

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 151: A Bit of Self-Reflection

Jake let go and looked at the corpse on the ground. Her bloodshot eyes still wide open, staring back up at him, with black veins extending from her face and unto her entire body.

Sighing, he turned his attention to the stunned observers around him. Many of them were still getting back up from the blast Abby had released not long ago. Some of whom would never get up ever again.

In an oddly ironic series of events, Abby had ended up killing even more of her own men than Jake had. He had finished off thirty or so, while her blast had killed nearly fifty, which meant that around half of the people that had invaded the valley were now dead. Another third of the survivors had already run off once he started glaring people to death. He had only killed those who kept attacking, while he didn't bother with those who ran.

Jake dismissed his scales as he deposited Abby's corpse into his spatial storage. She was bound to have had a lot of useful items. Next, he went and did the same to Donald's. He didn't care about any of the others, as he frankly doubted they had much he needed.

With that taken care of, he turned his attention towards the big barrier still covering his lodge. It was undamaged, and in a fortunate turn of events, had also protected the pond and waterfall behind it. However, the rest of the valley was a bit of a mess, primarily caused by the blast of space mana earlier.

Behind said barrier were Neil and his group. Neil's mouth was hanging wide open. On several occasions, he had expected Jake to die, but he had effortlessly thwarted the two's efforts every single time. The two people he and his group had failed to even fight for more than a few minutes had been dominated and killed in less than a minute.

The most overwhelming part was the sheer number of attacks he used. At first, he thought the masked man some kind of melee fighter. An evolved light-warrior variant or something. Then he launched powerful spells, both the disruptive mana blast and the mana bolts impressive in their own right. Then finally, he had taken out a bow and fired off arrows that each had enough power to shatter Abby's space barriers. *Is he really human?*

All of that was discounting the scariest thing. The masked man's ability to kill people out of nowhere. His ability to make people freeze up and become defenseless. He wasn't even mentioning the fact that he could grow wings, summon scales, or how he had killed Abby in seconds with some kind of powerful melee skill that only required touch from the looks of it.

He couldn't help but shift his eyes to Miranda. She had mentioned this 'owner' several times, but she mentioned she had never truly seen him fight. Neil had doubted his capabilities, but he would be a fool to do so now. He also couldn't help but question if coming here was indeed a good idea.

Speaking of Miranda, she too was very concerned inwardly. The creepy fuck and his devil spawn of a daughter were gone, but that still left the masked man's potential anger towards her. She didn't fear he would do anything like what Donald planned, but that he would just kill her outright.

Jake, on the other hand, hadn't even considered this. Instead, he stood solemnly contemplating a lot of things... but first, he had to finish cleaning up.

"Everyone, gather over here in front of the barrier," he yelled out to the still stunned people all around him.

Only around fifty people remained in total. The rest were now either dead or had run off, likely to die from the many beasts within the forest, which was also the reason why so many had stayed. Without Abby and Donald, they weren't sure they could even survive the way to any safe place. Not that there was truly any safe place in this new world anymore.

"Yes, boss!"

The first person answering turned out to be Chris, who he had talked to just before. He had survived the blast of space mana and was one of the first to get back up. And the very first to run over and stand in front of the barrier.

Though Jake wasn't exactly fond of the whole 'boss' business, that was something to fix later.

With Chris taking the initiative, everyone followed his lead and went in front of the barrier. Many still very hesitant, but nobody dared to be too slow. They all were afraid due to the leadership-style deeply engraved in their bodies from following Abby. Chris was the only one Jake saw who was showing just a bit of defiance.

“So, how long will this thing last?” Jake asked the space mage.

“If no one attacks it, a few more days at least... but I can remove it at any time,” he answered truthfully. Like most kinds of space magic that he practiced, it was very stable.

“Alright, can you take it down?”

Neil threw a quick glance at his party members before landing on Silas, giving him an idea.

“Can you swear you don’t intend to hurt us?” he asked. His goal was to use Silas’s lie-detector skill. Miranda had shared a lot of information about what happened, but it had been barebones. A detail such as the existence of that skill hadn’t been revealed.

“Right now, I don’t, but I can’t say that won’t change in the future,” Jake shrugged. “Nobody knows the future after all... well, maybe some people do, but I digress, and all that divination-stuff is mainly bullshit in my opinion.”

An answer that didn’t exactly put Neil’s mind at ease. Subtly, he threw a glance back at Silas, and Neil was surprised to see his friend stand there with a confused look on his face. Upon noticing his gaze, Silas shrugged and shook his head, utterly bewildered. *It doesn’t work?* Neil asked himself, frowning internally.

That was... a first. Every person they had encountered so far had worked in except for the disciple during the tutorial trials. Did that mean he was too strong for it to work, or that he had some other skill to block it?

In the end, he would have to try and negotiate their survival and future wellbeing without magical assistance. "I hope that we can reach some kind of understanding where-"

"Take that up with Miranda," Jake interrupted, waving his hand dismissively. The entire reason she had gotten the role of City Lord was so that he didn't have to negotiate anything.

Both Miranda and Neil were a bit taken aback, but both interpreted it as a pardon of sorts. Miranda was afraid of the consequences of her betrayal, and Neil was worried if he would be judged for leading a group of hostiles into his domain.

"Alright then..." the space mage tentatively said as he placed his hand on the ground and closed his eyes. A few seconds later, the space barrier shimmered out of existence, leaving only Miranda's behind. And Jake had already analyzed that long ago.

Without waiting, he stepped forward and walked straight into it. His foot was not blocked by it at all as he phased through it uneventfully. Once more, surprising everyone there.

"What?" Jake asked before explaining. "This barrier is made of pure mana from the environment. Activated by Miranda by channeling the core, and as the owner of the city, it naturally doesn't affect me."

It felt pretty good to stun the people within the lodge with his deep understanding of mana... and totally not the other weird words he threw out.

“City?” “Core?”

Perhaps forgetting that the whole city-business hadn’t been mentioned to any of them yet.

“Miranda, you handle that too,” he quickly delegated. “And find out what to do with those followers of Abby’s that remained behind. Don’t bother hiding anything unimportant for now.”

“Yes!” Miranda nodded enthusiastically.

“Oh, and one last thing... I need a word with you in private. So could the rest of you leave this bubble?”

“Alright,” she agreed. “Hank, can you begin figuring out the situation outside? And Neil, can you guys act as support in case it gets violent?”

“Sure.” “Okay.”

The two answered as they began gathering their things - one of those 'things' being Levi on the ground who had been unconscious the entire time. He looked a bit weird with growths coming out of his lower body, forming his preliminary legs.

Walking out, some of them threw a worried glance at Miranda, who gave them a reaffirming nod in return. She then proceeded to reactivate the effect of the barrier that isolated sound so they could talk peace.

After they were gone, Jake sat down on the ground and let out a big sigh before speaking. "Sorry about before."

"Huh?" she blurted out, confused.

"My outburst earlier. I have some bad experiences with betrayal, and as much as I hate to admit it, I have shitty control over my own emotions at times. I thought the worst despite knowing nothing. So, I apologize," he said genuinely.

"I... I was the one who broke your trust first. It is reasonable enough to think that I may have tried a coup d'état. Speaking of which... how do we get rid of the quest?"

"Oh yeah. That," Jake remembered as he rechecked the quest. Thinking for a bit, he asked casually. "Do you surrender?"

"Eh... sure?" she answered bewildered.

**Quest: Contested Pylon of Civilization has been completed!**

**Quest Reward: Retain control of Pylon of Civilization**

**City Lord cannot initiate an attempt to claim Pylon of Civilization for 10 years. Ability to further punish the City Lord granted. Would you like to add further punishment?**

“I just completed my quest,” Jake said with a smile.

“And I failed mine,” she added.

“Did you receive any punishment besides being locked out of betraying me again?” he asked a bit jokingly.

“No, just that,” she affirmed.

Jake looked at the ability to add further punishment for a while, and while just looking at it, the system made him aware of what he could do and... *what?*



There was quite literally no limit. Jake intuitively knew that he could add anything, and she would be forced to do it or lose her profession and City Lord role.

The thought itself was disturbing. Jake could add a punishment that forced her to stepdance fourteen hours a day or only walk on her hands for eternity if he wanted. Even directly remove her as City Lord. If he was cruel, he could do far worse. The only things he couldn't do was add to the durations she couldn't initiate the takeover-process for, or anything else that was 'impossible' like make her punishment to instantly get a level or something.

He couldn't help but imagine what a man like Donald would have done with this sort of control over someone. Nothing good, that's for sure.

Dismissing the thought of using it for anything, he rejected to add any punishment, but to his surprise, it didn't just go away. It was an open offer. He could add a penalty any time he felt like within the next 10 years, it seems. But at least he could close the menu itself, so he just had to close off the option mentally.

"All right, with that handled, I think you should go out and figure stuff out with Hank and the others. This should be a good opportunity to finally get some damn citizens in this sorry excuse of a city," he chuckled with a smile.

"Sure thing," she nodded as she got up and went towards the exit before stopping in the doorway and turning around. "Thank you."

He looked at her confused for a bit but smiled below the mask, and he answered. "Part of the contract, isn't it?"

“I still need to thank you,” she said as she bowed towards him. “Without you, we would have all either died or suffered fates worse than death today. So from all of us... thank you.”

With that, she left the lodge before he could respond, which was quite fortunate as Jake wasn't quite sure what to say. He had never experienced heartfelt gratitude like that before. Especially not from someone who was still, in many ways, a stranger. The feeling was odd but not unpleasant.

But her heartfelt thank you was why he had to close his eyes and enter meditation at that moment. Not to recover any resources, but to do what his Thoughtful Meditation upgrade was meant to help him with: Think.

Not just once, but several times he had lost control of his emotions. It was clearly something more than just a sudden angry outburst. It was like a flood of emotion overtook him. When he killed William, he experienced it, and today he had experienced it again.

It hampered his ability to think rationally and made killing be the only thing on his mind. Thinking back, he could barely remember his thoughts after he got the prompt from the quest. He did remember considering that Miranda must have done it out of sheer disrespect or thinking he was dead.

Which in itself was nonsensical. The mere fact that the quest was even available to her had to mean that the owner still lived. He hadn't considered that she had activated it due to some kind of emergency either, aka exactly the reason why she had triggered it.

So now the question was, why? It wasn't something he remembered experiencing before the system at all, and he had several moments where he encountered things that should infuriate him. Heck, he found his then-girlfriend and best friend in bed together, and he had managed not to kill either of them.

He felt himself grow angry just at the thought of them but quickly took a deep breath to calm himself. This was officially bad. And he had to admit to himself that it wasn't new either; he just didn't have the real need or desire to reflect on it earlier.

Had his emotions somehow been amplified? No, that wasn't it. His other feelings were clearly still the same; in fact, on the scale of being a beacon of emotion and a wasteland of apathy, he would put himself far closer to indifference.

Today was a good example. Jake hadn't really felt strongly about anything but Miranda's betrayal. Killing Abby and her creep of a father didn't exactly make him feel bad. So it wasn't his emotions that had been amplified. At least not all of them.

So was it only anger that was amplified? No... because he had felt anger before without it being so all-consuming. He was mad at Hawkie for harassing him when they first met, pissed at the King of the Forest and his arrogance, and had plenty of distaste for several of the foes he had fought.

*Anger stemming from betrayal then...* still didn't fit. William hadn't really betrayed him. Back then, he hadn't been angry at William at all, really; the one he was furious at was... *oh*.

It was a betrayal that triggered it, after all. Just not the treachery of others. It was himself all along. Jake had been angry at himself for trusting his girlfriend and best friend despite

all the signs. With William, he had been angry at himself for ignoring the plight of his former colleagues. Today, angry at himself for trusting Miranda with something so important as the Pylon of Civilization without any kind of failsafe or at least an attempt to ensure she wouldn't betray him.

*It fits*, he sighed internally. Now the question was only why... why he reacted as he did. But... even that he had an inkling of an answer to. The source was lying in the trump card that had allowed him to get this far.

***[Bloodline of the Primal Hunter (Bloodline Ability - Unique)] – Dormant power lies in the very essence of your being. A unique, innate ability awakened in the bloodline of Jake Thayne. Grants the Sphere of Perception. Grants an improved sense of danger. Enhances all instincts and intuition. +15% to Perception.***

His bloodline. His greatest strength and ace. It wasn't something he thought about actively during the day as it was just a part of him now. Trusting his intuition over logic, trusting his sense of danger as if it was the epitome of objectivity. Relying on his sphere for everything, even that very moment as he sat in meditation.

But he knew the root of his bloodline was his instincts themselves. It didn't necessarily grant him anything others didn't have. It just cranked it to absolute-11.

Everyday spatial awareness transformed into a literal Sphere of Perception. Intuition made nearly a prophetic power - any living being's innate sense of danger made into something that could only be called precognition or just straight-up clairvoyance.

So didn't it make sense that the feeling most enhanced of all was his survival instinct - his sense of self-preservation. So when he felt his sense of self was threatened, every single

cell of his body would strive to make the optimal decision to eliminate that threat. Thus invoking a strong emotion to act and find a solution as quickly as possible.

But as he couldn't exactly kill himself... he would have to eliminate the doubt. And with the reptilian brain in charge during those moments of rage, it could do only the simplest of things. Kill whoever or destroy whatever was associated with the doubt to 'fix' it.

Now, did it make sense to think that you could fix every problem by killing something? Absolutely not if you thought about it for more than a few seconds. But instincts weren't exactly known for being calculative.

He didn't know if this guess was right, but in an odd sense of irony, his intuition told him he was at least very close. And he also had a feeling that parts of his bloodline would lead to other... complications down the road. Intuition once more approving.

## Chapter 152: Killing Monsters = Loot 4.0

Jake felt a bit better after getting a better understanding of his own emotional situation and even deepened his insight into his bloodline. Perhaps it was indeed just a faux feeling of enlightenment, but it lightened his heart, nevertheless.

At least enough to move one point down on his list of things to do. One of which was to check his many status messages he had gotten during the fight with Abby and her scumbag dad. Speaking of which, he began with the kill message for him.

***\*You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 51 / Aspiring Blade of Debauchery - lvl 65 / Salacious Malefactor – lvl 38] Experience earned.***

*Right, that confirms it; he was a sick fuck through and through,* Jake thought as he read the name of that guy Donald's class and profession. Like, seriously. His class reminded him a lot of the Aspiring Blade of Nature he had fought during the tutorial, except instead of focusing on nature, this guy focusing on being a god damn degenerate.

Even the profession was fucked up. Did the dude seriously have a profession related to sexually assaulting people? Was that seriously a thing?

He hadn't seen many examples of classes and professions, and it quite honestly shouldn't have come as a surprise to him, but nevertheless, he found himself dumbstruck. He knew the system was boundless and that it allowed one to walk pretty much any path to power. The Viper had mentioned that time and time again. But in some hopeful and naïve corner of his mind, he had hoped that people like this guy wouldn't - no, couldn't - exist.

Seriously. Salacious Malefactor. It used colored language and fancy terms, but it basically could be read as 'lustful rapist'. The guy had to make a conscious choice to pick that profession during his profession-evolution too. He had *chosen* to be that.

The only positive thing he could say about the guy was that he was now dead.

Moving on, he went to the sick fuck's daughter, Abby.

***\*You have slain [Human (E) - lvl 59 / Disciple of Kallox - lvl 77 / Authoritarian Leader - lvl 41] Experience earned.***

Her class and profession were both a lot more typical. The class was clearly related to that Kallox fellow mentioned. Jake did wonder exactly how strong he was, but the guy didn't appear that impressive from what little he had heard.

Then again, Jake's view was pretty skewed. He had already learned that most humans didn't even know about the existence of literal gods and even more believed them to be some mythical entities that didn't really exist in any tangible sense.

Her profession was also relatively tame - a social-type profession that he hadn't seen before and likely a big part of the reason why she kept her merry band of followers around. As to what it actually did, he, of course, had no way of knowing.

Next, he went on to something he would actually enjoy. Well, not the first part, but hopefully the one after that.

He summoned Abby and Donald's corpses and threw them on the ground in front of him. In retrospect a pretty bad idea as it ended up getting even more blood on the floorboards.

But what one doesn't do for loot. The act of stripping down the two was a bit much, but Jake really felt like it was a waste not to. However, he did have the decency to leave Abby still in her robe. He could have the other people take that robe later if they wanted it. As for Donald? Yeah, fuck that guy.

Jake had already noticed that the rings usually merged with their bodies had reappeared on their fingers after their deaths. The same was true for the two necklaces.

Taking off everything of value took a while, and most of it was of no use to him - the ones from Abby especially. They were either for casters or had space mana requirements or even being bound to someone with relation to the Kallox guy. The descriptions even said he was the creator.

*I guess I can bribe that Neil guy with them.* He did find some things of use, though - a ring from Abby and two items of interest on Donald.

***[Ring of Brilliance (Rare)] - A ring with a rare gem crafted by a very skilled jeweler. The high quality of the mana in the gem grants the user increased mental stats. Enchantments: +50 Intelligence, +50 Wisdom, +35 Willpower.***

***Requirements: Lvl 45+ in any humanoid race.***

The ring had the same name as one he had found back pretty early in the tutorial. Or maybe found was the wrong term as he had also looted that ring off the corpse of a female caster he had killed. Disregarding that, this one was two rarities higher and offered many more stats while also holding a higher level-requirement.

Now he already had two rings, and more than that didn't work. System rules and all that. The one he planned on replacing being the worst of them. Naturally



***[Ring of the Jade-eye Tiger (Uncommon)] – A ring created by embedding the crystalized eye of a Jade-eye Tiger into a band. The Records of the tiger powers the enchant, granting some of the beast's might to its wearer. Enchantments: +20 Perception, +15 Agility, +15 Strength.***

***Requirements: Lvl 30+ in any humanoid Race***

His other ring had the exact same stats, though as a higher amount and different distribution.

***[Ring of the Ruby-eye Tiger (Uncommon)] – A ring created by embedding the crystalized eye of a Ruby-eye Tiger into a band. The Records of the tiger powers the enchant, granting some of the beast's might to its wearer. Enchantments: +30 Strength, +20 Agility, +20 Perception.***

***Requirements: lvl 40+ in any humanoid race***

Of course, it wasn't a contest which one to replace. Jake's only regret was that he would lose stats he actually used and needed. Well, used and needed more. Maybe the increased intelligence would actually prove supremely useful with his newfound magical abilities.

Intelligence was still his lowest stat by quite a bit, and this ring alone would give him more than a 10% boost. Nearly even putting him at the cap of how many stats he could gain in intelligence from equipment, aka a 20% boost maximum. With his gloves already providing 35, it would put him at a substantial 85 bonus out of an 89 maximum.

His equipment wasn't something he really thought of often. But he had to admit that it was without a doubt one of his many advantages over other survivors too. His armor and gloves were both from the Nest Watcher and offered solid defenses and stats. His necklace offered the quite frankly overpowered and ridiculously convenient spatial storage, and his mask was increasing his maximum mana by a ridiculous 25%.

It was just passive bonuses that, by nature of being passive, didn't really enter his thoughts on a daily basis. Heck, he forgot he had a mask on half the time.

Which isn't to say he didn't appreciate getting better equipment. Taking off his old ring, he put on the new one, losing 20 perception, 15 agility, and 15 strength, but gaining 50 intelligence, 50 wisdom, and 35 willpower in the process - trading 50 'good' stats for 135 'okay' stats in the process.

The sensation when swapping the stats was barely noticeable and actually made him feel slightly weaker. Which made sense as he lost physical stats but gained mental ones. Overall he was somewhat confident he had gotten stronger.

As for the old ring, he decided just to give it to Hank. The man looked like he needed equipment pretty bad after all.

The rest of Abby's loot was useless to him, as he already noted earlier, so he moved on to Donald's two things he found noteworthy. The first of which was a pair of bracers.

***[Leather Bracers of Peerless Deflection (Rare)] - Bracers made from tempered leather from a powerful E-grade beast. Produced by an even more powerful craftsman. Borrowing from the Records of the beast it is made from, these bracers have the ability***

***to deflect range attacks when infused with mana. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +25 Agility, + 15 Endurance.***

***Requirements: Lvl 40+ in any humanoid race***

These ones were actually pretty damn decent with excellent stats and a magical ability attached to them. In fact, the man had pretty decent stuff overall; it was too bad that Jake had better. *Oh well, more stuff for Hank.*

Looking at his old bracers, he got a strong sense of nostalgia. They were the first piece of equipment he had found in the tutorial and had been with him from before he even got his profession. They had, if his theory was right, led to him unlocking the Shadow Vault of Umbra skill. A skill that had gone on the backburner recently but had been instrumental to his survival in the tutorial.

***[Leather Bracers of the Novice Rogue (Uncommon)] – A pair of leather bracers made of fine leather, originally designed for new initiates in the Order of Umbra. Enchantments: Self-Repair. +5 agility, +3 strength. Increases the effectiveness of all stealth skills, further amplified while remaining hidden in the shadows.***

***Requirements: Lvl 5+ in any class or humanoid race. Stealth-based skill.***

These he didn't plan on handing out but instead save for himself. A piece of memorabilia, if you may. Taking them off, he deposited them into his spatial storage and put on the new bracers. Once more feeling the small rush of stats after binding them to him.

The deflection ability he would have to test later. For now, he moved on to the last thing the man had dropped, and without a doubt, the most... interesting.

***[Scimitar of Debauchery (Epic)] - A cursed blade made by the wicked, for the wicked. Crafted from steel that has soaked in the blood of the innocent has left a powerful curse of resentment on the blade. A curse that can be further strengthened by adding more souls of innocents. Wield with caution, for the curse does not only affect those it strikes. Enchantments: Curse of Debauchery***

***Requirements: Humanoid race***

Once more, like the Blade of Nature, he had strong suspicions that this blade was the source of Donald's class. A fucked up class for a fucked up man. Granted by - if the description was accurate - a fucked up sword.

But despite its fucked-upedness it was still impressive in its own right. First of all, was the requirement to use it. It didn't have a level required, and the only other items Jake had seen with that was Soulbound items. Which this one evidently wasn't.

It only had a single curse placed upon it. A curse powerful enough to bring it to epic-rarity based solely on its merits. Or demerits.

He also had a sneaking suspicion that it hadn't always been epic. It stated that one could add more souls to it, as ominous as that sounds, to strengthen it more - something Donald had done plenty of without a shadow of a doubt.

Now, the question, if he were going to use it, would be a resounding fuck no. Sure, it was likely better than his Shortsword of Icy Winds, but his shortsword had the advantage of not being literally cursed.

The only thing he couldn't help but wonder was if Donald had been fucked up from the start or if the blade had made him that way. A mystery he quite frankly didn't care about solving. So Jake just threw the blade in the corner of his spatial storage. Maybe he could still find a use for it later or forget about it entirely until the end of time.

Being done with all immediate tasks, he believed it was time to make his presence known once more. Walking outside the cabin, he saw Miranda skillfully conversing with the many survivors who followed Abby and Donald. Hank and Neil together with his party at her side.

The moment he was seen, the talking quickly died down as everyone turned to him. He felt the social pressure and spoke a bit forcefully.

"Miranda, what have you learned?"

"Well, according to them," she began, signaling to all those around, "they were more or less all forced into following her, either by circumstance or directly. They tell me that..."

Jake listened as she explained a bit more of the history of how Abby had gathered a crowd to begin with. About how their tutorial had been rather dangerous initially, even more so than Jake's own. At least if you only spoke of the outer area. They were forced into combat constantly from day one.

In fact, this was the primary reason why Abby had any followers at all. Why she was the leader, it was entirely due to her power. Most of them despised her, her father even more so. But she had been strong from the very start. Donald and her hiding their wickedness until they were powerful enough to stand unopposed.

To call her a good leader would be a straight-up lie. She had abused, killed, and forced them all into doing things they didn't want to. Any they met were given the ultimatum of either joining her or dying. If someone showed too much talent, they had the 'mysterious' tendency to disappear after either she or Donald asked for a private meeting.

This just reaffirmed Jake's theory of why she kept them around. Perhaps, in the beginning, it was done to have safety in numbers, but later it was clearly just to farm experience for her profession. As for Donald, his reason for keeping the group around was equally pragmatic but far worse.

He had already noticed it before, but their group only had three women remaining. In other words, of the more than 100 that had been in Abby's group, less than one-twentieth were female. Two of them were old in their seventies or maybe even eighties. The last woman was young. But she was... scarred.

Something Jake learned she had done herself. She had taken a knife and cut off her hair, cut her own face and body all over. The scars were not healing. Likely due to her own wish for them not to. She was also the sole survivor of the massacre that had taken place earlier, the two elderly women dying from the space mana explosion.

As for the rest of the women in their group... he could only imagine their fates. Actually, scratch that; he wasn't going to imagine it.

“So, are they staying?” he asked after hearing her long explanation and summary of what she had learned while Jake had an existential crisis in the lodge.

They had already learned of her profession as a City Lord and the fact that the area was free of beasts. She had credited that to him as the Owner of the land without providing further specifics about why or how.

“Yes, all of them are,” Miranda nodded. She had already added them as official citizens and registered them in her interface.

“How about you guys?” Jake asked, turning to Neil and his folk. Contrary to everyone here, those five had the ability to leave this place relatively safely. After Levi was healed, that is.

“We have agreed to stay too. To pay you back for what you and Miranda have done for us. Also... we have wandered enough. To have a place to call home is a valuable thing. It would be foolish for us to reject the offer,” he answered, his party members nodding in agreement, before adding. “As long as you allow us, of course.”

“As I said before, that is entirely up to Miranda. She is the City Lord here, not me. But I do have one task for all of you,” he said, smiling a bit deviously. “Go clean up my lodge.”

## Chapter 153: An Agreement With the Incompetents(?)

The next few hours were relatively peaceful as everyone worked together to clean up the valley. Neil and his party were in the lodge scrubbing the floorboards like their lives depended on it, while all the others went around and gathered up the corpses of their former comrades.

Nobody judged others for looting them either. All the equipment was sacked, and to Jake's surprise, offered in a big pile to him and Miranda without any prompt. Showing once more why both Donald and Abby had pretty good gear for their level. They had hoarded everything.

Jake, of course, didn't care for it and told Miranda to handle that too. Damn, it felt good just to delegate all his responsibilities away.

He also found time to drag Hank to the side and hand him the stuff from Donald. Which, Hank, much to Jake's surprise, rejected adamantly. Not because of the former owner, but because he didn't see any need for it.

During Jake's absence, he and Miranda had plenty of conversations about the future, and Hank had decided to focus nearly entirely on his profession moving forward. To lead the building initiative. With their number of citizens increasing nearly tenfold, there was naturally a need for new housing, which he would take charge of. In other words, he was now the de-facto leader responsible for infrastructure in his city. Nice.

Which left Jake with a bunch of stuff he didn't want but, on the other hand, didn't want to throw away. After going over the loot situation, he entered his lodge once more, and for the first time, got a good look at it.



It was more spacious than he had first anticipated. However, that may just be the lack of furniture. The cellar was well-hidden as they had agreed, and there was even a lovely small door leading onto a porch overlooking the pond and waterfall. It was better in every way than he expected, and damn impressive they had managed to make it in less than a week.

His entrance caused quite the disturbance for the four people cleaning it. Jake looked at them and noticed how they were all cleaning it without using magical abilities at all. Between them, they had to have a skill that could somehow help, wouldn't they? Then again, the best he would be able to do was to... actually, he could probably use Alchemist's Purification to get rid of it. *Yeah, let's try that.*

He hadn't really used the skill before besides purifying water. He extended a tendril of mana as he deployed the purification skill. At first, it didn't quite work, likely because the floorboards weren't considered an alchemical ingredient, but after a bit of a push, all the blood just suddenly evaporated.

Neil just stared dumbstruck at him. "Could you do that all along?"

"Seems so," Jake just shrugged, ignoring the glances he got from Silas, Eleanor, and Christen. Especially Christen. "Now that you are free, I think we should talk."

With those words, he sat down on the floor and crossed his legs, motioning for the four of them to do the same. Levi was unsurprisingly still out cold. But he should be back up within the day. He had chugged down one of Jake's own health potions after all.

After they were all sitting comfortably, or as comfortably as they could with a masked man who could kill them staring them down, Jake spoke. "Since you want to stay, I guess we should discuss what exactly that will mean."

The reason behind it was straightforward. Except for himself, the party of five was the most powerful by a landslide. They could easily wipe out everyone else if they so desired.

"What do you mean?" Neil asked. He had an idea, very much in the same vein as Jake's, but wanted confirmation, nevertheless.

"I won't be around all the time, which means someone will have to handle things when I am not here. Things that require strength, so we won't have a repeat of what happened today. And as the most powerful people besides myself, that falls on you guys," Jake spoke candidly.

"So we are to act as guards or what?" Christen asked, clearly not approving.

"Nah, shouldn't really be necessary. We got a good bunch of people now, and I doubt they would dare cause trouble any time soon. I just need you to back up Miranda's decisions. To be the tough hand that forces things through if her soft approaches fail to work," he explained.

"I think we can figure something out," Neil said after thinking a bit. "But won't we also need to keep improving our strength? I fear we will fall behind and be unable to perform that role if we just sit around."

Jake had naturally already considered that. “Once again, you won’t be guards. And while there aren’t any beasts in the city area, there are plenty right outside. We are still in the outskirts of the forest, and from what I have seen flying over it, you should be able to encounter several beasts of significant power further in. I would even expect quite a few D-grades in the deepest parts.”

“D-grade...” Neil frowned. “Aren’t we in danger of one of them coming here?”

“I doubt it,” Jake shrugged. “They have very little reason to hunt us actively. We won’t give them worthwhile experience. It also isn’t a permanent problem as I will hunt them down before long.”

Neil sat there a bit, waiting for the punchline, but nothing came. *This is D-grades... could it be?*

“Have you ever met any D-grades before?” Neil asked. Because he and his party had. The disciple of Kallox in their tutorial had been D-grade. Only in the early stages, but D-grade, nevertheless. And he had been... overwhelming.

“Of course I have. On that note, there are two caves only a few kilometers from here, both in opposite directions. I have only been to one of them, but I would advise you not to go too deep. There is a biodome of sorts deep within, and a real nasty D-grade mushroom monster resides there. And I think I pissed it off last time I went, so it may still be irritable if you chose to check it out, so be careful,” Jake courteously warned them. It would suck to have them all sucked dry by the Indigo Mushroom right after joining his city.

“Pissed it off?”

“Yeah, I just fought it a bit until it got pissed, so I took off. The damn thing is the size of a dozen football fields, and I wasn’t entirely confident in outlasting it,” he explained. *I guess I should go again soon*, he thought. Though he still needed to make a better poison for it first. But he didn’t have time with his hunting sessions with Hawkie and all that fun stuff. Also, he had to get back to that damn bird soon.

“Anyway, we are getting sidetracked!” Jake continued. “So, do you agree to help out?”

“Alright, I promise,” Neil agreed without thinking much about it. The more he talked to the mysterious owner, the harder he found it to understand him.

“Great. So, what is up with that orb your cousin went crazy for?”

*Finally, it came*, Neil thought as he steeled himself. He had expected it. He also felt his comrades freeze up momentarily at its mention. It was a legendary item. An item better than any of them had seen even close to before. So, of course, they feared he wanted it... along with what else he would potentially demand.

“It is made only for Disciples of Kallox, so I don’t thi-“ he tried, but...

“Yeah, yeah, just give it here, let me check it out,” Jake said, waving his hand expectantly.

Neil sighed in defeat as he lifted it up from beneath his robes and placed it together with its chain in the owner's open palm.

From behind his mask, Jake could see the orb and first noted how small it was. Identify, however, confirmed that it indeed was an extraordinary item in many ways. The grade alone making it very desirable.

"Neat," he said as he gave it back to Neil. The young man was just staring back at him in confusion and then down to the orb that was back in his own hands.

"That's it?" Neil asked, feeling more confused by the minute.

"What? Oh, I don't want it. I can't use it anyway, and even if I could, I wouldn't. It isn't even that interesting. Its high rarity is clearly because of the comprehension of Kallox's concept of space within. In every way, it is an item made for his disciple and quite honestly has little value for anyone else, much less someone who isn't a space mage themselves," Jake quickly clarified.

To sum it all up, the orb was useless to him. Not that he would have taken it even if it wasn't. He wasn't going to claim to be some saint who wouldn't have taken it if it proved supremely useful, but he was, as a general rule of thumb, not going to rob people.

A sentiment that clearly took Neil by surprise. Especially Jake's calm explanation of why he wouldn't even want it. It did hurt his pride a little to see the item he valued the most criticized, but he wasn't going to cry about it.

There was still a bit of tension until Eleanor couldn't hold it in anymore and exclaimed in laughter, "this is just too funny... seriously way too funny."

She had spent the last weeks of her life running to protect that damn orb with her friends, and now it was just casually dismissed as 'not even that interesting.' It honestly all just felt like one big joke.

Her laughter, however, did a lot to lighten the mood in the lodge. The tenseness of it all slowly dissipated as Christen joined in on commenting how absurd their situation was, with Silas just snickering to himself.

"Hey, mystery-man, what is your class anyway? Jack of all trades?" Christen finally asked, unable to hold back the question burning in her mind.

"Archer, upgraded to a type of hunter," Jake answered. It wasn't really something he saw any use in hiding.

"Hunter?" Eleanor asked, confused. "Some mage variant? Magic Hunter? Mage Hunter? Caster-Hunter?"

"First of all, those names suck, each one more than the one before," he answered. "Second of all, it has nothing to do with magic. To be perfectly honest, I don't even have any mana skill, really."

"Pretty sure I saw you fire off some beefed-up mana bolts," Christen butted in.

“Doesn’t require a skill to do that: just pure mana control and manipulation. A good piece of advice I would give you is to practice using mana. All of you,” Jake advised the party of five.

All of them looked at him a bit bewildered before one of them finally asked. “How?”

Which was around the time where Jake came to realize that was actually an excellent question. Precisely how did he manipulate and control mana so easily? Well, not easily, but naturally.

“Hm... think about how you put mana into a skill when using it, and then try moving that mana, just without using any skill. Just a tiny sliver, enough to form a string or a ball in the palm of your hand,” he tried explaining.

“Not sure I get it... how am I supposed to use the mana without a skill?” Neil asked.

“Just feel its movements in your body and control it. Even now, you should feel it in your body, like a current running on your skin. The exact same is true for stamina. Though I would be cautious with stamina because if you control it in unforeseen ways, you may end up blowing off a limb or two,” Jake once more tried explaining, tagging on a warning at the end.

An explanation that once more was just met with utter confusion from all of them. Jake tried again to make them feel for the mana, or in Christen and Eleanor’s case, their inner energy.

The conversation had entirely devolved from what it had initially been about as Jake slowly felt his frustrations grow.

“Seriously, can’t you feel the mana in the air, though?” he asked Neil.

“I am aware of it, and I can vaguely get a sense of it, but... I don’t think I ‘feel’ it as you describe,” Neil answered a bit sheepishly.

“You,” he said, pointing to Christen. “How does it feel when you use a skill?”

“Eh... well I think of using the skill, and then I do it... you know, it just feels normal, I guess?” she said, equally sheepishly.

Jake felt his head was about to explode. Were these people absolute morons? Had they spent no time at all practicing anything? Didn’t they have the faintest curiosity towards all the new energy types and how to use them? No desire to understand what their new powers were capable of at all?

He was seriously beginning to doubt putting faith in them at all to defend his city. Or was there just something different about his approach to mana? He had to dig more.

“Neil, when you manipulate space, how do you do it?” he asked pointedly.



“I use one of my skills that do so,” he answered. Uselessly.

“Have all of you seriously never used mana outside of a skill?”

To which he got no answer. Only four people looking down on the ground embarrassed as if they had just been scolded. Which, in essence, they had. Jake felt like pulling out a few hairs at how utterly incompetent they were.

“Alright, homework for all of you. Start to practice actually controlling your mana or inner energy outside of skills. You should be able to figure it out if you try hard enough,” Jake more or less ordered them. “Also, take these things and split them among you. I don’t need them.”

He threw a bunch of things out of his spatial storage and onto the floor. Equipment dropped by Abby and Donald that he didn’t want or need. A few of them could only be used by Neil as they required the Disciple of Kallox class.

The others were mainly scooped up by Eleanor and Christen, who split them among each other. Though Jake suspected they were saving some of the things for Levi whenever he woke up.

“With that taken care of, get the hell out of my house,” he said a bit jokingly. “And ask Miranda to come in after you. I need to speak with her too.”

“Alright, I will tell her,” Neil nodded as Christen went and picked up Levi, who slept on the floor. Why they had carried him in there again was still a mystery.

Just as they left, Jake couldn’t help but add. “One last thing. Don’t betray the promises you made today. We clear?”

To which he got four grave nods. The faint wave of bloodlust he let loose with the words clearly not harming his intimidation-factor in the slightest.

## Chapter 154: Clouds & Brimstone

Jake flew up into the air as he headed towards the cloud island once more. His mood was pretty good for most of the flight, but he ran into one tiny little issue a few hours later. He couldn’t find it.

Now, how does one lose a giant cloud the size of countries with a tree on it the size of a mountain? Quite simple; you just need to have the same sense of direction as Jake. How it was possible for him to be that incompetent at finding things with his supernatural intuition was quite frankly a miracle.

During his descent, he had been a bit in a hurry and hadn’t really bothered considering how to get back again. In fact, he had barely registered what direction he was supposed to go. He had a general idea and was pretty sure of himself, to begin with, thinking that heck, how could he miss it? Well, it turns out he could.

It was kind of impressive when you think about it. Especially considering that Jake's monstrous perception allowed him to see hundreds of kilometers away. Sure, many things obstructed his vision, but he could still see quite far.

Up in the air, it was a bit harder as countless clouds and a constant mist covered everything, making it hard to see more than a few tens of kilometers away, even with his perception.

And while he found that fact plenty worth complaining about, his perception did end up being what led him back once again.

A trip that should only have taken half an hour tops ended up being a half-day journey. But in the distance, Jake finally spotted it - a giant mass of clouds. Occasional purple flashes of lightning jumping between the trees was the first thing that caught his eye, and the rest of the journey was straightforward from there.

He had ended up being a bit higher than expected this time and was floating well above the island. But with it in sight, it wasn't hard to make his way down there. Now his next objective was just to find his and Hawkie's own private mini-cloud island. That was where they had parted, after all.

That part turned out to be super easy, barely an inconvenience. While many smaller islands were floating around the giant ones, the ones holding trees were very sparse. From the directions he had come upon the island, he also had an excellent general idea of where it was.

He still had the Pylon act as a compass of sorts after all, and he could remember that there weren't any large-scale cloud islands between it and the massive cloud country, meaning it had to be on that side.

This was then the point where he remembered one of his forgotten skills - Hunter's Tracking. As luck would have it, he had become quite familiar with the mana signature and general aura of Hawkie over their many days spent together.

Activating the skill heightened his senses as he focused on finding Hawkie. The skill did its work better than expected, and nearly instantly, it felt like a particular island lit up in his eyes. In the air, it was like several small mist-like trails came into existence. He instinctively knew these were trails left by Hawkie.

Flying to the island, he found it deserted. It was kind of expected, but still a little disappointing. In retrospect, however, it was likely for the best. He needed to meditate and refill his dwindling mana and stamina reserve anyway.

Sitting down with his legs crossed, he entered meditation as he thought back to his last talks with Miranda back at the city.

The plan moving forward was relatively simple. They now had more than fifty people and would begin construction of a place to actually live. The valley had been designated as a no-go zone, with the barrier around the lodge remaining indefinitely.

As long as it wasn't attacked, it would sustain itself solely from atmospheric mana. Jake and Miranda were the only ones who could walk through it by default, so it would serve as a great way to ensure no one getting close to the Pylon. To make things better, Miranda had figured out how to ping him with a bit of an exploit. She could offer another to take

up the position of City Lord, but to do so would require an acceptance from Jake, meaning he would get a system-prompt. In other words, she could offer it to Hank, Jake would get a prompt, and Hank could then just decline it with Jake notified. The only issue was that she couldn't offer it to the same person within a period, but that shouldn't be an issue. She was also only to call him in case of emergencies.

With Neil and his party staying, a modicum of safety was also ensured anyway. Jake would guess that the five of them were pretty far up the earthling's power ladder. They also had the advantage of working well together and being a somewhat balanced team. Their lack of understanding of basic energy manipulation was a big problem, but he hoped they could learn it quickly.

Before he left, he also gave Miranda a few things. Some equipment he knew he would never get to use, some books with general knowledge, and the notebook Jacob had given him. Jake had skimmed it through already, and it mostly contained basic knowledge of the system as well as the man's own thoughts. But he also discovered that it contained knowledge of how a Pylon of Civilization worked and the role of a City Lord. Needless to say, it was beneficial for her. As to how Jacob knew Jake would get a Pylon... well, it was pretty obvious as the Viper had told Jake that him being a Progenitor wasn't exactly a secret, and the only way to become a Progenitor would be to kill a D-grade boss and hence be able to claim a Pylon. It was a simple deduction, so no divination-bullshit involved with that one.

He also gave her a bunch of potions. Which meant it was also time for him to begin making some more. He had spent two entire weeks just making potion after potion upon first returning from the tutorial, and now less than two weeks later, he already felt like he needed more.

It put his mind at ease, however, to have given them out. Many of them were for Neil and them to use during their leveling sessions, with the rest being saved for emergencies. He had also more or less ordered her actually to spend some time training and getting her class upgrade.

On that note, he had also remembered an old item he still had in this spatial storage.

***[Akashic Tome of the Lucenti Mage (Unique)] – Allows the user to acquire the class Lucenti Mage if compatible.***

***Requirements: Lvl 24-99 in any class. Compatible user.***

He had thought of offering it to her, but after a bit of questioning, he was pretty sure she wasn't compatible. And even if she was, she didn't have any light magic yet, making him suspect that even if she could technically use it, her affinity towards the Lucenti scroll of magic wasn't very high.

He did consider giving it to her anyway and finding someone who could use it among the survivors. That thought he also threw away, more due to selfish reasons than anything else. He had a solid feeling the class would be powerful, much like Neil and Abby's Disciple of Kallox. The Great White Stag had been strong after all.

Time slowly ticked by as he meditated, and soon a few hours had gone by. His tracking skill told him Hawkie had been there only a few hours before he arrived, making him guess it was either hunting on its own or on a trip back to wherever it went once in a while.

As he didn't really want to go hunt solo just yet, he took out his cauldron and began doing some good old alchemy. Stamina potions were the most pressing at the moment, so he started with them by taking out some common-rarity Green Lavender and Evergreen

Grass. On another side note, he was finally below half of his storage of the three basic lavender types. And nearly entirely out of the Inferior-rarity ones. He would have to find a new source of ingredients at some point or actually begin gathering alternatives himself.

Five batches of stamina potions later, he detected a presence coming his way. A presence he recognized as his feathery friend.

**[Galesong Hawk – lvl 94]**

The hawk detected him a few moments later and threw him a questioning glance.

“Yeah, I sorted things at home. It luckily wasn’t as bad as I feared,” he said, putting the bird at ease. Not that he was sure it was actually concerned or just annoyed and surprised at his sudden departure.

He leaned a bit more towards the latter as the first thing the damn bird did was to demand more potions. Only reinforcing his theory that Hawkie thought of him as a potion dispensary first, comrade in arms second.

*You’re lucky I am slightly apologetic I just bailed on you like that,* he grumbled inwardly as he coughed up a potion.

After drinking it up and resting on its branch a while, Hawkie threw him the ‘let’s go kill things’ look, which he could only agree to. The fight with Abby and Donald could barely be

called a fight. They were far too weak to truly pose any threat towards him unless he literally just stood there and let them go at him.

Jumping off the cloud with Hawkie at his side, he felt far more in his element than in the city down far below.

The Viper's plan had been set in motion. The warnings went out, and the surrounding factions were made aware of his return. Now a week had passed, and the promised day arrived.

Most forces had presented themselves and sworn loyalty in the allotted time. Others, mainly those with roots elsewhere, chose to leave. A real storm had been going through an area containing the millions of planets surrounding the Malefic Order.

Among the factions that pledged loyalty or proposed to vassalize themselves were also many gods and the factions they either served or ruled.

The only remaining Hall of the Malefic Order was placed in the first universe in the area around where the Viper was born and had risen to power. The planet he had made a desolate wasteland on his path to power was seen as a holy land for pilgrims, members, and those who came just to pay respect.

But over the years, many factions appeared in the area he once ruled with an iron fist - the Order confined to only a few thousand life planets in total. The only remaining Hall found on the only Great Planet in the area.



Great Planets were without a doubt one of the most wondrous existences in the multiverse - a planet larger than thought possible - one that dwarfed any celestial object in any pre-system universe. It was of such unimaginable size that it could contain entire galaxies within. Great Planets were rare, even in the vastness of space itself. To make them even more impressive, the mana density in some areas was large enough for even monsters with the power of gods to spawn naturally.

This particular planet went by the name of Primordial-4. The name posing no specific meaning besides being named that was because it was the closest Great Planet to the rise of a Primordial. A planet the Viper had wandered during his ascension and fought many powerful foes on. In fact, some rumors even claimed it was where he became a deity.

It wouldn't be out of the ordinary. All knew the Holy Mother had ascended on the planet now known as Primordial-1. A similar Great Planet, of course.

All the planets surrounding this Great Planet had surrendered or left - none of the factions large or powerful enough to dare stand against the Order and the Lord Protector that guarded it, much less the Primordial himself.

But one force refused to leave.

The Brimstone Conglomerate was a faction of the 11th universe that had risen to be one of the premier forces of the multiverse. Named after the Brimstone Hegemon, their headstrong and powerful leader. A man who had risen by leaving a mountain of corpses behind.

It was precisely the type of entity the Viper hoped would reject him. He couldn't help but chuckle as he heard the name.

Powerful. Influential. Just enough to believe the Malefic Order wouldn't be stupid enough to actually attack them. It would mean war with an organization with roots in several universes. Too large to strike down for the Order that was confined to such a small area, many would think.

But as with all organizations, even the mighty Holy Church or Malefic Order, it had one fatal flaw. Its namesake. The Brimstone Hegemon himself. If the Holy Mother or the Malefic Viper perished, so would their organizations. If the Brimstone Hegemon were to fall, so would his conglomerate.

This wasn't a fear for them, however. For in the same vein, then as long as the Hegemon lived, so would the organization persist.

And currently, the Brimstone Hegemon sat upon his throne within his divine realm. A throne made of the hearts of thousands of stars, in a land forever burning with the heat that would make even the center of the sun feel chilly in comparison.

Not a shred of fear was evident on his face. The threat from the Malefic Order but a farce in his eyes. A powerplay to bring them to the negotiation table for better terms. Even if the Primordial decided to make good on his threats, it wouldn't matter.

Within a divine realm, a god was far more powerful than anywhere else. It was their world, after all, created from their very essence. The mana within was theirs - every single speck of energy theirs to command. It was an insurmountable home-field advantage that made invading the divine realms of other gods either an act of futility or just straight-up suicide.

This is exactly why what happened next surprised the Hegemon so much. The god felt a presence forcefully enter his realm. One he didn't have to look long for as a figure appeared floating before him.

"For a Primordial to come personally... should I be honored or offended?" the Brimstone Hegemons voice echoed out in his entire realm as he stared at the scaled man before him. The Hegemon the size of a mountain, with the Viper staying in his human-sized form.

"Honored, of course. Few have had the privilege," the Malefic Viper answered casually.

"A privilege I most certainly could do without," Brimstone answered in a joking manner. His mind was working on overtime to figure out the intentions of the Malefic One. The thought of him coming for a fight never crossing him.

For if there was one thing harder than fighting a god in their realm, it was killing them. For as long as the realm held energy, the god would be able to siphon it off to sustain themselves. And the Viper wasn't exactly what he once was...

"Now, is there anything I can offer such an esteemed guest?" he asked, continuing from earlier. Maybe this could even be an opportunity to create closer ties with the Malefic Order, but more importantly, the Primordial himself?

True, he had been in isolation for oh-so-long, but he still had contacts. He was still respected. While his personal power had without a doubt waned, the mere fact that he carried the title of Primordial would bring great benefits.

“I have actually come for two reasons,” the Viper said with a smile. “First of all, I would like to extend my thanks to you.”

“Oh? What have I done to warrant the gratitude of the Malefic One?” the Hegemon asked with genuine confusion.

“I have been gone for a long time,” the scaled god answered as he continued. “Many have either forgotten or become complacent towards me. Towards my Order. I have made it my personal quest to change that. To return my Order and my name to what it is meant to be. What I want to thank you and the Brimstone Conglomerate for is your help in accomplishing just that.”

“May I dare ask how we are meant to assist you in this endeavor?” Brimstone asked with furrowed brows. Was he truly looking for a partnership?

“Well, that is where my second reason for being here comes in,” the Viper answered, still smiling casually like before. “I have come to kill you.”

The Hegemon was taken aback and could only ask, confused. “Pardon?”

“I said I have come to kill you. So yeah, I thank you for offering your life to help restore my Order to glory. Nothing has ever worked better than a big show of force, you know? And you fit the requirements to be the supporting character in this play,” the Viper laughed.

“Don’t jest,” Brimstone scoffed. “What do you truly want?”

“See, this is exactly what I am talking about!” the Viper said, this time with a trace of annoyance in his voice. “Had this been back in the day, you would have already started running.”

The Brimstone Hegemon had had enough of the foreign god by now. At first, he had indeed held respect due to the title of Primordial held by the Malefic Viper, but he had never respected the god himself. He was a washed-up god who hadn’t even shown himself in so long. By the time the 11th universe was integrated, the Viper had already long gone into hiding.

“I think it is time for you to leave,” Brimstone said as his realm moved.

Lava and fire exploded from the ground as his throne began shining a deep red. The entire realm’s heat spiked as he mobilized all the power inside to expel the Viper. Either that or burn him to death.

The inferno appeared to consume the entire world as everything turned red - heat that could melt space itself, seeking to eradicate the lone foreign element within the realm.

At first, the Brimstone Hegemon was confident, but soon he began frowning as his attack failed to find any purchase. A frown that only deepened the more time went on. *It appears I will have to get serious*, he sighed as he stood up from his throne.

The Viper stood untouched by the flames within the inferno with his eyes closed - a light smile on his lips. Truly... it had been too long. It felt good to finally be in the heat of things again. Pun fully intended.

Raising his hand, he looked through the flames as his gaze landed upon the Brimstone Hegemon - a green glow spreading from his hand.

**Touch of the Malefic Viper**

## Chapter 155: One-sided

The Malefic Viper exited the shattering realm, appearing in the void. A giant sphere that looked to be made of glass with a perennial inferno within was crumbling behind him. Vilastromoz had a relaxed smile as he savored the sensation of letting out a bit of power for the first time in forever.

The Brimstone Hegemon was viewed as a powerful god from a multiversal point of view... but powerful wasn't enough to face the Primordial. So while he did feel some enjoyment... it wasn't enough. Luckily, it looked like it didn't have to be.

**\*clap\* \*clap\* \*clap\***

Loud claps echoed out within a void that should be soundless as the clapping god made a mockery of the laws of reality.

“Wonderful display!”

Sitting in the middle of nowhere was a humanoid figure that one could easily mistake for a human at first glance.

“Yip of Yore,” the Viper said as he looked towards the figure. The person looked vaguely human, but his limbs were slightly too long, and his features were a little... off.

“For a Primordial to know my name... I am honored,” the smiling god said without a trace of mockery. “You know, I came here to kill you to look cool in front of all the other gods as the first-ever Primordial Slayer...”

He stated his intention to kill the Viper with an honest expression before laughing out loud. “But man, fuck that. I heard you didn’t do shit for like a 100 times longer than I have even existed and that you were just some old has-been.”

“Oh, but I am,” Vilastromoz said with a toothy grin.

“Yeah, sure. Shit, I should have believed Valdemar...” Yip said, shaking his head. “Anyway, wanna fight?”

The Malefic Viper's smiled as it turned to a large grin. "You know, I heard a lot about the madman known as Yip of Yore. But I don't believe in madness without a method... why come?"

"Honestly, I just wanted to see what the hype was all about. Lots of crazy shit from the old generation floating around about you," Yip said, still grinning himself.

"Disappointed?"

"No, quite the opposite. You know people compared me to you just because I did a bit of cleanup of this annoying Pantheon after becoming a god. Said we were both madmen, so I guess you know what you are talking about. Wait, are we the only reasonable ones?"

"No," the Viper said. "We're not."

With those words, the void tore, but it wasn't the Viper that made his move. Yip of Yore appeared before the Malefic Viper and threw a straight. A simple punch that even the most amateur boxer knew.

The Viper leaned slightly to the side, dodging the blow.



The void behind him parted in a crescent wave as the already crumbling sphere behind him exploded into minuscule fragments.

It was a simple attack, but one powerful enough to make space itself tremble. To part the void was an ability only allowed by the most powerful of gods. For most, merely being able to exist within it was enough.

These two gods, however, weren't most.

Another punch was thrown, the Viper once more dodging as he smiled casually. Then a third punch and a fourth, all easily dodged or deflected. For two gods to fight like that was quite frankly ridiculous.

Their movements slow enough for even mortals to follow, their attacks unadorned and straightforward. Yet each hit brought with it destruction. The void around them was slowly torn apart before quickly regenerating itself.

After the fifth punch, Yip of Yore teleported away only a few meters, sitting down with his legs crossed once more.

"Lost again..." he murmured.

"How... peculiar," the Viper said as the void around him warped and bent. The realm of the Brimstone Hegemon that Yip of Yore had annihilated was now only a shattered sphere once more, and it looked like nothing had ever happened.

“A concept of legends and wonder, time, fate and karma interlinking to create a scenario that carries no causality or shapes reality unless you wish for it to... making all your antics those of ‘Yore,’” the Malefic Viper said with a smile. “Fun tricks.”

“What is life but a great story?” Yip of Yore smiled in return. “I just seek to create the greatest story of all.”

“Ah, but does a great story not need to be grounded in reality?” the Primordial smiled. “So let’s add some truth.”

The smiling Yip suddenly stiffened as the entire right side of his body turned black and began rotting. It only continued for a few seconds before the god appeared to shimmer and returned to his undamaged form once more... but with what looked like a dark green scar of a handprint remaining on his shoulder.

“Anyway, it was a pleasure to meet you,” the Viper said.

“Pleasure's all mine,” Yip answered back, still smiling despite the scar that was sizzling with power. “May our next battle be a bit more interesting... so how about we do it by proxy? Let them meet amongst the stars...”

Vilastromoz was about to leave but asked anyway. “If you think your Chosen can take down mine... you’re free to try. In fact, I am quite sure he would enjoy it very much.”

With those words, the Primordial disappeared from the void, with Yip leaving soon after.

The sphere that had once been the Brimstone Hegemon's divine realm crumbling to nothingness alone in the endless void. A figure that had lived for more than 80 eras eradicated, and in but a few generations, his name forever forgotten, only remembered as yet another deity foolish enough to defy the Malefic Viper.

Jake took in a deep breath as he enjoyed the pleasant smell of a newly made batch of mana potions. It was a bit weird how the potions themselves didn't taste of anything, and yet the vapor released from the cauldron could smell so damn good.

The entire thing only got better as his newest creation also earned him yet another level.

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 71 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 80 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

*Nine more for the big upgrade*, he reminded himself. Nine more levels and he could pick a skill to either gain a buttload of willpower or strength, along with all the other powerful effects with the associated skill. Sadly, Hawkie was too impatient to allow him just to sit down and work.

The bird chirped at him to get moving already. It was only able to recover as quickly as it had because of his potions, but he didn't blame the thing. They had only gotten in a single hunting-session after returning, so he also felt a bit restless himself.

It had been a rather boring one that was just killing a few weaker Flare Crows and Cloud Elementals. Not enough to net either him or the hawk any levels, but he felt like he was close. Another quick hunt, and he should reach 90 and gain a new skill. One he was quite excited for as he hoped it would reflect his recent progress in magic.

Spreading his wings, he leaped off their small cloud platform, Hawkie in tow. Recently the bird barely commented on his flying skills, making him feel quite good about himself... he thought as he got another gust of wind in his side, adjusting him a bit.

Nevertheless, he had become quite the proficient flyer. Far from as good as the birds, but pretty good for a human that didn't have any wings less than two weeks ago. Not that he had anyone to compare himself to, he just had a feeling he wasn't completely lost when it came to being a wannabe dragon.

Their first target was to be another Cloud Elemental already in the middle of a fight with a bird nearly the size of itself. Which is to say, a big-ass bird. It looked a lot like a smaller version of the D-grade Thunder Roc, and using Identify confirmed that they were likely associated somehow.

**[Lightning Roc - lvl 98]**

With its enemy a single level lower than the roc. Cowardly bird.

### **[Cloud Elemental – lvl 97]**

They had moved further inward than they usually did. Not by far, but over their days of hunting, they had begun moving further and further in, today just marking another new record. It was natural, as the levels and the density of prey got higher the further in they went. Not by much, but a bit.

It all had to do with the spawning of the Cloud Elementals. In the outer area, they could spawn as low as level 25, while here in the halfway point to the giant tree in the middle, it was hard to find any below 60. The frequency of those above 90, of course, being far higher also. You could still find ones above level 90 at the fringe; they were just rarer.

With more powerful cloud elementals came the equally as powerful predators that preyed upon them. Despite the variety of birds not being the greatest, this was still the first lightning roc they had encountered.

If he had to guess, it was because they preferred being closer to the trees. The big tree in the middle specifically. Or maybe they were just incredibly scarce. He didn't know, and quite frankly, the only thing he truly cared about was how good of a fight it could put up.

Its abilities didn't seem particularly effective against the Cloud Elemental as lightning did little to them. It was just a battle of attrition with the roc's mana slowly breaking apart the Cloud Elemental little by little. But from the blasts of pure electricity it released, he would say it was pretty powerful for its level. He said, being only level 80 himself, yet not at all worried about facing down two monsters nearly at 100.

“I take the bird; you handle the elemental,” he said to Hawkie, getting a blink of approval in response.

Drawing an arrow, he coated it in his blood infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper. With all his levels and the upgrade to ancient-rarity, his blood was damn close to being - if not already - his most potent poison. He hadn't progressed at all in his concocting skills since the tutorial ended, as he had only focused on getting his potion brewing up to par.

A weakness, yes, but one he could shore up once he got an opportune time. Aka, later when he was not preparing to shoot down the Lightning Roc before him.

He nocked the arrow and drew back the string as the stamina and mana moved according to Infused Powershot. His entire body and bow were filling with energy. Hawkie waited at his side patiently as it prepared to head in the second the arrow was fired.

Pushing both his body and his bow to the limit, he activated Limit Break to 10% straight away to get a bit of extra power. It gave him another second of channel time before he was forced to release it in a mighty explosion of energy and scattered clouds.

His attack had gone unnoticed by the Lightning Roc and elemental both up to this moment. Partly because of the distance between them and partly because they were engaged in combat. Well, the elemental was dumb as a rock, so it wouldn't notice anything unless you were right below it.

The roc – and the arrow's target - noticed the approaching attack far too late to react. The arrow pierced its stomach and didn't stop there as it flew straight through. Feathers and blood were flying everywhere as it screeched out in pain.

But it didn't have time to wallow as it had to quickly try and adjust before the next arrow. One Jake was already channeling. Lightning crackled across its body as runes lit up on some of its feathers. Its speed immediately spiked as it disengaged from the Cloud Elemental and flew out into the open fields of clouds.

Jake didn't wait any longer as he released his second arrow. Weaker than the first, but still channeled to a point where it was hard to dodge even in the roc's accelerated state. It tried to avoid the arrow but was affected by Gaze of the Apex Hunter and failed the moment it did.

It had managed to barely move its wing in front of it, which resulted in it being pierced and more blood and feathers sent flying. Its only advantage was its massive size that made the damage appear to be far less. A barrel-sized hole looked like a normal arrow wound on a regular large bird.

Which is, of course, where the poison comes in. Insidiously it had already begun spreading through its veins, causing destruction. In its haste to avoid the second arrow, it hadn't noticed and failed to counteract it right away. Not that Jake had any intentions of letting it work on recuperating.

He attacked again with another arrow, once more making it freeze up right before it hit. The effect diminished significantly with consecutive uses, but it got the job done as its already damaged wing was hit once more.

The roc now had two choices: run and try and survive the poison or kill the one who had inflicted it. As a beast, it didn't properly understand that ending Jake wouldn't result in it being cured of the poison. Though in this case, it was actually right as without him, the blood would stop being poisonous. If he had used a concocted poison, though, his life or death wouldn't matter.

Not that Jake had any intentions of dying. In fact, if he could keep up his current approach of just slowly ending the bird at several kilometers distance, he wouldn't complain. Sure, it was a bit boring, but he had already reconciled that getting a good fight from anything below D-tier was hard.

Hawkie and the Cloud Elemental were also now deeply embroiled in their bout. The hawk using its tried and tested tactic of slowly whittling the big elemental away with powerful blades of wind and the occasional explosion of wind to tear out large segments of its body before scattering the clouds with a powerful gust.

It was a long fight, but it was somewhat safe for Hawkie with its insane speed. One even Jake couldn't match even with his inflated stats. Its occasional speed-up from using wind magic to boost itself made it even faster still in short bursts. In other words, Hawkie was a nightmare to fight against for the slow Cloud Elemental.

Back with the roc, it had reached the conclusion that offense was the best defense. It supercharged itself once more as it made a beeline straight for Jake. Which was met with another arrow that it narrowly avoided getting through the eye as it instead tore up a good part of its neck.

He got off another shot before it reached him - the roc passing two kilometers in a respectable four seconds, pissing all over the sound barrier a few times over. It was fast, but Jake already knew it was fighting a losing battle. If it had truly wanted to live, it should have run.



Jake had an insane damage output from his arrows and poison, but his defenses were nothing to scoff at either. Scales covered his body as he leaped back. Lightning rolled over him as he dodged the charge of the roc, and he felt his skin prickle beneath the scales. His cloak got flayed entirely, forcing him to quickly throw it into his spatial storage.

*Back to having a cloak that gets destroyed first thing every fight*, he internally complained as he drew the string and turned to shoot another arrow at the giant bird that had just passed him. It also failed to dodge as it took a Splitting Arrow to its rear side, resulting in a dozen small arrows sticking out of it.

It quickly turned as its beak opened, firing off a lightning bolt. Jake dodged the first one, but it soon released another two in short bursts. He knew they were coming from his danger sense, but he still failed to dodge the third as they were simply too fast.

In an explosion of electricity, he was shot back as his entire body smoked. Or more accurately, his clothes smoked, as the pristine black and dark green scales beneath managed to withstand the blow entirely. Once more making Jake happy for the powerful magic resistance they provided.

But while the lightning bolt itself hadn't done much damage, it had made him momentarily spasm and thus fail to release another arrow, buying the roc a moment to breathe. Which it did, quite literally, as it inhaled deeply.

Parts of the cloud island itself got inhaled as the beast took in more and more. Jake momentarily failed to attack as he wondered what it was doing. Something he soon found out.

Opening its beak once more, it released a stream of dark clouds with thunder crackling within - a new attack, but not one that Jake found particularly impressive. That was his initial reaction, at least. That is until several seconds passed, and it kept releasing dark clouds.

By now, it was entirely surrounded by the thunderclouds. The area a hundred meters around it were covered in dark clouds obscuring the giant roc's figure. At first, Jake thought it a new attack but soon noticed it was quite the opposite.

Within the cloud, the lightning kept hitting its body, but instead of leaving wounds, the electricity instead nurtured it.

It likely believed him unable to see it as it stopped exhaling. The cloud now nearly two hundred meters in diameter, completely covering it. The Lightning Roc also tried to reduce its size as much as possible as it landed on the cloud island.

Jake didn't have any intentions of letting it try and recuperate. He took out an arrow and began charging yet another Infused Powershot. It appeared that the beast had learned a little, though, as the thundercloud released lightning towards him in an attempt to interrupt his channeling.

Just before he was hit, he released a massive burst of mana, scattering the lightning completely. He had been forced to halt his charging but soon began once more. Another lightning strike was released towards him, but it was okay. He had channeled enough.

The arrow was released and flew straight for the stationary bird within the thundercloud. It was off to the side of it, smart enough to not linger in the obvious middle, but to Jake, it didn't matter. He could see it clear as day with his insane perception coupled with the extra bonus from his Gaze of the Apex Hunter. Not that it would matter anyway, as Mark of the Ambitious Hunter was also present. The bird had no escape.

Startled that the human was aware of where it was hiding, the Lightning Roc tried to dodge but failed as it froze up from the gaze of its soon-to-be killer looking upon it. This arrow was striking it straight in its head as it only managed to sway slightly right at the final moment.

It had managed to avoid getting an arrow through the eye, but it wasn't that much luckier. Its lower beak was hit as it completely shattered from the impact, sending blood and pieces of beak flying everywhere. Followed by a distorted screech of pain from the roc.

It tried to move once more, desperate to survive but was hit by another arrow soon after. It barely managed to exit its thundercloud as it was hit in its already damaged wing, sending it spiraling towards the cloud island below. The entire wing severed from another Infused Powershot.

Crashing down, it struggled for a few more moments. The thundercloud had already dispersed the moment the roc exited it, and it clearly had no gas left in its tank. A final arrow penetrating its skull ended its life. Jake felt the notification of the kill followed by the warm glow of a level-up. Which meant another skill. But that would have to wait till the fight was truly over.

Hawkie had made good progress with the Cloud Elemental, but there was a long way to go. Alone it would take the hawk close to an hour to kill a Cloud Elemental a few levels above its own if it did so in a safe manner. With Jake joining in, however, it was over fast.

Bolts of mana hit the elemental over and over again as it struggled with having yet another opponent. Jake had plenty of mana to spare and didn't hold back at all. Hawkie also found way more space to be offensive in its approach, making its own damage output increase. This all resulted in the elemental dispersing only a few minutes later.

Killing the Lightning Roc had taken Jake less than five minutes, so the entire battle in total had only been around fifteen minutes. While the two would typically go looking for their next prey, Jake motioned to return to the island. It was skill selection time.

## Chapter 156: Skills & Pylons

Landing on the cloud island with Hawkie at his side, Jake sat down in meditation instantly. He felt like it was far too long since he had gotten a skill in his class and hoped for something useful to add to his repertoire. He especially desired to see his magic progress reflected and maybe even get some sweet new skill related to it.

First on his notifications were the kill messages, and that, of course, was as expected.

***\*You have slain [Lightning Roc – lvl 98] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*You have slain [Cloud Elemental – lvl 97] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

What he cared more about was the ones right below it.

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 90 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*Ambitious Hunter class skills available\****

With great anticipation, he accepted the prompt. He nearly didn't dare look, but of course, he had to. He still vividly remembered his disappointment at 80. His first reaction was a sigh of relief as he saw five new options available he could choose from. The maximum. *So far, so good.*

Without further ado, he dove straight into it. Doing as you do, he started from the first option. Instantly getting a bit miffed at the common rarity.

***[Weak Telekinesis (Common)] – Move the world only with your mind. Grants the hunter basic telekinetic powers, able to move objects within a certain range using only mana. The cost of the skill is dependent on the weight and resistance of the entity you attempt to move. The weight limit and power of Weak Telekinesis is based on Intelligence and Wisdom.***

*Okay, at least telekinesis is cool,* he thought to himself. The common-rarity tag being a bit sore on his eyes. The name alone pretty much described the skill entirely. It was just telekinesis and apparently a weak version of it.

It was one of the many things he could already do without a skill. Albeit not as elegantly as a skill would likely make it, but he could do it, nonetheless. Which was without a doubt the reason why he had unlocked it. No way it was a skill related to his class after all. Telekinesis and a hunter aiming for strong prey didn't exactly go hand in hand.

So while it was a skill he liked and even wanted due to pure vanity, every reasonable part of him made him skip over it. Better to just train himself to be able to do telekinesis without a skill. If one day he was offered a legendary super-telekinesis skill, he may pick it, but weak telekinesis was just too... well, weak. Hence he moved on.

***[Superior Mana Bolt (Uncommon)] – Sometimes, the simplest applications of mana can be the most effective. A philosophy you have followed as you refined the most basic of spells. Allows the hunter to summon bolts of mana to defeat your foes. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Intelligence when using Superior Mana Bolt.***

The mana bolt. But far from as simple as the ones he had seen during his first days of the tutorial. The basic mana bolt skill was only inferior-rarity, making it truly the lowest of offensive magic skills. And now he had upgraded it twice over at least, it appeared.

While he wouldn't pick it, it did show that Jake's mana practice hadn't been a waste of time. If he had actually chosen to be a caster back during the tutorial, he would have likely improved it even further. It always felt good to get some positive affirmation that his work had gotten results.

The next skill was very much the same story.

***[Infuse Arrow (Uncommon)] – Magic and archery combined to form a new way to damage your foes. Infuse a spell construct (of Uncommon-rarity and below) into an arrow. The spell will activate upon impact. Note that not all spells can be bound, and the effect varies based on the spell used and the arrow infused. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of the infused spell based on Intelligence.***

It was the result of the magic practice where he attempted to create proper magic arrows. While it had turned out to be less effective than just throwing mana bolts repeatably, he had learned something from it.

Though, of course, the skill was, in good old English, absolutely worthless. That limit of only spell constructs of uncommon-rarity and below sitting there ruining everything. But it also inadvertently explained a lot.

The system recognized the level of his mana bolts as being of uncommon-rarity, which was why he would so easily infuse those into arrows as it was his limit. Or maybe it was his limit because it was based on his practice of using the mana bolt as the base. When he tried it with Touch of the Malefic Viper, however, it failed every time. Touch being a skill of epic-rarity, of course, so he hoped that with practice, he could make arrows infused with Touch... *damn, that would be good.*

Death on the outside with coated poison and death on the inside from Touch. The double-whammy.

That was something for the future, though. Moving on, Jake went to the second-to-last skill. Yet another result of his application of mana, it seems. One he hadn't actually seen coming.

***[Disruptive Mana Eruption (Uncommon)] – Dispel that which impedes you. Erupt in a torrent of destructive mana, dispelling any spell constructs in your immediate vicinity by overloading them with mana. Higher consumption of mana based on power and stability of the spell constructs. Adds a minor bonus to the effect of Wisdom and Intelligence when using Disruptive Mana Eruption.***

Jake still vividly remembered the first time he exploded in an eruption of mana to dispel others' magic. He was locked down by the lackeys of Hayden and Richard and was looking death in the eye. At that moment, he had followed his instincts and flooded his entire body with mana and managed to dispel it somehow.

When he began practicing mana, he thought back on that feeling and managed to replicate it. He did wonder why he hadn't unlocked it earlier, but perhaps it had to do with him not actually understanding at all what he had done back then. Now he knew that it was a bit more than just a flood of pure mana.

It was 'destructive' mana. The same type Jake used to make his mana bolts. He still wasn't quite sure what the difference between the destructive mana and normal mana was, besides the moniker of destructive mana being able to destroy stuff.

Now he had finally been offered it as a skill. But it fell into the exact same category as many of the prior skills. He knew it was still a simple technique, and he knew it was something he could do even without a skill.

Before moving on to the last skill, he quite honestly wasn't sure if he felt disappointed or happy with his skill choices. Clearly, his efforts had been recognized, but on the other hand, he had seen nothing above uncommon-rarity.



He had to remind himself that he had only been part of the multiverse for a few months in realtime. Some of the time had been spent in a time-chamber with Villy and Duskleaf, and while that time had been productive, it was far worse than live combat. It was also alchemy-focused, of course.

Dispelling quite a lot of his discouragement, he moved on to the final skill, immediately noticing the epic-rarity, making his lips curl up.

***[Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter (Epic)] - The signature skill of the Ambitious Hunter: An arrow to strike down a fated foe in a single shot. Grants the skill to summon a powerful arrow designed to strike down a specific foe. The Hunter must envision his foe and, with great focus, channel all of his desire to slay it to summon the arrow. The arrow summoned deals significantly greater damage to the envisioned target while ineffective on anything else. Damage increased further based on level disparity. Adds a small bonus to the effects of Agility, Strength, and Perception when using Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.***

His class had offered quite a few skills during the last many levels, and while he couldn't say he was disappointed in them, he wasn't exactly over the moon either. Granted, his profession had skewed his view quite a lot, being offered Ancient skills left and right.

Big Game Hunter and Mark of the Ambitious Hunter were the only ones really worth mentioning. Infused Powershot was from Powershot he got as a regular archer, and his other powerful skills weren't really from the class itself either.

Moment of the Primal Hunter came from his bloodline more than the class. It had been a rare skill that was likely quite okay, but it was his bloodline that had made it the legendary trump card it was today.

One Step Mile and Gaze of the Apex Hunter were both classified as class skills but were both gained as tutorial rewards, so he couldn't really credit his class with those either. He felt like getting the Gaze had more to do with his bloodline and high perception than anything else.

It wasn't like the stats from the Ambitious Hunter class had been incredible either. Rather low, actually. Jake knew that classes on average gave more stats than professions, but his case was entirely lopsided. His profession gave him insane stats while his class was rather lacking.

But perhaps this skill would prove a gamechanger. The description at least made it appear like it had the potential to. It was also something Jake felt like he needed right now. He saw no reason why he shouldn't be able to shoot this arrow with his Infused Powershot, making it a genuinely deadly attack.

Of course, he picked it.

Feeling the knowledge enter his head, he became aware of how to use it intuitively. It didn't come with any explicit understanding of how strong it was or potential limitations, but that is what testing is for. Something he was sure the dear elementals and birds on the cloud island below would gladly volunteer for.

As Jake was making rapid progress on his own, so did the world around him move forward. Humanity had taken a hit for sure, but many heroes would rise in a time of crisis. In several places, the bubbles that were leftovers from the tutorials were surrounded, studied, and a few brave souls even entered to try and claim whatever rewards lay within.

Some made progress while others failed miserably. But it wasn't an impossible challenge - far from it.

A being like the King of the Forest was indeed an outlier. While the final bosses of these tutorial zones were indeed all D-grade, they were only *just* D-grade. The King had been level 136.

All grades are naturally split into several stages. Early, mid, late, and peak was the most often used terms. For an E-grade like Jake, being between level 25-50 was the early stage, 50-75 mid, 75-95 late, and 95-99 peak. In the same way, then in D-grade 100-130 was the early stage, 130-160 mid, 160-190 late, and 190-199 peak. Level 200 being C-grade.

The King was a mid-stage D-tier Unique Lifeform. Already incredibly powerful for its level. For such a being to have even been in the tutorial, to begin with, was evidence of how abnormal Jake's tutorial had been.

But even if the average final boss was only a level 100 average D-tier end boss, it didn't mean that humans would stand a chance - the difference between tiers simply too high. Even Jake, being a late-stage E-tier with all his bonuses, couldn't necessarily face one head-on yet.

Yet, humans did have some advantages still. First of all, their ability to rapidly progress. With the barriers trapping the tutorial zones, none of the ones within could exit and progress, but humans could level. Secondly, they had numbers and coordination.

This is why the Lord-tier bosses all around the world were falling. Many of them comparable to the dungeon bosses Jake had faced. Some even stronger than the strongest boar. No final bosses had fallen except the King before that day. Very few had even

managed to kill any of the lords during the tutorials, so to defeat a D-grade was a tall order. Most didn't even know these lords and final bosses existed.

But some factions were very special, some places the frontline of humanity's progress.

In one such place - even special among the many factions battling the tutorial zones - stood an old man in a blue robe. Surrounded by several other humans who all followed him without question. During the tutorial, he had killed the strongest lord in single combat. His name was Noboru Miyamoto, and today was the day.

Now, he had come for the General - the final boss. But surprisingly, this wasn't even their first bout. Two days prior, he had been there too, to fight. He and his fellow warriors had been forced to retreat, but today he held no such intentions.

Behind him stood his family. All of them powerhouses in their own right. The most influential members of their large family. The weakest among them wielding power only slightly below that of Abby. Someone who, in comparison to Jake, had been far weaker, but in the context of the entire planet was at the peak.

In front of them stood the Terracotta General upon his horse of stone. He was a bulky statue far too nimble for solid rock. Around him, only a few Terracotta Footsoldiers remained. None of them a threat. All of the powerful members of the General's army were crushed during and after the tutorial.

The Noboru clan had made a focused assault on this tutorial zone from the very beginning. Sent soldiers into the zone to whittle away at the Terracotta army little by little. Miyamoto and the rest of the elites entering to take care of any powerful enemy the normal clan members couldn't handle.

All for this day. The day where they would claim the head of the enemy General.

Miyamoto stared at the General atop his horse. His sunken eyes were shining with a sharp light. Raising his hand, he gave the order as they moved - a dozen or so elites against the D-grade general.

The Terracotta general fought valiantly. His halberd cut down five fighters before his head fell to the blade of Miyamoto. A massive loss to their family. But the gains from claiming the Pylon would outweigh it.

He hoped they were still the first to claim a Pylon of Civilization and receive the associated rewards. There were bound to be some bonuses. His patron god had urged him to quickly claim it despite the losses they would no doubt suffer.

Today he had done it. But he wasn't first. This was the second Pylon claimed on Earth. It didn't tell him he was second, but the profession offered made it clear he was only among the first ten. But all he truly cared about was that he wasn't first.

Closing his eyes in disappointment, he sighed at his own weakness. *If only I could return to springtime.*

## Chapter 157: Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter

Jake was excited as he stood up once more. Hawkie was confused about why he had asked to fly to the platform only to sit his ass down and make weird faces for half an hour. The hawk had already decided that the human was a bit loony. His sanity was nearly as questionable as his flying skills.

The bird couldn't give up on its free source of potions that easily, though, so it had to put up with the hassle that was the human mind.

To experiment with skills was one of Jake's favorite things in the post-system world. He still fondly looked back at smashing into trees while practicing Shadow Vault. Learning and improving a skill was a never-ending process, too, making it an endless entertainment source—the best part of skill practice, of course, being right at the beginning when it is all new.

His first task was to find a suitable target to test it out on. As it was conjuring an arrow, he planned on doing at minimum two tests, to begin with—one against a real foe like a bird and one against the intangible elementals.

As the arrow would be entirely summoned and magical, he hoped it would have the ability to damage the elementals. It wasn't a given, though. His regular arrows were technically summoned too, but they were made to be fully physical entities and didn't really hold any inherent mana.

Looking about, he quickly saw a lone vulture. It was around ten kilometers away on the cloud island, but he could see it clear as day. He had a feeling it had a level worth making it a test subject, and Identify confirmed it.

## **[Bubalinae Vulture – lvl 96]**

The names of the things were still weird, and he didn't exactly know what it meant. Not that it matters. The bodybuilder-bird had a big chunky body that was just perfect for testing his new arrow.

Following the knowledge imparted to him on how to use the skill, he held out his hand. Palm facing upwards. Closing his eyes, he focused on the aura he had felt from the vulture. He furrowed his brows as he tried for a few minutes, getting no results.

He tried opening his eyes once more and staring at the vulture as he focused on it. Just as he was wondering what he was doing wrong, he had a breakthrough. Instead of focusing on the act of summoning the arrow itself, he focused on his desire to slay the beast.

The skill answered him as an arrow began being summoned in his palm. Growing upwards with the tip of the arrow coming out first. A barbed arrow-tip with several jagged etches and a slightly larger head than his regular arrows.

After that came the shaft. Its shape longer and thicker than the arrows from the magic quiver, with the material looking to be some kind of metal. Yet it had a brown wooden color, making the body look rather average.

The final part of the arrow was the fletching at its rear. These weren't made of feathers but instead looked to be made of cloth or even plastic. They were vanes. Bringing back

memories from before the system and his compound bow. It was a type of fletching Jake hadn't seen after the system hit.

It made the arrow look almost modern. With a metal body that could even be aluminum for all he knew. But the moment the arrow was entirely out of his palm, it became clear it wasn't some modern arrow.

Runes lit up all over the shaft and arrowhead, and there were even small shining engravings visible on the fletching. They only lit up for a few seconds before the arrow returned to normal, but the markings left by the runes remained.

Jake stood there and stared at the arrow as it still floated over his palm. Its length nearly an entire meter. A bit more than twice the size of his usual arrows. It was honestly... monstrous. The aura it gave off as he stared at it, one of bloodlust and pure power.

He knew that he could only conjure one arrow at a time, the conjuration process of making this one arrow taking the better part of a minute. In other words, it wasn't a skill he could use during actual combat. It was one he had to prepare before the fight.

With the requirement of having a target already in mind also, it made the application of the skill relatively narrow. It was one that could only be used when hunting. When stalking prey and taking the initiative as the predator.

It had several limitations. Jake could only hope that the power would make up for it.



With a move of his hand, the arrow fell down as he caught it. In the other, he summoned his bow as he nocked the arrow - a bit awkward with its large size but more than manageable.

At the side, Hawkie had been observing everything attentively. At first, it had only scoffed at the stupid human standing there with his palm held out, but it quickly shut itself up internally as the skill began working.

The arrow that was summoned was scary. Hawkie didn't like it. It felt like it was made with the singular purpose of slaying prey. A prey not that much different from itself. Luckily Hawkie's instincts informed it that it wasn't the target.

Back with Jake, he drew the string as Infused Powershot began channeling. The vulture off in the distance was still relaxing, utterly oblivious to what was to come.

Jake hadn't coated the arrow in any poisons. It wasn't time to test that yet. This attack was purposefully made to test the power of the arrow itself. And as he would pretty much always use it with Infused Powershot, he saw no reason not to include that skill in the testing.

Seconds ticked by as the buildup of power increased. As Jake reached his limit, he activated Limit Break at 10% for just a bit more. A couple of seconds later and he couldn't keep the charging up. It was time to release the arrow.

Letting go of the string, the arrow was released. The explosion from Infused Powershot forcing Hawkie back a little as it was forced to keep itself still perched on its branch by opening its wings to buffer the impact. Parts of the cloud platform predictably dispersing from the energy released.

The arrow itself was flying through the air with unprecedented speed. The runes and engravings upon it lit up once more, the engravings on the fletching serving to speed up the arrow while the ones on the arrowhead subtly formed the image of a vulture.

On the cloud island, the vulture sat in relaxation as its instincts flared with warnings. It tried to react, but it already felt itself freeze up by the time it noticed anything was wrong, the subtle presence from the gaze of an Apex Hunter upon it.

Jake looked with great expectations from afar after having frozen the vulture with his gaze. He saw the arrow get closer and closer before finally hitting. And hit it sure did.

The arrowhead sunk into the flesh of the vulture unimpeded. The natural defense of the feathers offering no resistance at all. Of course, it didn't stop at the arrowhead as the rest of the arrow penetrated into the vulture, leaving an elegant, perfectly round hole.

It exited out the other side, its speed barely lower than when it first hit. But it didn't cause any impact then as it dispersed into nothing, only a moment after exiting. The only signs of it having ever existed were the damage done to the bird, and Jake's lost stamina and mana.

Jake, still observing, began feeling disappointment at the lackluster wound left behind. The attack had only carved out a fist-sized hole through its body and with the natural toughness and vitality of-

***\*You have slain [Bubalinae Vulture – lvl 96] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

-and then it died. From a wound that, in comparison, wasn't any more extensive than a 9mm bullet-hole on a human. Something Jake hadn't predicted was for it to die in one shot even if he had hit the brain. Which he hadn't. It was a gut-shot. Unless vultures had their brain and heart in a neat line in their stomach for the arrow to pierce through, he hadn't hit anything vital.

Yet... it died. The only feedback Jake had about how exactly it dealt enough damage to do that was the feeling he got from Mark of the Ambitious Hunter. It increased all damage done, and this damage was released as an invisible energy that directly damaged the vital energy of whatever he injured.

The wave that was released when the arrow hit was... massive. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter had done far more damage than the arrow's physical impact should ever cause. It wasn't just a giant arrow that was ridiculously sharp.

Summoning the arrow had drained more than 2000 stamina and 1000 mana. Considering Jake only had a total of 8800 stamina, it was massive. Without all of his big stat bonuses from titles, it would have cost him half of his entire stamina pool, maybe even more.

The mana portion wasn't as bad as he had 13000 mana with the 25% bonus from the Mask of the Fallen King along with all the other bonuses. But the fact that it had drained mana was in itself significant. It meant that it was indeed far more complicated than many of his other skills. Splitting Arrow, as an example, only required stamina despite appearing magical.

At his side, Hawkie was staring wide-eyed at what had just happened. It had noticed that the arrow appeared powerful, but it had failed to recognize exactly *how* powerful it was. Jake turned to his feathered friend with a massive grin on his face.

“Ready for another?”

Jake wasn’t even close to done testing his new skill. With the vulture dead, he moved on to a different kind of target. His gaze fell upon a giant cloud elemental that was just minding its own business.

**[Cloud Elemental – lvl 93]**

Once more, he focused on the skill as he held out his hand. This time, his target was naturally the Cloud Elemental, and the manifested arrow reflected that. It looked the same for the most part, but the arrowhead was now bullet-shaped and looked like a crystal.

It appeared somewhat fragile, but Jake could feel powerful echoes of mana from it. He also saw that the resources he had expended for the arrow were vastly different from before. This one had cost him 2500 mana and only 500 stamina.

Nocking the giant arrow, he took aim at the massive Cloud Elemental. With a deep breath, he began charging another Powershot.

Once more, an arrow of unparalleled might was loosed. Like a giant spear of destruction, it flew towards the giant elemental that was just doing elemental things.

It reacted less than a millisecond before the arrow struck. Unsurprisingly the arrow pierced into its incorporeal form, but what happened next did surprise Jake.

The arrow exploded with energy that seemed to somehow stay contained within the elemental's body. Pure destructive power reminding Jake of the energy his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter released, ravaging the elemental from within.

Without any grand explosion or mighty blast of force, the elemental's giant form simply turned to mist as it dispersed.

***\*You have slain [Cloud Elemental – lvl 93] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

*I think I hit the jackpot*, Jake smiled viciously. The arrow did indeed customize itself based on his visualized opponent. He wasn't sure if it would work on everything, but it sure as hell worked on these enemies.

“So, any comments, Hawkie?” he asked the hawk that was still perched on the tree.

The hawk looked at him as it clearly had a look of mixed emotions. Jake couldn't quite read its thoughts but saw a hint of fear and a bit of... expectation?

Jake did wonder why the hawk was still sticking around with him. While they certainly did make a strong hunting team, it was also risky for the hawk in many ways. Jake had proven several times that he was a credible threat to its life.

While it was far faster than him, he had ways to lock it down and possibly even kill it. Yet it chose to stick by him, something he found a bit questionable. Especially considering that it was a beast. A smart beast, but still a beast.

Jake was fully aware that he gave off a... presence of sorts. Even during the tutorial, the weaker beasts would flee when they saw or felt him, and even a mighty beast like the Horde Leader appeared to feel a hint of hesitation when he met its gaze.

Now that presence had only gotten amplified. Jake didn't know if it stemmed from his bloodline or just from being strong, but it was clearly a part of him. It even affected the Pylon of Civilization area, making beasts who entered it aware that they had intruded upon his territory.

Yet the hawk had approached him willingly and stuck by him after that. He wasn't stupid enough to believe that it was only due to his potions and help in combat. *I wonder what you want from me, Hawkie...*

He watched with bated breath as the fight played out before him. Bertram tried to block the giant beast's attack but ended up just being knocked back nearly a hundred meters before smashing into an old office building.

Maria, the archer who was second only to him in level, stood with a giant bow of flames as she bombarded the gigantic monster. She appeared more like a mage, but her swift movements as she dodged the beast's ranged attacks made it clear she wasn't.

Her attacks tore into the beast little by little as its hide became black and burnt. It did noticeable damage but far from enough to kill the powerful D-grade beast.

With the time she managed to buy, Bertram had gotten up, and the healers had managed to get him back in top condition. With a slew of buffs and shields placed on him, he charged the beast again.

The light around him was refracted as he received a powerful buff from the high-level priests and an invisibility spell from a light mage.

He got in close and unleashed everything with a cleave. His blade extended nearly a hundred meters as he cut down into the shoulder of the beast. His sword managed to penetrate deeply before it was stopped, and he was once more smashed away.

But he had managed to buy enough time. With a concert of chants, the ritual was complete.

More than five hundred followers had donated their energy to unleash a powerful joint attack. Jacob could not contribute directly to the fight due to his class, but that didn't mean he couldn't design the fight from the beginning – and so far, fate had been realized.

A giant beam of light descended from the sky that burned into the beast, weakening it significantly. Simultaneously, Maria released her strongest attack as she took out a special arrow she had crafted before. When it was fired, the cry of a phoenix was heard as the arrow itself turned into a flaming bird that smashed into the beast, resulting in a giant explosion.

The beast roared in pain as it unleashed an attack, but a second ritual activated at that very moment. There were more than a thousand people behind this spell, as a bubble of mana encapsulated the beast entirely, blocking out the destructive breath.

A third ritual came into effect as the ground below the beast erupted, and it fell into a kilometer-deep abyss.

A collection of explosives and countless magic circles were already present within the hole as they all exploded, blowing up the entire area as the earth shook.

Trapped, it could only struggle as thousands of attacks rained down upon it. Thousands of spells worked together to restrain and weaken it, as the few influential people in the group managed to damage and finally bring it down.

When the beast fell, they all cheered as Jacob went together with the other elites to claim their prize.

Laying his hand upon the Pylon, Jacob accepted the profession as he claimed it. The third person on Earth to do so.



## Chapter 158: Why?

Jake sat on the cloud in meditation as he regenerated his stamina and mana. Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was as draining as it was powerful, and quite frankly, he wasn't even sure it would speed up his hunting speed if he used it on more 'regular' enemies. Though, of course, Jake's definition of a regular enemy was one many levels above him.

It had been a few days since he got Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. Since then, he had gained a single level in his hunter class, but the largest gain was how familiar he now was with his new skill. He liked it a lot, but he felt like there was one more test needed...

**[Thunder Roc - ???]**

As always, the hawk sat with him. He knew it would leave soon as it had been a while since it last did so. And that would be his time to strike.

"Hawkie, I am gonna take this one alone. This is my fight, alright?" he confirmed, looking up at the hawk.

It gave him a glance with doubt, unsure if the human could really handle the giant Roc.

The sentiment that D-grades were far above E-grades was heavily ingrained for everyone, beasts and humans alike. No creature or elemental on the cloud continent, not even those at level 99, dared get close to the D-grades.

But Jake wasn't just any random creature. He was someone who had stacked titles upon titles, gotten an excellent profession and above-average class designed to fight stronger foes. He had powerful skills beyond someone at his level and grade.

He had felt like he could maybe fight it even the first time he saw the Roc... but now he would try. He wouldn't earn any more class skills before 100, which was the evolution, and while he could grind up his profession... he shouldn't need it.

The level of the Thunder Roc had to be below 110 based on how it felt. Weaker than the Indigo Mushroom by a fair bit, but with far more effective attacking methods for sure. It also appeared to be agility and intelligence-focused, making it a good matchup for him.

His scales were good against magic, and with it being not as robust, he believed he could weaken it substantially before the battle even began, especially with a well-placed Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

A few minutes later, Jake was in top condition as he flew towards another small cloud island and began summoning the arrow. He had believed Hawkie would leave, but it appeared to want to stay and watch from their old island. That was fine too. Maybe Hawkie could help protect the platform, as Jake had moved away, hoping to leave it intact.

Focusing on his target, he held out his hand, and the arrow slowly began emerging. It was his most expensive arrow so far, draining nearly 3000 stamina and around 2000 mana. More than a third of his stamina pool was instantly gone, but it was fine.

With conviction, he prepared the rest of his equipment for the hunt. Poisoned all of his arrows and even took out his best hemotoxin for the first initial arrow. The ones in the quiver would be Necrotic for maximum damage.

When he was ready, he threw Hawkie one last glance as he turned towards the giant Roc in the distance. A huge grin on his face. He was bubbling with excitement as he felt Big Game Hunter come into effect already, boosting him even further. He used everything as they made up the elements that in concert made this hunt possible to even attempt.

**Big Game Hunter**

**Limit Break**

**Mark of the Ambitious Hunter**

**Infused Powershot**

**Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter**

Together, they synergized as he charged up the shot - his tough body allowing him to channel the Powershot for longer, his high magical stats making both the Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter and Infused Powershot stronger.

The distance between Jake and the Thunder Roc was around 14-15 kilometers, but Jake had a clear view of everything.

Breathing in, he felt his body tense up as he reached his limit. Without further ado, he released the giant arrow towards the airplane-sized D-grade beast.

It flew ahead, its speed surpassing the speed of sound more than ten times over. In three seconds, it reached the Roc that sensed it shortly before it arrived. It felt the threat the arrow posed and prepared a response when it suddenly froze.

The eyes of a supreme predator were upon it. It failed to respond as the arrow pierced into its stomach and left a huge wound as the arrow dispersed shortly after impact. It didn't manage to pierce through, but it had drilled more than five meters into the giant beast, doing incredible damage.

This also confirmed Jake's theory that the beast was agility and intelligence-focused over being durable. *Good.*

***SCREEECH!***

The beast screeched in pain as it released a shockwave of sound that hit Jake more than ten kilometers away, making his clothes flap. But he didn't react as he had already nocked the fourth arrow.

Two were already in mid-air, heading towards the giant Roc.

The first hit, but the second was avoided as it also swiftly dodged the third, but was once more hit with a fourth. Each arrow little more than a needle on its large body, but the damage from each was not to be discounted.

Poison seeped into its body as it prepared its counterattack - one that came quicker than Jake expected.

**BOOM**

A bolt of lightning struck the cloud island where he had just stood, blowing it up entirely. Jake had already jumped to avoid it, but the blast still sent him tumbling. He quickly stabilized with his wings as he returned fire.

His arrows flew true as they split into dozens mid-air. More small needle-sized attacks to the giant Roc hit it, making it shriek out in even more anger.

It had begun flying towards him now, sending out torso-wide bolts of lightning aiming to roast him whole. Sadly, his near pre-cognition from his instincts allowed him to dodge each one as he fired back arrow after arrow.

The poison had been poured into the bottom of his quiver, making each newly conjured arrow instantly be coated with liquid death.

By now, the entire Cloud Continent appeared to be in an uproar. One of the two titans that dominated it was under attack and had even taken a heavy injury from the opening attack. Yet none of them dared to approach the fight, but all ran away in fear. Even the stupid Cloud Elementals had something instinctive that made them back off.

*Come on, this ain't all you have to offer*, he thought as he saw the massive wingbeats take the gigantic beast closer to him. It was injured... but far from enough to bring it down. Even now, he could feel the poison within its body be eliminated at a fast pace.

When it was only a few kilometers away, its entire body was enveloped by thunder as it sped up.

*Here it comes*

The entire cloud continent appeared to darken for a moment as the Roc attacked. It sped up and appeared in front of Jake with speed surpassing his arrows by quite the margin. It stopped right before him as it, for the first time, laid its eyes upon its attacker.

It saw the small human as it attacked with the most predictable kind of attack. It pecked down as electricity revolved around its beak, indicating that it clearly used some skill.

Jake flew back and dodged as he saw a beam of lighting be released from the beak, blowing up a huge part of the cloud continent below them.

*Feisty one, aren't ya?*

With a chuckle, he avoided its follow-up attack, but instead of retreating, he closed in. *A giant body isn't always an advantage.*

When he got close, lighting fired off its body into Jake, but it appeared to just cover the outside of the scales that now covered his entire body. His dagger was already in his right hand and his sword in the left. He stabbed the sword into the bird while his Venomfang got coated by dark mana as he stabbed the beast.

He had poured far more mana into the Descending Dark Fang than usual, and it was showing. The stab exploded with dark mana as the mana was directed straight out of the tip of the dagger, effectively extending it.

Instead of his dagger only sinking in the length of its blade, it left a 2-meter deep stab-wound on the Roc, making it screech out nearly as loudly as it had from the first Infused Powershot. *Did I hit something important?*

Jake felt his danger-sense spike as he quickly retreated from the Roc that released even more lightning than before, trying to get him off. It was enough to make him disengage, but the attack failed to harm him.

*Come on...*

The beast was now thoroughly enraged as it screeched towards the sky. Thunder from a clear sky above descended as the entire beast began humming with power. It looked towards him as it opened its beak, Jake already fully aware of what was to come.

*Moment? No... it isn't necessary.*

A thought he nearly came to regret as the beast clearly wasn't done. Several feathers had been dropped by the bird and were now floating gently through the air all around him. All of them suddenly quivered as electricity covered them, and they began flying towards Jake from all sides.

Each feather was as large as a two-handed sword as they flew to penetrate the human. Simultaneously the beast was about to release its massive lighting breath. Jake looked up at the beast as he felt the pressure mounting.

*Not enough.*

He moved as he gazed upon the giant Roc the moment it was about to release its attack. It froze for a moment, ruining the timing as Jake dodged and weaved away from every single giant feather coming for him. They had been aimed to keep him contained... but the follow-up attack being delayed ruined it.



Jake flew up as he used a part of the Wings of the Malefic Viper skill that he hadn't much before. Green veins on both wings appeared and began glowing as a mist-like substance began being emitted.

With a beat of his wings, he retreated from the blast while blowing a cloud of poison mist into the face of the bird.

Just as he did this, the Roc unfroze and released its attack. It had only been stopped for a few milliseconds, but in a fight like this, that was more than enough to change the momentum entirely.

Not that the Thunder Roc had ever truly held the momentum. Jake had been dominant from start to end.

*Why?*

He retreated a bit more as he released another Splitting Arrow, causing a few more minor wounds. It fired more blasts of thunder, but he avoided them one by one. The feathers kept flying around in the air, reminding him a bit of the flying daggers of that stupid metal mage back in the tutorial.

And like then, he easily dodged them as he showed off his prowess in air-combat. Hawkie was still far faster and more agile than him, but the bird would already be long dead if they switched places. It didn't have Jake's danger sense, his high perception, and the incredible defenses that allowed him to take a stray-hit once in a while.

Jake knew he had grown a lot stronger than his time in the tutorial - than his last time truly facing off against a D-grade. Yet...

*Why is it so...*

He dodged another attack as he channeled a large bolt of dark mana. He shot a quick Infused Powershot with it hanging overhead, making the Roc try and avoid but failing due to its large body. When it did so, he also released his bolt of dark mana into the face of the Roc, causing a large explosion of dark mana to obscure its vision.

*Why is it so weak?*

The first time Jake had laid his eyes upon the Thunder Roc, he had a feeling he could take it... but at the same time, he didn't wanna be too arrogant. He didn't want to get himself stupidly killed by facing a superior opponent. He knew he fucked up with the King of the Forest... and didn't want to repeat that.

He repeatedly played the fight with the King in his head, comparing his current strength to the King... and finding himself coming up short every time. He was too weak, too slow, his body too feeble, and his mind and soul too fragile. He saw his defeat every time.

Jake had an idea about D-grades formed in his head about them being nearly unapproachable enemies. The Indigo Mushroom didn't quite count as he hadn't truly faced it... and it hadn't truly fought him either. In fact, it had only strengthened his perception of exactly how powerful D-grades were.

A massive net of mushrooms where an entire biodome was its body... its whole being drilling who knows how far into the ground. It was just enormous, and what little attacks it had made had put him in quite the bind.

But...

*It's just a damn bird shooting lightning.*

As he saw its movements become slower, he began to realize it truly didn't have anything more to show him.

The first attack had done tremendous damage to it, weakened it before the fight even began. The poison had kept piling up, and by now, it was truly showing its worth as its body was covered with black spots that had decayed.

Feathers fell out, not because the Roc used them to attack, but because the flesh keeping them in place rotted away. The control of its attacks lessened as Jake found it more comfortable and easier to counterattack.

*Is... this it?*

Would there be no mask dropping from its face to reveal an incomprehensible attack? No Golden Claw that appeared to rip the world in two, forcing his Moment of the Primal Hunter to activate, him wanting it to or not? Would there be no hidden card that would force him into a corner?

From a logical standpoint, Jake understood.

The Thunder Roc was far stronger than the Flare Crows and the Cloud Elementals. It was clearly a powerful beast that rightfully sat at the peak of this entire cloud continent. It didn't *need* anything else but what it already had to be a true-blue D-grade.

Jake's body was burnt, and he had many wounds covering his body... but he hadn't felt *that*.

The feeling of walking on the line between life and death – to flirt with death and come out superior. It was a superior foe... but not superior *enough*.

Jake shook his head internally as he dodged another giant feather by just swaying his body slightly. In many ways, dodging in the air was easier than the ground. Sure, attacks could come from all angles, but Jake could see attacks from any angle.

When the Thunder Roc began retreating, Jake understood it truly didn't have anything more to offer. It was nearly dead, and even if it escaped, it was questionable if it had enough vital energy to purge the poison in its system.

Jake just sighed as he charged another Infused Powershot for nearly a full ten seconds. The Roc had managed to get a good 5 kilometers away, but it was far from enough distance to escape him.

Firing the arrow, he aimed for its left wing that was already severely damaged. It tried to sway but found itself frozen by Gaze of the Apex Hunter once again, and the arrow hit it right in its joint.

The giant beast fell to the cloud continent below, like a crashing airliner, sliding across the clouds for hundreds of meters before stopping.

Jake flew after it as he saw it try and get up.

The Cloud Elementals and other beasts in the area still just looked on, none daring to approach.

He landed on the massive beast, getting shocked by its electricity, but his scales neutralized most of the damage.

With One Step Mile, he stepped on its torso as he appeared right below its neck, and with a Descending Dark Fang, he plunged his Venomfang into it. With the Dark Mana extending the blade as he had before, he swiped it to the side, cutting a 1-meter deep gash in its neck, sending down a waterfall of blood.

It was the final strike to end the D-grade beast's suffering – a mighty lord of the massive cloud continent, slain by an E-grade human in a one-sided battle.

# Chapter 159: Under Pressure

Jake stood on top of the massive corpse of the Thunder Roc. He felt the gazes of hundreds of beasts upon him. They had all observed the battle before and looked at the human with a mix of confusion and fear.

The innate suppression of rank was something they all knew. Of course, the power difference was genuine, but the deterrence was as much instinctual as it was based on pure power disparity. So to see an E-grade like them slay a D-grade juggernaut seemed impossible. Even more unbelievable was how quickly and easily the human had done so.

All of their fear was transferred to the man who just stood there.

Jake sighed as he dropped his Limit Break from 20% and let the weakness overtake him. He had learned long ago that while the weakness sucked, he could circumvent it by reactivating Limit Break at 20% again. It would make the next period more severe, but it was a way to avoid getting ganged up on when he dropped it.

But he had a strong feeling none of the beasts would dare approach him even in his weakened state - all except one that came, albeit still far more cautiously than before.

Hawkie flew over and flew around the corpse for a bit. Jake threw it a glance, indicating for it just to land on the corpse already. It seemed hesitant to do so, even with the beast dead.

Jake just sighed and instead just looked at his notification.

***\*You have slain [Thunder Roc – lvl 102] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 92 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 93 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 82 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

*Two levels for that?* he asked himself internally. It felt unearned as he rolled his shoulders a bit, feeling the stiffness that remained from the electricity.

He had lost more than a third of his health pool just from the constant bombardment of thunder that occasionally hit. The entire fight could have turned on a dime if he made the slightest mistake... but Jake didn't make any mistakes. He tended not to make significant mistakes in combat, as if he did, he would have died a long time ago.

Hawkie had at this point stopped just floating above and had built up the courage to land on the giant Roc.

Jake just looked at it and smiled, but that smile quickly turned to a frown when he saw what it did next. It gave him a quick look before it began channeling wind around its beak. It formed a drill of sorts as it began digging into the giant Roc's body, much to the surprise of Jake.

He had never liked to desecrate the bodies of those he killed if he didn't have a reason to. The Den Mother he had done so with because he felt the poison gland within, but others he had just left be. He didn't know how to properly handle the ingredients left behind anyway.

Hawkie kept digging as the blood and guts flew up from the hole it made. The body had significantly weakened after its death; if not, Hawkie wouldn't be able to drill into it as it did now. It took the bird a few minutes before it came out of the bloody hole with a weird stone in its mouth.

Jake looked at it as he saw Hawkie place it in front of him.

***[Thunder Roc Beastcore (D-grade)] – A Beastcore left behind by a D-grade Thunder Roc, containing remnants of its Records within. Can be used as an alchemical ingredient for many types of creations but is most often found in Elixirs.***

“Well, what's this?” he asked both himself and Hawkie. The bird looked at him like he was an idiot for not already knowing, while Jake closed his eyes for a moment, looking inwards.



Knowledge appeared in his mind as he dove into what was provided by Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. A flood of information came forth as he opened his eyes once more.

“Neat.”

He put the core in his spatial storage as he considered what to do with it.

Beastcores were an item that any beast at D-grade or above had a chance to generate upon death. When beasts, or any creature for that matter, died, a part of their Records would often remain in the body.

If Jake, for example, died, his eyes would be infused with the Records of Gaze of the Apex Hunter, turning them into high-rarity items. Maybe even Ancient or Legendary-rarity ones. This didn't mean he could pluck out his eyes now and be left with valuable items.

He would have to die for his Records to transfer. The same was true for the Thunder Roc. Instead of entering a specific part of its body, its Records condensed into a Beastcore for Jake to use. Thinking back, this Records transfer was likely where most, if not all, drops from creatures he killed came from.

Records from the creature condensed an item – his Mask of the Fallen King being a prime example. Instead of the King forming a 'core' upon death, it instead created the mask from the Records. The fact that it made a legendary item upon death was proof of how strong the King had been.

*Did I fuck up by not just taking all the corpses?*

Jake wondered, but on second thought, he likely hadn't. Cloud Elementals turned into those small bead things that Hawkie collected, the dungeon bosses had all turned into or created items he used to kill the King or other dungeon bosses, and none of the other things he killed were worth looting.

With Hawkie in tow, Jake flew up and returned to their usual cloud island. Not a single beast in their surroundings dared to get in their way.

**BANG**

The bullet flew through the air before hitting the spider-like beast. One of its legs got hit, making it stumble slightly, but it was far from enough to make the D-grade beast fall.

It fired out a web from its backside that fell like a blanket over the entire area the bullet had come from. Upon making contact with the concrete building, it began being devoured by the acidic web.

Sadly for the spider, the sniper was long gone, as another stream of bullets hit it. It stumbled once more, and before it could get up, a figure emerged from one of the shadows nearby, zoomed past him, and cut its side with a sharp dagger.

It hissed in pain as the wound began burning with the power of a strong curse, the same proving true for the bullet in its leg. The fight had been going on for the better part of three hours, and the beast was getting tired.

It was only about the size of a car, but it was an unusually fast and powerful beast. Yet it had been whittled down by bullets and sneak attacks over the last few days, making it never able to rest and fully recover. All of the attacks that managed to pierce its natural defense were imbued with curses.

The shadows it had called its home was now a danger it wanted to avoid. And the worst of its attackers appeared to its beady eyes once more.

A human wearing a robe, black streams of lightning crackling all around him – a metal staff in his hand that already had an attack charged up in the orbs floating around him. It hissed again and charged the accursed human, but after only taking a few steps, the ground below it erupted into a dark explosion.

Blinded, it failed to avoid the lightning strike, sending it tumbling back nearly a hundred meters, impacting a wall. The attack itself had done little damage, but it was the sheer quantity of it all. It couldn't even get up before another sniper-shot hit it.

This torture continued for another two hours before finally, with a flash of thunder from the sky, the beast fell dead to the ground.

Dozens of figures emerged from the surrounding buildings' shadows and gathered around the corpse - the cloaked man with the metal staff the first to arrive.

"Good job, everyone, it was a tough cookie, but we made it," Caleb Thayne said as the other figures nodded.

“117, seems like we found a mid-tier Pylon defender. It would have been easier if we got one of the low-tier ones to beat,” Matteo said, looking annoyed at the corpse.

“Well, at least it wasn’t a high or peak-tier challenge, or it would have taken way longer. If we could even do it. Good thing it couldn’t heal,” Nadia said, as she wiped her rifle with a cloth as if it was her child.

“Either way, time to claim the Pylon,” Caleb said with a light smile as he went over to the Pylon that had spawned only a few meters from the corpse of the spider. “Go get the others while I figure this thing out.”

A few of the cloaked figures nodded as they left to find the rest of their group. Only the elite had participated in this battle, yet they still lost tens of people to the spider. It was lucky that it was out of mana and could only shoot its web towards the end. Its magic had taken far too many lives.

Caleb could drain its mana with his dark lightning, so once it was empty, he could keep it empty. As long as they never allowed it to rest, they could eventually whittle it down. Which they had. They had prepared the arena and kited it around into mines, ambushes, pitfalls, and so on.

In the beginning, it had quite a few other spiders with it, but over the last week, they had hunted them down one by one.

Caleb pressed his hand on the Pylon. “6th, huh. Still in the top 10, so not that bad.”

He smiled a bit to himself as he claimed it and changed his profession. The new one gave 16 free points per level, still a rare variant of City Lord for being one of the first 10 to claim one. *Umbra should be OK with this.*

As the de-facto leader of the Court of Shadows on Earth, Caleb felt quite a lot of pressure on him. They were already closing in on six digits in their entire group, so it was high time that they claimed a Pylon and began establishing themselves.

Once the first 100 Pylons were claimed, things would start for real. Caleb had claimed the 6th one, meaning quite a few more needed to be claimed for the next stage to begin. But from now, it would likely get faster as humanity grew in power. *And we'll be ready.*

As he was getting accustomed to his new profession, he was brought back to reality by the rest of the people coming. A massive wave of individuals all marched towards the broken-down city on the horizon. All of them had retreated to a safe distance while the Blades of the Court fought the D-grade.

In front of the group were four people he recognized as he smiled- a woman holding a newborn baby and a middle-aged couple that looked younger than they had before the tutorial. Everyone gave way for them, showing respect to the family of the Judge.

Within the Court of Shadows, Judge was a role most often only held by S-grades, and they were the leaders of their Court. But Earth didn't have any S-grades, so Caleb would have to make do. Yet even if he had been named Judge, or more accurately Judge-elect in another multiverse, it would not be contested.

Blessed by Umbra, Holder of the Legacy of Tenculis and a supremely talented caster. All of that, completely ignoring his relations to another notorious figure of the 93rd Universe.

Caleb and his wife, Maja, were both perfectly aware of Jake. Caleb was told by Umbra, and he had told his wife, but for now, all they had told his parents was that Jake lived and was doing well. The implications of what Jake had done were just too complicated to properly communicate.

When Caleb learned of Jake... that he was a Progenitor that had usurped fate, slain a powerful D-grade, and was likely the strongest human on Earth, his reaction had been... a shrug.

It was a bit weird to say, but Caleb wasn't surprised. His brother had always been strange but also competent. Yet even more so than that. If Caleb were asked who he knew would do best in surviving in the post-apocalypse, it would be Jake. A desolate island in the middle of the ocean? Jake. A pit of monsters? Jake.

He remembered once when he was a child; his family had gone to the zoo. Jake was only seven back then, and Caleb had been five. It was the first time going for both of them as there wasn't a zoo close to their town, and they had always been more fond of things like amusement parks.

It had been a nice trip, but Caleb remembered one part of that day far more distinctly than anything else. They had gone to see the wolves for feeding time, an event the two boys had been looking forward to a lot.

Jake and he had stood at the small barrier, looking down at the pack of wolves that were awaiting their daily feeding. Yet when Jake appeared, they all turned towards him. All just... looking at him. Jake just stared back, a young, excited child.

The speaker came out and talked about the wolves, but the animals just kept staring up at Jake. Jake, at this point, had noticed them as he just stared back with puzzlement. The speaker finished up her small info dump on wolves, and with a device, the meat was deposited into the enclosure.

The wolves noted the food but didn't stop looking at Jake. One of them turned a bit to sniff it before it looked back up at Jake, almost expectantly.

Caleb clearly remembered Jake, almost as if on instinct, nodded to the wolves. With approval, they dove into their meal, the poor speaker finally talking again after the wolves stopped acting weird.

He doubted Jake even remembered it, but Caleb had never forgotten. Because that was the day, he finally understood a feeling he had experienced growing up himself. A weird feeling had always been at the back of his mind, his instincts whispering to him that he was in the presence of something... dangerous. His parents had never noticed, but Caleb couldn't help it. Through the years, Jake became more... muted, and his presence became far more controlled.

Not that Caleb in any way blamed or ever even feared Jake. He knew it had helped shape him always to be baptized by that feeling. When he felt the pressure from accepting the Legacy of Tenlucis, he had barely registered it.

The reason why the Legacy of Tenlucis was so dangerous was because of the concept it relied on. Tenlucis had been a god of darkness and lightning, living with the belief that the power of the dark heaven was above all, even himself. Through his own delusions, he had managed to create a path where he always moved under the pressure of the heavens, continually being mentally strained but also forcing him forward.

It had pushed him to the top, but it had also made him... unstable. Which was why he entered one of the places in the Multiverse that even Primordials avoided. And there, he had died. But at least he had the decency to leave a few legacies behind.

Caleb had now accepted that Legacy after Umbra directed him towards it when he got his profession upgrade. The reason was simple... because Caleb had stood tall before her. Before the overwhelming aura of a god standing at the pinnacle of power, he hadn't felt even the slightest bit fearful or intimidated.

Because he had grown up in the presence of a far more dangerous monster.

## Chapter 160: Can I?

Jake stood on the small island of clouds with Hawkie still at his side. The hawk had been giving him inquisitive looks for the last few hours as Jake had just been standing there, staring at the giant creature in the distance while recovering his resources.

**[Storm Elemental – lvl ???]**



*Can I?*

He honestly wasn't sure. The Thunder Roc had been far easier to take down than expected, but he was well-matched against it. His poisons worked wonders as it was flesh and blood, its defenses were weak, and it had been barely D-grade.

The Storm Elemental gave him the feeling that it was slightly stronger... and that was ignoring how bad of a matchup it was for him. His poisons were borderline useless. Even the poison mist from his wings would be ineffective, as there was a constant current of air surrounded the elementals, blowing away the poison.

Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter was still useful, but it could only be used once as it simply took too long to summon another arrow. He had thought of having Hawkie join him, but... without sounding rude, the bird would only get in the way.

He doubted the bird's attacks would do much harm to the Storm Elemental and instead just end up getting fried by the streaming bolts of lightning within its body. It would only distract Jake, making him worried about the bird throughout it all.

Jake's mana bolts would do damage, but far from enough to bring down the massive elemental. Sure, if he could just bombard it constantly from far away without it fighting back, he could maybe... *wait a second.*

Why couldn't he just do that?

Cloud Elementals were slow as hell, and he assumed the Storm Elemental to be no different. He saw it mulling about close to the massive tree at the center of the cloud continent, and its movements were slow. Sure, due to its enormous size, it still traveled tens of meters a second, but to Jake... that was actually pretty damn unimpressive.

*Can I?*

What if he just stayed... tens of kilometers... no... even further away. Finally, put his massive perception and range to good use by being a true sniper.

Hawkie kept looking at him, and as it saw determination begin to form in Jake's eyes, it gave him an encouraging call.

Jake looked up at the hawk as he remembered something. "You collect those beads from the Cloud Elementals... could it be you want the one from that one?"

It gave him another encouraging sound, pretty much confirming it to Jake.

"Why do you need them, anyway?"

Hawkie looked a bit hesitant before finally motioning for him to follow. Jake was still unsure why he should follow, but he was still low on resources from the Thunder Roc fight, so it wasn't liked he planned on fighting right away.

Spreading his wings, he glided down after the hawk as he soon noticed the direction they were heading. Hawkie tended to leave nearly every day for a few to over a dozen hours. Jake had tried to follow on prior occasions, but every time the bird rebuffed him.

Yet this time, it wanted him to follow.

Without questioning it, he flew down towards the forest below together with Hawkie. They kept flying at their high speed as Jake noted exactly where they were going.

The forest was absolutely massive, larger than most major continents on the old planet if he had to guess. He saw only trees from far up in the air, some even being at eye-level with him ten kilometers up in the air. He knew that D-grade beasts roamed deeper within. And at the moment, they were going deeper.

Feeling the Pylon's location, it was already hundreds of kilometers away, towards the outside of the forest, yet they kept flying. Deeper and deeper they went, and Jake began noticing the level of the beasts growing below.

He spotted a monkey-like beast at the top of one of the trees at level 73, higher than the Mole Lord that had dominated the area of the forest where his Pylon was.

Minutes passed as they kept going until finally, Hawkie began flying downwards. They were still not in the deeper parts quite yet, but the average level of beasts around there was still on average in the eighties.

*What do you have going on this far in?* Jake wondered

He had already guessed that the reason why he met Hawkie, to begin with, was that it had been heading towards the cloud continent when it saw him, but he hadn't thought that it lived this deep in.

With his sharp senses, he could even feel D-grades deeper inside... no... one was close. Straight ahead of them, where Hawkie was heading. *Is it leading me into a trap? Why would it?*

Jake felt a bit of doubt, but he wasn't that afraid. He felt confident in escaping from an early-stage D-grade, and on the way, he had chugged another stamina potion, meaning he was above 70% in all his resources.

Besides... his intuition told him that the hawk didn't wish to cause him any harm.

He didn't believe for a second that Hawkie didn't feel the D-grade ahead either. It was practically projecting its aura in the surrounding area to scare off any other beasts.

The two of them entered what was clearly the territory of a D-grade beast as Jake felt the aura come down on him. He scoffed as he countered with his own, utterly rebuffing it. He didn't fear the presence or aura of the Malefic Viper, and this D-rank beast wanted to suppress him?

Hawkie at his side wasn't affected by the aura at all, or maybe it was just used to it. At least that is what he assumed, as it didn't react.

Jake felt the focus on him intensify, making him fully aware that the beast had some kind of perception skill to zone in on him.

He just kept following Hawkie confidently as they reached a barrier of some kind. It blocked both vision and sound, only allowing the aura of the beast within to get through. And his Sphere of Perception, of course.

Not that he needed it as what was within came out for them.

Jake felt it coming as he landed on the ground. Out of the barrier first came a flash of colors and light before a beast emerged. A small figure with blue mana flashing around it came towards them, stopping only a few meters before him and Hawkie. Hawkie had landed to his side and was already making bird sounds towards the newcomer.

With a quick Identify, he identified this was indeed the D-grade. Well, the aura also made it obvious.

**[Mystsong Hawk – lvl ???]**

The hawk was about the same size as Hawkie, aka not that much larger than a regular hawk. But while Hawkie was brown, this bird was nearly entirely light blue with deep blue rune-like markings all over its body. It actually reminded him a bit of the Great White Stag with its demeanor. It was a mana-focused bird for sure, something the barrier, and without a doubt, what lay within, was only further proof of.

The two birds were now chirping back and forth, clearly not quite in agreement. Jake smiled a bit to himself as he got the situation. *Damn, Hawkie scored a D-grade. Nice.*

He couldn't help but mentally give the bird a fistbump. He had to admit that he wasn't even sure if Hawkie was a he or she, but it didn't matter. A score is a score; either way, it was impressive.

"Sorry to butt into the family drama, but what's the deal?" Jake finally asked after more than a minute of intelligible bird-talk. Wasn't he supposed to have some kind of overpowered translation-skill?

Two pairs of eyes turned to him because the shiny bird screeched madly, trying to intimidate him.

"Yeah, no. Anyway, what's inside that barrier you really don't want me to enter?"

The D-grade bird looked a bit baffled at the human who just completely ignored it. A few quick sounds from Hawkie made it look over before looking back at Jake with skepticism.

“The barrier?” Jake asked again, seriously considering just trying to enter it.

Exchanging looks yet another time, Hawkie made a few more sounds before the Mystsong Hawk did what Jake could only interpret as a sigh before turning around and flying back into the barrier. Conveniently leaving a hole more than large enough for Hawkie and Jake to enter.

Jake didn’t need a bird-translator to get that one, as he and Hawkie went through it.

After they entered, the hole in the barrier closed right away. Jake noticed that you could still see out but not into it. It was a bit like the barrier around the Pylon, albeit far weaker from what he gathered.

The inside of the barrier was certainly not as he had expected. A constant white mist covered the entire area, and Jake instantly felt his mana regeneration spike. The mana density within was practically tangible as Jake breathed in.

“Screech!”

Which got him a mad screech from the Mystsong Hawk, clearly telling him to cut it out. Jake got the message as he stopped breathing in the mana. His mana pool was already full anyway; he just wanted to test it a bit.

Hawkie made some more sounds towards its mate, Jake just looking around. The spherical space within the barrier was only forty or so meters across, more than large enough to house the two hawks and the human, but also small enough so that his sphere covered a large part of it.

He observed the inner zone with his sphere and saw that the ground was entirely bare of plants. It had all been replaced with intricate markings and runes, glowing a faint sheen of mana. Specific gathering points with piles of small orbs were also found around the pattern, and Jake identified one of the orbs.

**[Cloud Orb (E-grade)] – A cloud orb dropped by an E-grade Cloud Elemental. Contains highly concentrated cloud-affinity mana within.**

*So this is where Hawkie takes them*, he thought. They were clearly powering or amplifying the formation and the source of the abundance of mana in the air. It also explained why it was so misty, as it stemmed from the cloud mana.

Cloud mana was a mix between air and water based on the knowledge his Sagacity of the Malefic Viper provided, but the white clouds leaned far more towards the air-affinity. Why it worked like that, he didn't know, but he reckoned the darker clouds leaned closer to water-affinity. Or wasn't it actually just straight-up lightning and air affinity at that point?

While the formation and the two birds still making sounds at each other were interesting, he saw one thing that gave him pause. The formation was clearly built with a center, and in that center was a small nest. And in that nest, a single egg.



“You two expecting a kid?” Jake asked, his voice actually a bit surprised. He didn’t even think about how a D-grade and an E-grade had ‘gotten it on’ but was genuinely happy for the two hawks. Sure, it was a bit of a fucked up world, but he was happy that his buddy Hawkie had a family.

Both turned to him, Hawkie puffing up a bit with pride, while the D-grade hawk looked at him suspiciously. This earned a few bird-words from Hawkie, as it appeared to want to convince its partner about something.

*Wait, how do these birdbrains even understand me? Translation skill or just really smart birds? Well, they are smart birds...*Jake thought as he stood there in contemplation about ultimately useless things.

Jake walked a bit closer to the egg to see it with his eyes, which got him a small blast of mana from the Mystsong Hawk, rebuffing him.

“Easy there. I am not going to eat my pal’s kid, geez,” Jake said as he shook his head.

He moved closer to the egg and, under the watchful gazes of the two hawks, squatted in front of the nest.

The egg was small, only a bit bigger than a chicken egg. It had a brown color but had white markings running through it. Jake could feel the intense mana surrounding it and could even faintly feel the life within it. His Sense of the Malefic Viper feeling for the mana sensed strong undulations of wind-affinity mana and pure mana.

“You want the orb of the Storm Elemental, right?” Jake asked after standing up.

Hawkie didn’t hesitate to give an affirming screech.

“Why don’t you just hunt it down?”

He looked at the Mystsong Hawk, which just averted its gaze to the formation around them.

“Ah.. you need to be here for the formation... I guess other powerful beasts are also in the area... got it. Damn Hawkie, seems like you are the breadwinner, forced to take home the orbs. Wait, you stole my orbs too... does that mean I am a contractor...?” Jake said, going on a bit of a tangent.

The Mystsong Hawk looked confused at the Galesong Hawk, which just looked away embarrassed, perhaps beginning to wonder if bringing the weird human to its nest and mate was a good idea or not.

“Well, what’s in it for me?” Jake finally asked, bringing both of the bird’s attention back on him.

It was a question that clearly neither of them had considered. While Jake couldn’t fault the Mystsong Hawk as it had met him only minutes ago, as it clearly didn’t know he was coming based on its reaction, Hawkie was something else.

“I may have given out potions and let you take those beads without asking anything in return, but that was to return the flight-training favor. This is different. You aren’t asking me for some useless baubles but for me to face a D-grade elemental and then give you the loot afterward. Even as a favor for a friend, that doesn’t seem fair.”

His scolding made the Mystsong Hawk glare at Hawkie, while Hawkie looked both a bit embarrassed and ashamed. Clearly, its partner disagreed with Hawkie’s selfish ways, and Jake was more than happy to make the hawk feel the scorn.

The hawk made some angry screeches like a mad wife finding out that its husband was being an asshole to others. Jake just laughed a bit internally, finding it a reward in itself to see one magical bird slapping another magical bird with its wing.

He let the two continue for a bit as he just looked at the magical runes a bit closer. They appeared more powerful but less complicated than what the Great White Stag had created. The power, without a doubt, due to the bird being D-grade.

*Should I try and have it teach me? Nah, we can’t even speak, and I already have a buttload of alchemy to catch up on,* he thought.

“You know what,” he said, interrupting the one-sided bickering. “I’m gonna go kill that elemental; meanwhile, you two can figure out payment.”

And with that, he flew upwards, passing through the barrier harmlessly as he soared towards the island.

*Can I?*

*Well, I am sure as hell gonna try.*