be better, she felt something. Everyone did.

A presence washed over the valley. Confusion overtook the invaders as their gazes flickered about, looking for the source - only Abby looking straight up into the air.

“Something is coming,” she spoke to herself, for the first time with a hint of worry in her voice.

Chapter 149: Anger

Jake felt his vision practically turn red as he flew down. He was still accelerating as he pushed mana into his wings to fly even faster and at his top speed approaching what was once the sound barrier. Hundreds of meters passed every second.

The last time he felt this amount of anger was when he met William the second time in the tutorial when he had felt the same surging bloodlust beckoning Jake to kill him.

He didn't think as he soared through the sky. It would only take him a few more minutes to get there. He was flying to be directly above the Pylon to make his landing more easily. To avoid the trees.

As he got directly above it, he stopped momentarily and stared down. The valley was a natural clearing with few trees covering it, ... so from several kilometers up, nothing was hidden from his gaze.

He saw a transparent barrier surrounding a house. More than a hundred people were attacking it. Miranda sat on the porch of the lodge that hadn't been there before. A man and young woman standing right in front of said barrier.

Too many things were happening for him to wrap his head around it. His anger too high to even bother trying.

So he turned in the air as he began his descent once more. Not bothering to hide... no, willingly throwing out his bloodlust downward. His aura was nearly tangible as he let it wash into the valley below. He wanted them to know he was coming.

Everyone looked confused. Only a single person able to locate the source instantly. The woman was standing in front of the barrier with Miranda. The only one of any consequence from a cursory glance.

Seconds later, he reached the valley.

BOOOOOM!

Without stopping in the slightest, he smashed into the ground - soil, and dust thrown everywhere. His high toughness made the impact not harm him in the slightest despite the small crater where he landed.

“MIRANDA!” he yelled. “EXPLANATION. NOW!”

Even in his rage, he could recognize that the situation wasn't simple. But he wasn't relaxed enough to think straight either. He barely had enough control to not smash into the barrier separating them.

Miranda, on the other hand, felt the bloodlust wash over her as she shivered. She knew this was not the time to mince words.

"We came under attack, and I triggered the process as a last resort. I don't want to claim it or challenge you!" she yelled back.

Jake just looked at her for a second, not getting the feeling that she was lying. His rage died down ever so slightly but was fast reignited when he saw several people walk out of the lodge - four of them newcomers with relatively high levels.

"And they are?" he asked coldly. Was this really just some elaborate trap? He felt the gazes of all the people around him upon him. It reminded him of the time Caroline betrayed him in his meeting with Jacob... which didn't help his anger management situation.

It was the same... surrounded, lured in by people he naively thought he could trust. No... this was different. He was different. He wasn't going to be naïve like then and nearly lose his life. Even if surrounded, he was confident in his ability to at least escape.

And not just escape... but make sure not a single fucking one of them was going to make it away.

“Don’t misunderstand; they are just hiding here as we did!” Miranda tried to explain. His level of anger far higher than she expected. “It is them who have come to kill us!”

She didn’t hesitate to point out the man with the bloody scimitar and the young woman in an obnoxious robe, who were standing there, likely also trying to grasp the situation. A masked human with wings had suddenly crashed down and started yelling at the woman, throwing them a bit of a curveball.

His yellow eyes finally shifted to them - especially the woman who had the highest level besides him, sitting at 59. By far the most potent human he had ever encountered so far. “Your turn. Explain.”

“Hey, I get the whole mysterious masked man persona you’re going for, but I am not particularly fond of that shtick,” the woman said, having gotten her bearings. She had to recognize that the man in front of her was strong... but he was surrounded. And the others were too weak to pose a real threat too. While he was an unknown element, she didn’t for a second believe he wasn’t one she couldn’t handle.

This is why what happened next came as a surprise. With a step forward, Jake disappeared, only to appear right in front of her. While Jake wasn’t overly tall, she was on the small side herself. Meaning she suddenly found herself staring up at a figure one and a half heads taller than herself.

“Explain.”

Jake had to hold himself back from just shoving his dagger into her throat. The minor slight of not taking him seriously was enough for him to want to murder her. He barely

managed to remain rational. A small voice in the back of his head keeping him back from doing something he may come to regret.

However, his action of teleporting into her personal space spooking her far too much to even hear his question, as she quickly blasted herself backward and proceeded to teleport in mid-air and land a good fifteen meters away, her eyes wide.

For the first time, she appeared to begin to believe that perhaps antagonizing him further wasn't necessarily the best course of action.

"Look, we don't care much for that woman Miranda or her friends; we just want that guy in the white and gold robe and his companions. The moment we get him, we will be on our merry way, and hopefully, we will never meet again," she said after calming herself down.

Jake looked at her and back to the man standing with Miranda. Bloodstains were clearly showing that he had recently bled from his eyes, nose, and mouth - the results of a fight they had just before he got here by his estimate. Upon further inspection of his surroundings, he saw even more signs of a fight having taken place.

It was also at this point that Jake truly realized that something was seriously wrong. Not with the situation, it actually seemed pretty damn straightforward, but with his own head.

He had been forced to actually *think* when he began talking to them. His rational mind was starting to do some work to analyze the situation. Why had he been so mad, to the point of nearly going entirely out of control?

His initial anger and surprise were justified when he saw the quest pop up. But a few seconds of thinking should have led him to several possible reasons that didn't include a grand betrayal of his trust. Thinking on it... this really wasn't the first time either.

It really was like with William. Back then, he had completely lost control of himself. He had felt like he wasn't in control of his body at all. In his mind, he had easily written it up as just being a heat-of-the-moment-thing, a one-time occurrence. But now, it had nearly repeated itself.

He feared what he could have done if a barrier didn't separate him and Miranda... he may have even just killed her outright before getting any understanding of the situation. *I will have to figure out what the fuck is wrong with me*, he thought. *But first, I need to figure out this mess...*

The others around him also noticed his silence as they all felt the bloodlust in the air disappear like it was never there, to begin with, and his entire demeanor calmed down as he made a big sigh and let out a big breath.

"Alright... from the beginning. Miranda, if you will," he said, trying to sound as calm as he could. At the same time, he dismissed his two wings to appear more... human. Also, they were a bit distracting, and if a fight truly broke out, he predicted they would create more problems than advantages.

Miranda was naturally surprised at everything that was happening. His seemingly sudden shift in personality from last she saw him. Back then, he appeared relatively calm and collected, and now he had barged in like a beast out for blood... and then back to his quiet self not long after.

After she also calmed herself, she began explaining about Abby and Donald. Abby didn't bother to interrupt either, as she was actually quite interested in why Neil and his party had chosen to stay in the valley and not just keep running as they usually did.

Jake nodded along and noted how she didn't mention anything about a city or the Pylon at all. And from the looks of it, the Neil guy didn't look like he thought anything was off about her explanation. However, he did look confused and a bit listless. Though that may just be the tears of blood.

Abby didn't bother interrupting at all, though she was a bit taken aback when Miranda mentioned her being after a legendary orb that Neil had and that it was the root of their conflict.

"So, as I understand it, Neil and Abby are cousins and got into a fight over an orb, and now they marched into my place and made a mess of it?" he summarized rather coarsely.

"In essence... yes," Miranda nodded. Not entirely agreeing with the overly-simplified summary.

"You got anything to add?" he asked Abby, who just stood there nonchalantly. Her father at her side, showing full confidence in his daughter to handle the situation.

"Not really," she shrugged. "It is bullshit Neil got the orb to begin with. Nothing wrong with reclaiming what is rightfully mine."

Having also heard a bit about the circumstances of Neil, Jake understood what had gone down. And he... didn't really care much. But there was one part of the entire thing he didn't really agree with.

"Nothing wrong with trying to snatch it," he commented. Getting an admonishing glance from both Hank and Miranda and a surprised one from both Neil and Abby. "But I don't really get why it was rightfully yours. You lost; he won. End of story."

"How the fuck is it not unfair that he gets lucky as fuck and gets a test practically tailor-made for him?" she scoffed.

"Didn't you just lose because you were too weak?" he asked. Not even trying to be condescending. These were his genuine thoughts. "Why didn't you just beat the test alone?"

He would have. That, or he would have lost and have no one to blame but his own incompetence.

"I..." Abby began. Not having a quippy answer quite at the ready. Her brief moment of embarrassment only serving to make her angry. "Who the fuck do you think you are anyway?"

"Me?" Jake asked rhetorically. "Just a guy who is annoyed that a bunch of idiots made a mess of his newly commissioned house while he was away. I have a lot of better things to do than deal with your stupidity."

“Then just get me the damn orb already,” she hissed.

“Now why would I do that?”

“Because I fucking said so?” Abby practically roared. “Or do you honestly think I wouldn’t kill you with the rest of them? That I couldn’t? Or are you such an arrogant ass that you think you can beat everyone here alone?”

Jake briefly glanced around him and quickly assessed the situation before confidently turning back to her. “Yes.”

“Abby, my dear, let’s just get rid of this lunatic and finish up here once the barrier is down,” Donald said to his daughter. He, too, was getting rather tired of this whole charade.

“Before that,” Jake said before raising his voice, making sure everyone around the valley could hear him. “Listen up! Attack me, and I will kill you. Stand down, and if Miranda over there agrees, I can offer you a safe place to stay.”

Quickly followed up by Abby also yelling. “If you fuckers don’t do your job, I will personally displace every single limb away from your body after this shit is over. Your head last.”

“Pretty sure the head can’t be considered a limb,” Jake very accurately interjected. A correction that she evidently didn’t find endearing or welcome in the slightest.

“Last chance... leave now,” Abby warned a final time. No matter how much she was grandstanding, she truly wanted to avoid a fight if she could. But more so than avoiding a conflict, she wanted the orb.

While the barrier was up – more precisely, the space-barrier made by Neil - nobody would be able to enter or leave. And she wanted to be rid of the new element, aka Jake, before that happened to avoid having to face him and Neil together.

“The next move is yours,” Jake just said. “Attack, leave or negotiate.”

“Fine, if you really wan-“ she began, but her next action was not words spoken but a slightly raised hand that caused movement in the mana around him. His danger sense having already warned him just before he felt it.

She made her choice, he thought as he stepped forward, teleporting once more. The place where he stood moments earlier exploded behind him.

His step didn’t take him all the way to her, as she was already flying backward the same second she attacked. Likely predicting that her sneak attack wouldn’t succeed in ending the fight. But she was surprised that the near-instantaneous attack failed to even touch him.

Behind the barrier, all of them were highly invested in the fight. Partly because they wanted to see what the mysterious masked owner was capable of, but primarily because him losing would mean them all dying.

Neil was shocked when he saw Jake move. He hadn't adequately felt it the first time, but after seeing One Step Mile for the second time, he began to suspect that it was space magic. But at a level far higher than anything both he and Abby were capable of. It was far from as complicated as what they did... but the quality...

Jake thought for a moment as he saw the woman retreat. The bearded man called Donald, charging towards him with a red glowing scimitar. A type of energy emanating from it he didn't immediately recognize.

Taking out his dagger and shortsword, he blocked the man quite easily. However, he didn't have time to counterattack as space around him constricted once more - this time not to hurt but suppress him.

With a scoff, he opened his eyes wide as he released a ridiculous amount of mana that blew away all the space mana surrounding him, effectively canceling out her space magic. It was similar to when he was ambushed by Caroline and forced to release a large blast of mana to survive. The difference this time being his skill in doing so being far higher, and his body far stronger, thus capable of handling the blast.

Able to move again, he didn't hesitate as he swept his sword forwards. Donald managed to block it but stumbled back from the casual blow. Realizing how utterly outmatched he was in pure stats, he tried to retreat, but nearly just fell on his ass. Leaving him utterly open as Jake plunged Venomfang into his stomach.

“NO!” Abby yelled as she released a massive wave of space magic, sending Jake flying backward.

Less than two seconds had passed since the battle begun. None of the many people in Abby’s army had been able to do anything, yet one of their two leaders was already heavily injured.

Chapter 150: Barely a Fight

Abby was furious when she saw her father take a dagger to the stomach. Not afraid, just angry. She didn’t think the blow was truly dangerous as they had both taken far worse before and walked away easily.

Jake flew back and landed on the ground nearly a hundred meters away. A bit surprised at the speed at which the blast of space mana had reached him. He hadn’t really taken any damage from it, but he had to admit that it did hurt a little.

Standing up straight, he saw the man Donald also get on his feet again. His wound looked like it hurt a lot, but Jake knew it wasn’t fatal. He didn’t coat his dagger in either poison or his blood before attacking, meaning it only infected him with the innate poison found within Venomfang. Not to speak ill of his favorite dagger, but honestly, the venom sucked compared to any of the toxins tied to his profession.

If Donald knew these thoughts, he would have chewed him out without a doubt as he currently struggled with the venom coursing through his body. He could clearly feel his vital energy being consumed as he worked to eliminate all traces of toxicity in him.

“Be careful, his dagger is poisoned!” he warned his daughter.

“You okay?” she asked back, still keeping her gaze trained on Jake.

“I’ll manage. But don’t get hit,” Donald said back, as he also stared at the masked man in the distance.

Not feeling particularly in a rush to finish anything, Jake just looked back at them tentatively. In his sphere, he had already felt several presences behind him - some of Abby’s goons. Trying to launch an ambush without a doubt.

It very likely wouldn’t work on anyone at his level of power, but Jake was an especially lousy opponent to try and do that to. He counted three, which was very fitting. It just happened to be the limit of how many mana bolts he could summon at a time.

His three attackers saw three orbs shimmer into existence and transform into something resembling mana bolts. Except they practically crackled with power. That was all they had time to think before the three bolts flew out, one targeted at each of them.

None of them managed to even put up any semblance of defense before they got hit. Jake stood there unfazed as three explosions sounded out behind him. His eyes never leaving Donald and Abby.

For some reason, Jake hoped that killing those three off would warn the others. Evidently, that was very wrong of him. He soon found himself bombarded with arrows and spells from all directions as Abby's followers attacked.

Their levels were low - the ones he had killed not even above 30. Many hadn't even reached E-grade yet. But he had already made it clear what the consequences would be for attacking. So, he retaliated.

He didn't want to use any more destructive skills or spells than necessary. This was his valley, after all. Why destroy the scenery for no good reason when he had a skill capable of killing without any blood or destruction?

His eyes landed on the ones above firing spells at him. Both of them glowing a piercing yellow color as Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated.

On the cliff, seven people stood. Two archers and five casters. They had just fired off an attack each when suddenly they felt his gaze. Followed by a sudden spike of pain before eternal darkness claimed them. Like puppets with their strings cut, all seven fell to the ground dead.

Sadly for his opponents, only a few had seen what he had done. And those that did see didn't release a second wave of attacks. Abby and Donald, on the other hand, had seen it as clear as day. And both felt a cold shiver run down their spine. They had heard the term 'if looks could kill' but had never imagined someone who could make that literal.

Their fear only got worse as he did it a second time. Then a third. And a fourth. Small groups of people fell to the ground one after another. They noticed that with some of

them, there would be a survivor or two who were just standing there, shivering absolutely terrified.

It 'only' took thirty or so people to die before they stopped attacking. Many were either just standing there frozen or hiding. A few even turned their tails and ran the hell out of there.

"What the fuck are you?" Abby asked with her eyes wide open in shock.

"I believe we've already had this conversation once already," Jake just said while rubbing some dust off his cloak. He had taken a few hits from the small fry, but nothing that could do anything against his armor and high toughness.

"Okay, you fucking win, we'll leave," she finally said. Donald at her side, clearly agreeing, still a bit pale from the venom he had eliminated.

Jake could only sigh. "A friend of mine gave me some good advice not long ago. That leaving alive one whom you have sown bad karma with is stupid."

"I swear that we will never come and seek trouble with you and your people again," Donald said in an almost pleading voice.

"Fine, let's make it easy," Jake said, turning towards the lodge. "Hey Mark, you have seen everything. Are these two trouble or not?"

Mark completely flabbergasted by being addressed so suddenly wasn't quite sure what to say. It didn't help that this was the first time the masked man had talked to him. Even less so when he had literally stared people to death just a few minutes prior.

"I... I don't know," Mark hesitated, looking desperately at his father and Miranda for any kind of support.

Maybe not the best to put him on the spot like that, Jake thought before asking someone else. "Okay, a bit much to put it on you. Miranda, your take?"

"If you hadn't come, they would have killed us without a doubt," she said and then pointed directly to Donald. "And that bastard would have done even worse."

Jake wasn't quite sure what she meant for a second but saw the small shiver as she held her arms around her. While he wasn't the most socially adept at reading people, he got that part at least.

It should be pretty clear that Jake wasn't some moral beacon of any kind. Especially not after the system. He had developed a likely too lighthearted relationship with the concept of murder, and he was most likely far too quick to adopt violence to solve a situation.

And while he didn't know about the moral stances of the multiverse as a whole, his own moral compass made that shit sit right at the top of the list of things that still wasn't fucking okay.

Stepping forward, he appeared right in front of a random group of goons. The guy at the front nearly pissed himself as Jake grabbed him by the neck and lifted him. “Is this true?”

“I-“

Before he could answer, one of the guys behind him yelled out loudly. “Yes!”

Jake saw a rather scrawny looking young man staring back at him. Deep green eyes that were far calmer than Jake expected. He had noted this guy due to his relatively higher level than the others, but even more so as he was one of the few people that hadn’t attacked him.

“Name?”

“Chris!” he yelled back with the same vigor as the ‘yes’ before. And he didn’t even require Jake to enquire further. “He... he took my sister... used her... killed her.”

Through his mask, he saw the young man holding back tears without a doubt drawing out some painful memories. Jake let the guy he was holding up go, making him fall on his ass.

“I guess that settles it,” he said, turning his attention back to Abby and Donald. “Death it is.”

“Fine! Fuck you and fuck this!” Abby screeched as the air shimmered around her. Jake instantly felt her aura take a spike as she grew in power. If he had to guess, he would say she was using some kind of boosting skill akin to his own Limit Break.

Donald, too, no longer held back, fully realizing that this was not the time. Tears of dark blood came out of his eyes as his entire body bulged. One place disgustingly more so than any other. *Him first.*

For the first time, he took out his bow. Before, he hadn’t really been determined to necessarily kill them. Scaring them off was always an option. But now that he had made his decision, he was no longer going to restrain himself.

Jumping back, he avoided an attack as the space in front of him exploded. Donald made a swiping motion with his scimitar as he sent out a red wave of energy, but this too was easily avoided as Jake nocked an arrow, making sure to cut his own hand with it first.

Pulling back the string of his bow, he felt space around him constrict once more. He knew it would collapse around him in mere moments, so he once more released a massive blast of mana. The space mana was once more dispersed, but it also served to hide his channeling of Infused Powershot.

It wasn’t a long channel, but it was enough. He released the arrow in an explosion of mana and inner energy, sending it straight for the head of Donald. The man tried to use a skill to avoid it but suddenly felt himself freeze up as he felt the Gaze of an Apex Hunter pierce into his soul.

Just before the arrow hit, a slate of some kind appeared before him - a slate with a disgusting mural depicting dozens of naked women suffering and a figure with a remarkable semblance to Donald standing above them. Luckily for everyone but the disgusting man, the arrow smashed into the mural shattering it entirely. But somehow, it had been powerful enough to negate the attack altogether.

Donald stumbled back as he coughed up black blood. He raised his head only to see another arrow already coming straight for him.

Abby stepped in and blocked it while simultaneously releasing another barrier of some kind, heading straight for Jake. It was like he got a pane of glass thrown at him. Like one does when confronted with a big piece of glass, he kicked it hard, shattering it.

Could he have dodged? Sure, but he didn't feel like it. His focus currently was to kill the lunatic of a man in front of him. He once more released a barrage of arrows with Splitting Arrow, trying to make it harder for Abby to block it.

She blocked it once more, allowing Donald enough time to get back in the game. Gritting his teeth, he summoned a specter of a wailing girl, looking no older than sixteen. It tried to run, but he grabbed it with his hand and forced it down into the sword, amplifying its glow and the mana it emanated.

Time to end this

, Jake thought as he lifted his bow once more and channeled an Infused Powershot. Once more, a wave of crimson light was sent after him, along with another metaphorical pane of glass.

Instantly he released the Infused Powershot, at the final moment shifting the target to Abby. It broke straight through the pane of glass and forced her on the backfoot as she summoned a defensive barrier to block it.

Before she even blocked it, he was already channeling another Powershot. The wave of crimson light was still heading for him, but this one he didn't fear at all. Before it hit, he covered his entire body in dark green scales. The wave hit him, and he saw a few scales sizzle with energy as it passed through him - a very faint sliver of the power invading his body.

But it completely opened up the man who fired it as he had expected Jake to evade or maybe block it. He hadn't expected him to ignore it.

Donald tried to retreat as he felt something was off but found himself freeze up again. Which was the exact moment Jake released his arrow. In the back, Abby quickly tried to muster up some kind of defense for her father, but at the most critical time felt herself also freeze up as two yellow eyes landed upon her.

The arrow flew true, this time not meeting any obstacle before it hit Donald's head, which didn't stop it either. It didn't just pierce through but shaved off his entire head and upper body as it was obliterated in the wave of power that was his Infused Powershot.

"NOO!" Abby yelled as she saw his headless body fly backward from the momentum of the arrow. Her feelings swiftly shifted from sorrow to absolute fury. "I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU!"

Once more, she exploded in power, as Jake felt a massive wave of space mana heading towards him, leveling the ground in between them. Several of her own men were also getting hit in the process as they were standing too close.

The wave destroyed anything it hit, but upon hitting the barrier surrounding the lodge didn't manage to do jack shit. The only other place where it failed to do anything was upon hitting Jake, who simply tanked it with his scales still active.

He felt a few of the scales chip and break, but nothing a bit of mana wouldn't fix. However, what they couldn't fix was the floating mass of space mana she was collecting above her.

"FUCKING DIE!" She yelled as she threw it at him. Blood flowing from every one of her orifices, ears included. Showing it was a skill she couldn't use easily at all.

This one Jake didn't plan on blocking. But as he tried to dodge, he felt the space around him constrict more than ever before. Like he found himself stuck in a moat. With a giant unstable sphere headed straight for him.

But... luck was not on her side. Because while Jake could barely move, he could still manage to take a step forward. One Step Mile was utterly unaffected as he phased through space and appeared a few dozen meters away.

A pillar of shattered space exploded behind him, sending stone and gravel flying into the air. It was nearly ten meters in diameter and left behind a hole perfectly circular, with no bottom in sight.

Abby once more found herself completely flabbergasted. Her ace was nullified by the man simply taking a step forward. It was a complete joke that her strongest space magic skill was countered by a guy who had unlocked a skill utilizing the concept of space at a far higher level than anything she could do.

Yet she refused to give up, as she released yet another skill. Two bolts that looked a lot like Jake's own bolts of mana appeared, as she fired them after him. *Space mana bolts? Space bolts?* he asked himself as he easily dodged them.

She threw out a few more as Jake began walking towards her. He had already dismissed his bow; it no longer being necessary. Her attacks had waned in strength after the sphere, and she was now just throwing out things in desperation.

Finally, she stopped as Jake fired a single set of Mana Bolts at her. Her space mana now so weak it shattered and made her fall. She was apparently unable to even summon a new one.

Jake kept walking as she crawled backward, fear in her eyes as she pleaded. "Do... don't! I... I'll do anything! I can work for you! Please! I... I can be your whore, do whatever you want, just let me live!"

He heard the words but cared more about what he felt. Very subtly, he felt a sensation around his neck as space mana gathered. Her attempt was just...

“Pathetic,” he said as he swung his head to the side just as a small ring of space mana collapsed where his neck had been milliseconds earlier - a failed attempt at cutting off his head without a doubt.

“Please, I didn’t mean it, you win! I will serve you, I wmgmh-”

Jake swept his hand down and held it over her mouth, muffling her. Tired of her shit. It was barely a fight... he didn't even have to use Limit Break...

The last thing Abby saw was two apathetic yellow eyes staring down at her as Touch of the Malefic Viper delivered her death. Her screams muffled for a few seconds before she went silent.