

# THE PRIMAL HUNTER

## Chapter 161: Towards the Horizon

Jake awoke from meditation and stood up, stretching a bit. It didn't really do anything as the system had thoroughly changed his physique, and he wasn't even sure how things like muscles mattered anymore, but he still felt better after doing it.

He looked towards his target in the distance and saw that the Storm Elemental had confidently moved closer to the giant tree to soak in its mana. Jake had clearly ruined the natural balance that the Thunder Roc and Storm Elemental had created by killing one of them...

So wouldn't it only be fair to finish off both?

His tactic for the Storm Elemental would be far different, however. Instead of just fighting it straight-up, he would challenge himself another way...

Jake had always been pretty decent at long-distance shooting, and he had to admit that he always admired the Longbowmen. Jake remembered that the longest range ever achieved with a longbow was a bit less than 350 meters, and that wasn't even with any focus on accuracy.

He once read that using a longbow was more similar to golf than any actual archery. Jake wasn't sure how accurate that was.

With what Jake planned, he knew that his usual attacking tactic wouldn't work.

Even at around a dozen kilometers, there was practically no drop-off for his arrows due to the sheer power behind them -- the Windsoar bow's enchantment that helped with air resistance also being immensely helpful.

But Infused Powershot was what really made it possible. The problem was that... the mana within the shot would run out before hitting. It would slowly fizzle out, making the arrow slow down and begin dropping far more than before.

Jake didn't know the exact maximum range of Infused Powershot, but he didn't believe he could keep his arrow flying in a straight line for more than 20-25 kilometers, if even that.

So to shoot a Storm Elemental from where he currently stood would be... difficult.

He focused his eyesight and could barely see the humongous figure of the Storm Elemental far, far off in the distance. When he focused, it was like he was looked through a telescope; well, except it didn't limit his peripheral vision at all.

*That 1978 perception is about to be put to good use,* Jake snickered inwards as he began to make some quick calculations.

*So, based on my calculations, if I shoot up and the arrow goes whoosh and then it goes wee, hitting the elemental with a boom, it will do big damage,* Jake nodded, approving of his own brilliance.

In all seriousness... this kind of attack was where he did a bit of calculation, but otherwise, he just did what *felt* right.

When it came to pure archery, this would, without a doubt, be his biggest challenge yet, which is why he was still excited for it. It wasn't as much a life and death battle as it was Jake overcoming his own limits.

Gazing towards his target one more time, he saw that it indeed hadn't moved for ten minutes or so, just standing right at the tree, one of its massive arms placed on the trunk. He estimated the distance between him and the Storm Elemental to be...

175-177 kilometers.

His last Infused Powershot at full power passed around 15 kilometers in 3 seconds. That meant even if he could shoot with that much speed, it would take the arrow 35 seconds or so from shooting it till it arrived.

But he wasn't shooting in a straight line but a curve. It would also travel significantly slower for a lot of the journey... meaning he effectively looked at more than a minute of travel time.

It was about the same time it would take him to summon another Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter.

Did he need to be that far away? Probably not.

Was he confident in hitting from that range? Not really.

Would he do it anyway? Hell yeah.

Jake had already decided that he wanted to accomplish a few things before reaching D-grade. For his class, he had wanted to beat a D-grade in one-on-one combat without any gimmicks. But he also wanted to explore exactly how far his current skills in pure archery could take him. And what was more critical to archery than precision?

He began summoning his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter as he focused on the Storm Elemental. What appeared was an arrow similar to the one he had used on the Cloud Elemental, and once more, it had also drained far more mana than stamina to make. He was fully aware that he could only shoot a few shots before running out of either stamina or mana... but he had a feeling it would be okay.

While he wasn't sure exactly how the elemental's resources worked, he had a strong feeling that it wouldn't be able to regenerate itself faster than he could pump out arrows. Especially not as he was more than liberal with consuming potions.

With his Venomfang, he made a deep cut on his own wrist as he focused on Blood of the Malefic Viper. He soaked the entire arrow in the blood, as he knew it was his most effective toxin against the non-biological elemental.

Nocking the giant arrow, he took a final look at the target so far off in the distance it wouldn't even register in a regular human's eyes. Yet Jake could see his target quite clearly, the streams of thunder rumbling within releasing the occasional flash of light.

Almost like it was begging for an arrow from half a small country away.

Drawing the string, he felt the resistance. He still found it very magical how the bow could keep feeling taut despite his increasing stats. He knew it was due to its quality as he was pretty sure a common-rarity bow from the tutorial would break in his hands.

He began charging all his boosting skills, and even Big Game Hunter awakened to his intent, boosting his strength and agility even further. Limit Break activated at 20% as he knew he would handle the weakness while recovering his resources anyway.

Mark of the Ambitious Hunter also proved once more how little Jake understood it. He used the Mark on the Storm Elemental even though it was so far away, and to his amazement, he could even feel where the elemental was from it.

He thought it would be out of range... but then again, the skill's range did scale with perception.

With everything ready, he began charging Infused Powershot. Power whirled around him as he did the last-second calculations and got a feel for the perfect angle. He took a deep breath as he began reaching his limits.

Jake let go of the string, and the arrow exploded out as it flew in an arc out into the distance.

One would think it was a danger that it would encounter other flying creatures during its flight, but the risk was actually quite low. Most of the birds tended to stay lower as they hunted the cloud elementals on the continent below. A few did note the shadow of the arrow passing over them, but as it wasn't an attack aimed for them, they ignored it.

Jake had already begun creating another Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. With his eyes closed as he focused, he didn't even look if the arrow would hit its target.

He would know if it did... and if it didn't, he would just have to try again.

The seconds ticked by as he channeled summoning the arrow. It slowly began emerging from his palm, suspended above it by the skill.

10...11...13

34... 35...

59... a minute passed, and nothing yet.

63... 64...

He felt the arrow about to be fully summoned as he opened his eyes. The first thing he did was to throw his gaze towards the Storm Elemental... and just in time.

From above, a giant arrow fell. It looked only like a small needle as it impacted the massive Storm Elemental that had just been minding its own business at the lightning tree.

Destructive energy invaded the elemental as Jake felt it through his Mark. Like a wave, it tore through the massive form, and Jake was certain that it was making loud booming noises based on the many small forms of panicking birds and elementals he saw.

But... Jake didn't have time to look. He once more drenched the now-finished arrow in his blood as he nocked it and once more began charging Infused Powershot.

**BOOM!**

Once more, the cloud island he was on shook, and he felt a lot of it be blown apart... he would have to find another one soon as this one would disperse entirely in only a few shots.

Another Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter flying in a great arc towards the horizon as he consumed a mana potion and began making yet another.

A bit more than a minute later it landed, this one missing the massive elemental by nearly 100 meters. It sounded like a lot, but with the gigantic shooting distance, it really wasn't. The Storm Elemental had moved slightly in the direction he had shot from, but after finding nothing, it was already making its way back again to the tree.

So he shot again.

**BOOM!**

This one flew in another great arc, tearing through the sky. The wind gave way as the Windsoar enchantment that gave his bow its name truly proved its worth. With wind resistance non-existent, his arrow didn't lose much momentum as it flew; the only thing working to slow it down was the energy from the Infused Powershot running out.

Perhaps there was something poetically ironic about using a bow blessed by elementals to get revenge on someone slaying elementals... to slaughter even more elementals. Cloud and wind were even closely related...



The third arrow descended like a great artillery strike, hitting true as once more the massive Storm Elemental was invaded with destruction incarnate. It writhed in pain as it tried to locate its attacker but failed.

Its intelligence was non-existent like the Cloud Elementals. It moved only on instincts and refused to leave the giant lighting tree... it was just a sitting duck, never going more than a few kilometers away from it. Well, Jake would call its instincts pathetic, but he wasn't the best to ask.

**BOOM!**

A fourth arrow was released, and this one also flew true. The cloud island below him couldn't take a single shot more before being completely dispersed... but he only had mana for a single arrow more, so that was fine.

Ten thousand mana, uplifted to nearly fifteen thousand with the potion, was consumed with five arrows. Jake's stamina was also down to a third, the constant strain of Limit Break at 20% and, of course, the investment in the arrows. This meant that each summoning had drained nearly 3000 mana and more than 750 stamina.

A few remnants of the massive roars of the Storm Elemental even made their way towards him, barely audible in the distance. He couldn't help but chuckle, thinking of the beasts below the island and the birds flying on it, all scared absolutely shitless.

**BOOM!**

The fifth and final arrow was released, the cloud island below him now wholly blown apart. He quickly made his way to another nearby small island as he settled down on it. He deactivated Limit Break as he began breathing heavily from the exhaustion.

He had just entered meditation as he felt the fifth arrow hit.

56 minutes later, he opened his eyes and consumed a mana potion, and then reentered meditation immediately again.

An hour after that, he chugged down a stamina potion before continuing his meditation.

This continued for 6 hours total – 3 stamina and 3 mana potions – before he opened his eyes for another shooting session.

He gazed towards the distance and saw his target still at the lightning tree. It was less damaged than six hours ago... but far from healed. All signs of toxicity from his blood were long gone, but it didn't have enough time to regenerate fully.

Its internal thunder was slightly muted... and as the saying goes, one must smith when the iron is hot.

2 minutes and 49 seconds later...

**BOOM!**

Another arrow rained down on the poor Storm Elemental. It wasn't smart enough to understand how screwed it was, but even with its primitive instincts, it had been happy to be left alone for the last half a dozen hours.

**BOOM!**

Then a seventh came, tearing away at it even more. Its massive right arm seemed to lose its form for a moment before the elemental reformed it.

**BOOM!**

The eighth arrow hit it in its mid-section, and a massive portion of its body was consumed for a moment, with the Storm Elemental once more expending considerable resources to heal itself.

**BOOM!**

Arrow number nine missed by less than five meters to the right of the massive stationary form. *Can't be perfect every time*, Jake chuckled, already preparing the tenth arrow.

**BOOM!**

The tenth hit, meaning eight total hits by Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter. The Elemental truly looked to be spent, so Jake did the only natural thing.

He went through another round of recuperation on yet another small cloud island.

A bit over twelve hours after the first arrow arrived, the barrage continued.

**BOOM!**

The eleventh arrow blew apart the right arm once more, but this time it didn't regenerate it right away.

**BOOM!**

The twelfth arrow blew apart the other massive arm, one it also failed to regenerate.

**BOOM!**

The thirteenth arrow hit it right in the chest-section, blowing out a massive part of its body. The destructive wave tore through it, as the lighting that ran through it was practically non-existent now. It tried to regenerate the destroyed part of its chest, but it appeared to have difficulty maintaining its form.

**BOOM!**

Fourteen. Twelve of which that hit. That was how many Arrows of the Ambitious Hunter were required to kill the D-grade elemental.

***\*You have slain [Storm Elemental – lvl 107] – Bonus experience earned for killing an enemy above your level\****

***\*\*DING!\*\* Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 94 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*\*DING!\*\* Class: [Ambitious Hunter] has reached level 95 - Stat points allocated, +4 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 83 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Jake basked in the levels but noticed there was one notification he had missed. It came the moment he killed the Elemental and was honestly one he hadn't expected.

***\*Skill Upgraded\*: [Expert Archery (Uncommon)] --> [Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)]***

## Chapter 162: Pecking Order

Jake looked at the upgraded skill with a bit of bewilderment.

***[Expert Archery (Uncommon)] An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. You have proven yourself an expert with your chosen weapon and is fast approaching the level of mastering your craft. Adds a small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon.***

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***[Archery of Vast Horizons (Rare)] - An Archer's best friend is the bow in his hand and the arrow in his foe's heart. Unsatisfied with merely becoming an expert, you have sought beyond mastering common bowmanship, and do not shy away from using magic to enhance your technique. You seek to cross all horizons with your arrows, and your target shall be pierced, no matter the distance, no matter the means. Adds a***

***small bonus to the effect of Agility and Strength when using a ranged weapon. Adds a small damage bonus to all arrows based on distance traveled and Perception.***

He was bewildered... was all it took really just to shoot a long distance to get a skill with a weird name? It didn't just upgrade from 'expert' to 'master' or something like that. Instead, it changed direction.

Not that he was complaining. The skill was objectively better in every way as it added a damage bonus based on distance and perception. It also said damage bonus and not that it increased the effectiveness of his stats, which meant it likely worked like his Mark of the Ambitious Hunter.

Was it because he had reached some level of understanding of how the Mark did its damage? Was it because he had killed a D-grade while only in E-grade himself with his long-range archery? Was it because he used a plethora of different skills besides usual archery?

It even mentioned using magic to enhance his archery... did he really do that? Infused Powershot was technically magic... so was Blood of the Malefic Viper if you thought a bit about it. The arrows generated from Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter to be used against the Storm Elemental also clearly carried elements of his mana control, and he doubted it would be as strong as it was if he hadn't practiced mana manipulations and making those mana bolts as much as he had.

The usage of the word 'vast' was also weird. Why not distant horizons? Sure, one could argue that vast included distance, but it also included breadth. Was it talking about how diverse his archery was?

He had to admit it wasn't just regular archery anymore... even from a post-system perspective. He actively integrated Gaze of the Apex Hunter to strike harder, used arrows highly reliant on his abilities as a mana-user and everything from his profession.

Jake stood in thought as he considered the skill. Ultimately it was just a straight-up upgrade, so it was good, and now his perception would prove even more useful. Especially the first strike with Infused Powershot would be stronger... because he *really*

needed it to be.

Closing his system menus in satisfaction, he felt like he was forgetting something. Turning his gaze towards the cloud continent, he saw that the birds were all gathering towards where he killed the Storm Elemental, almost as if they were searching for som-

“SHIT! THE ORB!” Jake yelled out loud as he took flight towards the island. *Damn you, fortunate skill upgrade, for distracting me!*

He was flying desperately forward as he tried to keep an eye on what was happening in the distance. He saw the birds chase a Lightning Roc that had stolen it, but soon a group of Flare Crows attacked it and managed to burn it before one of the large vultures dove in, smashing its talons into the Lightning Roc.

Jake just kept flapping his wings as he tried to get closer. He tried to use Gaze of the Apex Hunter once in a while to try and stop the bird that he assumed had the Orb as he got closer at a pace far slower than he would have liked.

Miranda sat in the newly constructed longhouse with Hank, Neil with his party, and a few of Abby's former goons.



The last few days had been very fruitful for the city with the influx of 50 or so new citizens. Granted, it was a bit skewed on the gender-ratio with only five women in total: herself, Eleanor, Christen, Louise, and the scarred woman.

That woman was one of the people inside the house currently as they discussed future plans.

“Do you believe it’s safe to make contact?” Miranda asked.

“Abby and Donald didn’t want to... a few tried to run that night to try and enter the fort, but they were all killed,” the woman explained. “We quite frankly don’t know anything about them... but they were struggling a bit from the looks of it.”

Miranda nodded as she took in the information.

Getting a group of survivors who had spent nearly a month wandering to chase Neil and his friends had proven quite valuable. They had seen many sights on their travels and had learned a lot.

The first of which was of a few larger human settlements. Around 20 kilometers outside the forest, a total of 130 or so kilometers, a large settlement was called ‘the fort.’ The reason for that was simple, as it was an old medieval fort before the system. The tourist trap was now being used with its original intent in mind as many had taken refuge there.

But... for a lot of humans to group up in one place also presented challenges. Ignoring all the usual difficulties of running a functional settlement, they also had to deal with beasts' constant assault.

A large settlement was the best hunting ground and served as a beacon to attract experience-hungry beasts. It did raise the issue of why no beast ever dared enter the area of their Pylon, but Miranda just assumed it had something to do with the Pylon itself.

Or maybe it was the Pylon's owner? Who knows...

Either way, they were currently trying to determine if they should contact the fort and possibly offer them to come to the forest with them. But there were many risks and unknown factors associated with that, and they quite frankly didn't feel comfortable making the decision without the owner there.

First of all... the fort likely had thousands within while they weren't even 60 people. And while Neil and his party were powerful, they didn't believe that they could ensure any semblance of safety against that many.

Whether the owner could, they didn't know either... but Miranda had a feeling it would be okay. Not because of any skills, though. Her Intuition skill had recently upgraded to rare-rarity and become more specialized towards city management. Annoyingly so, it included better knowing the owner's intent, yet it didn't do jack shit even if it said it did. *Can the system be bugged? Or is he too strong somehow?*

Besides, they had plenty of things to do already. They were currently constructing wooden buildings from the abundance of wood in the forest, with Hank taking the lead in the project. The man was growing in levels quite fast and seemed to enjoy himself. Louise helped him and had even managed to evolve her profession to some kind of architect. Mark also enjoyed helping out and would soon evolve his profession too.

The family had practically taken over the small city's budding construction industry, and Miranda was more than happy for them to do that. And the first thing they had made – after the owner's lodge – was a sign to place at the valley entrance.

There was unanimous agreement that the valley with the lodge in it would be entirely off-limits for anyone but the owner himself and Miranda when she needed to contact him. Miranda still remembered that he disliked people staring at him while he worked, and she had a strong feeling that he would like his privacy. It was not because of some skill but by reading one of the easiest people to read she had ever met in her life.

With that in mind, they began building outside the valley but still more than well within the Pylon of Civilization's domain. They only built to the south side, away from the cliff with the waterfall, making the lodge effectively the city's northernmost point.

Was this the most effective when the Pylon expanded the area in a circular area? No, not at all, but it wasn't like they needed space. With less than 60 people total, they had only managed to create two wooden structures in the new 'city' so far. One of them was the longhouse they were currently in, and the other was a storage building.

The third building was also under construction and would be a second longhouse. The longhouses were large enough to house dozens, and they wanted one for men and one for women. Again, the longhouse for women wasn't really a pressing issue yet due to there only being a handful of them.

Miranda had to admit that she liked the vibe of the area they were building. They had purposefully left most trees standing, making everything covered by the canopy of the trees and giving off a very relaxing mood.

It appeared to help a lot of the members of those who had been forced into helping Abby. After her death, her leadership profession's effect faded, and a lot of the suppressed mental strain came forth. The psychotic little bitch's profession clearly had a skill that allowed her followers to feel... muted about doing horrible things.

Now they would have to deal with that themselves.

Neil and his party had already gone through all of them with Silas's truth-detection spell to ask some rudimentary questions. Mainly about things they had done and wrongs they had committed, as well as confirming that they didn't have any thoughts of revenge towards Miranda or Neil and his friends.

They had also asked about their thoughts towards the owner... but the response there was just weird.

None of them even considered for a second to think badly of him. The reason was that he had killed Abby... but not exactly as one would think.

Nearly all these people had been forced under Abby's umbrella early on in the system. They saw the indomitable power that allowed her to crush anything. Consciously or

unconsciously, they had already put her on a pedestal in their minds that she was ‘more than human.’

Now, that impossibly strong person was killed in a one-sided encounter with the owner. Crushed and made to look like a weak little girl. Instead of bringing her down from her pedestal to their level, in their minds, they had just seen an even larger pinnacle crushing her. All of their fear and – as much as they hated to admit it – respect of her power had been amplified and transferred to him.

It did mean that they worked with almost fanatical intent to help Hank build, and they seemed almost fearful in front of Miranda... the only different one was the scarred woman. Maybe because she had broken out of the spell long ago, she only felt grateful towards the owner, but that was it.

“So, we wait for the owner’s return, and then if we can convince him to help us, we make contact with the fort?” Miranda asked, summing up their circular discussion, always coming back to ‘well if the owner was here...’

They all nodded and they proceeded to discuss a few additional minor things before she dismissed them from their small meeting. Hank already knew what to do when it came to building things, and Neil and his comrades were also working hard on their respective professions these days. They all appeared to enjoy the downtime and not constantly to be on the move.

But she had gotten the feeling that they would soon like to go out hunting. Something they didn’t really feel comfortable doing before the owners return.

*I do wonder what he’s doing right now...*

“GET THE FUCK BACK HERE, YOU LITTLE SHIT!” Jake yelled as he chased the damn falcon-like bird that was flapping its wings desperately with a small orb in its beak. It was damn fast and used wind magic like Hawkie.

He was forced to stop up, fire a quick infused Powershot while freezing the bird with Gaze of the Apex Hunter before finally managing to catch up. He had clipped its wing and thought that *finally*, he could claim his damn loot.

He was already tens of kilometers away from the cloud continent, having chased down one bird after another. They had all swarmed the cloud orb, wanting to claim it for themselves.

With the Thunder Roc, Jake had been there. He had shown himself slaying the beast, intimidating all of them. Yet now, only a day later, they didn’t give a shit about him. Or maybe these were different birds? Some did avoid him, but honestly... he didn’t care.

It had been far too long since he killed the Storm Elemental, and he was only running on fumes now. He had used Limit Break on 20% while bombarding the Elemental and couldn’t deactivate it again with a period of weakness.

The only lucky thing was that he still had more than half his stamina left as he didn’t have to shoot all five arrows... but it was draining fast, the flight having already burned through half of his remaining resource pool.

His shot earlier had brought down another bird... but just as fast he did so, another one swept in and picked up the Orb.

**“ENOUGH!”** Jake yelled, his gaze freezing every single bird within his line of sight.

Blood began pouring from his eyes, but at this point, he was honestly just pissed.

“I killed that fucking elemental; that is MY orb!” Jake yelled furiously, getting the attention of all the birds fighting for the Orb. “Now give it the fuck here, or I swear I will make it my personal mission to hunt down every last fucking one of you.”

His outburst may seem weird... but he already knew a lot of the damn birds understood him, at least on some level. While they likely didn’t comprehend the words themselves, they understood the intent behind them.

But more than that... his aura intimidated them. A few recognized him as the killer of the Thunder Roc, too... it sure helped even more when he took out the Beastcore and held it up.

The bird currently with the Orb in its mouth looked very flustered. It was a Flare Crow with three of its comrades who all gave it a look. It flew towards the human with defeat in its eyes, the pressure from its comrades and all surrounding beasts bearing down on it.

It landed right in front of Jake and put down the Orb. It looked up at him briefly before quickly scurrying away.

By now, they appeared to all have realized: the new apex predator of this region wasn't the two D-grade titans but this small human who had slain both of them.

Jake picked up the Orb and put it in his spatial storage. He was tired and annoyed at having to waste his time chasing these shitty birds. He didn't even bother to go anywhere as he sat down on the ground right then and there, deactivated Limit Break, and entered meditation.

Not a single beast willing to get near.

## Chapter im5: Intermission 5 - Meira

Meira wiped the sweat off her forehead as she sat down to take a rest. Her sweat not only due to the strenuous task she was performing but because of the heat it was done in. Drinking from the water bottle, she thanked her parents for emphasizing the importance of investing free points into physical stats despite being an elf.

Looking to her side, she saw her father and mother both still working to fill the cart and get the shipment ready for their supervisor. It was hard work, but her family knew that their small clan was lucky to have it. To even still exist.

A few thousand years ago, their clan had been rather prevalent, their matriarch even being a mighty B-grade powerhouse. While it wasn't much on a Great Planet like Primordial-4 as a whole, it was quite something for this fringe area.



That is until the mine was discovered. One day a party of explorers from their clan found a hidden pocket dimension with a great mine. One where materials worth more than their clan's collective wealth many times over could be found.

But instead of informing the clan, they sold it to an outside source - the Brimstone Conglomerate. A few days later, their enforcer descended, slew their matriarch and half of the elders, and enslaved their entire clan to work for them. Those who opposed died, and those who obeyed lived.

Meira's father had been the child of one of the elders who submitted. Today, he was a powerful pinnacle D-grade expert already, yet all he could do was slave away for his clan's survival.

"Meira, we are leaving for the station now," she heard her father call. With a sigh, she got up and went over to him as he deposited the last ores into his spatial storage and called for their mount.

A giant bird descended soon after with a small wooden structure on its back - housing for the long trip.

Getting on board, they soon took flight as she waved goodbye to her mother and her siblings, who were still working below. When they were far away from the camp, her father turned to her, a severe look on his face.

“Go rest, so you are ready for when we arrive,” he said somewhat dismissively as she nodded and went to her room, where she collapsed on the padded floor. She was already near the peak of E-grade, yet she still felt exhausted enough to fall asleep.

Three weeks quickly passed as she prepared herself in her room. The dress that her parents had prepared was a beautiful white one-piece. She spent nearly an hour making sure she was entirely clean from all the grime and dirt before putting it on and arranging her hair.

She knew how important it was that the young master of the branch took a liking to her. She had no positive feeling towards the lascivious man, but his liking or dislike of her person could determine her entire family’s fate and impact the clan as a whole. Maybe even lead them to a better future if all went well.

After landing at one of the transit platforms, the father and daughter pair were greeted by the handler and directed towards one of the meeting rooms, along with a small comment about the young master already waiting for them.

Entering the room, the two found themselves face-to-face with a handsome young human and an older-looking gentleman behind him. One she instantly recognized as the branch leader and his son.

The room itself was meticulously designed with expensive-looking wood that she recognized as some of the spirit trees from their forest. Trees they used to honor as guardians of the forest, now reduced to mere furniture.

The centerpiece in the room was a grand statue of a humanoid sitting on a throne. The mighty Brimstone Hegemon. A true god. And an accompanying aura that made her aware they were in his divine dominion.

“Meira, my beautiful, it’s good to see you once again,” the young man greeted with a lustful smile on his lips. His gaze was licking her from top to toe, stopping on every curve to admire them a little longer. Meira had to hold herself back from frowning in disgust as she bowed.

“I am honored to meet your excellency once more,” she said as she gave him a big faux smile. He either didn’t care or didn’t notice her disgust as he just laughed it off and turned to his father.

“She is quite good, isn’t she?”

The older-looking gentleman opened his eyes for the first time and looked at Meira. She instantly froze up as she had to stop herself from falling over from the sheer pressure... *B-tier... and well into it.* A powerful man from a powerful background. A background her parents and clan hoped to become part of through her.

“Weak, but young. With proper training, the girl should be able to do adequately,” he said with little interest in his voice before turning to her father, motioning for him to hand over the ores in his spatial satchel. The lowest kind of spatial storage one could own, and a necessity for these kinds of transports.

Meira just stood in her own thoughts from the man’s words. It didn’t feel good to be spoken of like she was cattle up for auction, but she probably was viewed like that in some sense. The leaders of prominent factions and clans often had many ‘partners’ to

ensure the continuance of the bloodline. If one actually had a real Bloodline Ability, even more so.

She remembered that one of the female elders of their clan also had several dozen young men she kept around. Gender or sex didn't matter; all that mattered was power. Granted, the sexes were treated differently, with women facing adversity due to being often viewed as tools simply to give birth. Meanwhile, a man was simply a soldier or worker to be exploited. Only through power could one truly become an individual. Long ago, she had dreamed of one day rising to power and becoming genuinely free, but that hope had fizzled out a long time ago.

Now all she hoped for was to survive and help her clan and family as much as she could. No matter how humiliating she found the entire situation. Part of her hated being born a humanoid race. To be embroiled in politics and factions instead of the free life of a beast. To be one with nature.

*I have to endure*, was all she could tell herself. Her mother, brothers, sisters, and all the young ones from the clan relied on her. If she could sway the young master and help lift up her clan's status... then maybe her life could hold some meaning.

A vain hope that would soon be extinguished.

After her father handed over the satchel, he got an approving nod as they all turned to pray to the statue in the middle of the room. One of the Brimstone Conglomerate tenets was always to make business deals in the presence of a statue and always credit the act of the deal to the Brimstone Hegemon. So was his creed and his faith. God-things Meira didn't understand.

As they were all bowing, they all heard a sound - a crackling.

The master of the branch looked up, and his eyes went wide. A long crack had formed down the center of the statue. The divine aura it gave off in turmoil as the cracks kept spreading. Until finally, the entire statue crumbled to dust, the aura gone forever.

“AARGH,” the powerful B-grade yelled out in pain as blood came out of his eyes and ears. The backlash of losing a big part of him. The blessing he had carried with him for tens of thousands of years gone from his status screen.

“No... impossible...” he mumbled. Everyone in the room was confused as the powerful man kneeled with shock and horror on his face.

“Ma... master... what happened?” her father asked carefully.

“The Hegemon-”

Which was all he had time to say before a shocking aura washed over them. One even more powerful than the man in front of them.

Meira felt her entire body shake as she diverted her eyes to the window. In the distance, she saw reality break apart as space shattered. And from the crack emerged two giant beings. One, a long snake-like creature with scales covering its entire body and eight small legs growing along its body.

The second was one even the smallest of children would recognize: a powerful body, four legs, and two wings on its back. Black flames were fuming at its mouth as it flew forward. A true dragon. Not any inferior version either... but a Black Dragon.

*A-tier*, she barely had time to think before it opened its mouth and released a mighty roar. The last thing she felt being the impact on her soul as she lost consciousness.

Meira came to at some point. The first thing she was hit by upon regaining consciousness was the smell and then the sounds - creaking from the building around her slowly falling apart, fires burning, and finally the sound of footsteps nearby.

She slowly opened her eyes and saw another pair staring back at her. At first, she was startled, but soon she saw the emptiness in them. Dead. It was the young master... her partner-to-be. His head, at least.

Her entire body was hurting, but she managed to lift herself up to a sitting position. She saw the blood drip from her nose and onto the beautiful dress her mother had created for her. A dress that was nearly as ruined as the building around her. *What happened?*

But deep inside, she knew. This was just like the stories of how their own clan fell to ruins - an invasion from a foreign force far more potent than their own. And now the time had come for the Brimstone Conglomerate to face the same destiny.

After looking around for a bit, seeing only the ruined room and the head of the dead young master, she managed to get up on her two feet. Her vision was still lacking, and her body

weak. But she couldn't just sit there and wait for the building to collapse... or for something to come and finish her off.

Which was about the time she recalled the footsteps as they were now right behind her.

"?????" she heard the voice behind her, as she quickly turned, only to stumble and fall down once more. Looking up, she found herself staring at two reptilian humanoids. At first, she thought it was maybe even the dragon from before, but the aura they gave off was much weaker... only D-tier or so.

Shaking her head, she motioned that she didn't understand. The one to the left took out an orb of some sort, and after a brief flash, it disappeared.

Meira just sat there, confused, looking up at the two of them as they just stared back. She had always found it hard to discern reptilians' facial expressions, so she wasn't sure if they were really as indifferent as they looked. For now, she still had only one goal in mind: survive.

Less than a minute later, another two people appeared. One of them reptilian like the others, and the last one a human from the looks of it. The original two reptilians bowed towards the human, making it clear she was above them.

Observing the woman as discreetly as she could, she saw her dark hair and red eyes. But more so than that, she noticed her robe. It was black and green, with the motif of a snake with its mouth open, fangs ready to bite down. A mark she recognized clearly.

She couldn't hold herself back from shivering slightly. It was even worse than she feared. Despite having lived less than six decades, she lived long enough to know the emblem of the most powerful faction on their entire Great Planet. The Order of the Malefic Viper.

If they were the ones that had come... she couldn't even begin to imagine... They were renowned for their strength and alchemy. More accurately, poisons. And if there was one thing they always needed, it was ample targets to test and refine their toxins on. Several clans like her own had fallen over the years to a random traveling alchemist from the Order who had come in need of a few test subjects. And no other faction would ever dare help.

Feeling her left thigh, she knew that the dagger she had hidden away was still there. The thought of trying to fight them didn't even cross her mind; instead, she considered using it on herself. The fate of being a subject of those... monsters was far worse than death.

Before her thoughts could be turned to action, the woman was also done observing her and nodded in satisfaction. Waving her hand, a black piece of paper materialized in the air as she smiled at Meira. Showing the two fangs growing where canines should be. *Vampire... figures...*

Turning her eyes to the contract before her, she knew what it was. Even if she couldn't speak to these people, she could read it. It wasn't written in any language per-se but was created by the system itself from a skill.

A slave contract.

Once signed, your life would be forfeit. Unless it included a way to annul it or the owner chose to do so, it would never disappear. With a single thought, the master would be able



to kill the slave. If the slave hurts the master, they die. If they were even thinking about doing so, they would experience pain directly inflicted on their soul.

And the contract in front of her had no conditions to annul it. It was perpetual.

The only kindness in the entire business was two things. One, a slave contract always had to be signed willingly. One cannot be fooled to sign it or do so while under the influence of any mind-affecting skill. Which isn't to say that they couldn't do exactly as they were doing right now. Giving a simple choice; sign or die.

Besides that, the second kindness was that one could always end themselves. Unless the master made a failsafe through other means, of course, but that was rarely worth it.

Meira hesitated. She hated herself for hesitating and not just ripping the paper apart and drawing her dagger. She hated herself for not even thinking about if her father survived or of her clan at that very moment. She just... didn't want to die.

Raising her hand, she placed it on the contract as she signed it. A rune flashed from the paper and entered her body - her soul. Another went from the contract into a tome at the vampire's side - the master rune.

After that, everything was just a blur. The only thing Meira remembered was seeing her father off in the distance. He saw her too. Their eyes met, and they both knew. They both signed. The trip to wherever her fate lay was relatively uneventful... as much as being stuck in a small subdimension with hundreds of other people could be - all with the same listless expressions on their faces.

Meira could only hope that she would live to one day see her family again... but as a slave on her way to the Order of the Malefic Viper, her prospects didn't look good.

## Chapter 163: Helping Friends

The two hawks sat within the protective sphere while the one Jake had named 'Hawkie' helped its mate with the ritual. Its mate, the Mystsong Hawk, was still skeptical but had agreed to the modifications anyway.

Hawkie needed to stabilize the entire formation while the Mystsong Hawk redrew the markings on the ground carefully. It was intricate work that took a lot of concentration from both of them for something they weren't even sure would have any point.

If the human failed to kill the elemental or didn't want to give the Orb, it would all amount to nothing.

Now, why would the hawks make this large formation and spend more than 1½ month feeding it energy as their egg slowly grew? The answer was simple: Records.

They wanted their chick to start out with as large an advantage as possible, hopefully even getting a powerful race. As a Galesong Hawk and a Mystsong Hawk, the race of their chick was already unpredictable to begin with, and while this entire ritual would make it even more so, it could only lead to positives.

As a D-grade, the Mystsong Hawk was already placed highly on the planet's hierarchy, and they both also believed that the Galesong Hawk could reach D-grade... but to reach C-grade or above was a massive uncertainty.

As beasts, their natural instincts were, of course, for both themselves and their offspring to become as strong and healthy as possible. They had made this entire formation to make sure of that, collected hundreds of the cloud elemental orbs... but they needed more.

That is when that weird human suddenly appeared. At first, he was just a shitty flyer that the Galesong Hawk took pity on, and a few of its fatherly instincts influenced it to give some pointers. It wasn't with any specific goal in mind; it just found the human amusing.

But then it saw the human fight. It saw the man annihilate the souls of an entire flock of birds with a look and for him to improve at a ridiculous speed as he hunted down beasts many levels above himself. It saw him kill beasts the Galesong Hawk wasn't confident in facing with a single arrow...

It saw him kill a D-grade that even its D-grade mate couldn't beat.

That is when the Galesong Hawk realized that it had met a monster.

To see him stand atop the Thunder Roc with a disappointed look in his eyes was what made the Galesong Hawk resolve itself and convince its mate to ask his assistance. The Mystsong was still reluctant but agreed nevertheless. It had tried to pressure the human with its aura but instead found itself suppressed.

22 hours after the human left, the Mystsong Hawk detected him within its projected aura.

A small hole in the barrier opened as the human flew inside, landing on the ground with far more grace than the Galesong had expected the human ever to be able to when it met him only a few weeks ago.

“Well, that was fucking annoying,” the human said as he suddenly began rambling. “Seriously, I kill the stupid elemental, and then everything just goes to shit and...”

However, both of them had already begun filtering out his rant on disrespectful thieving birds after hearing the first part. Besides, they didn’t fully understand his words, just the general sentiment behind them.

The Galesong Hawk made some noises towards him, and the human looked over. “Oh yeah, the orb is right here.”

He took out the Orb and displayed it to the two birds.

***[Storm Elemental Orb (D-grade)] – Contains strong storm-affinity mana and the remnant Records of a Storm Elemental***

The flight back had been rather relaxing. After recuperating a bit, Jake went to inspect the center of the cloud continent, aka the massive crystal tree. Upon further inspection... he was surprised to learn it wasn't alive. Or at least it didn't have a soul.

It was just a natural treasure. One that gathered and created lightning-affinity mana and likely also generated the clouds. Jake couldn't do anything to it or move it. So he decided just to let it be... perhaps he could find a use for it in the future, and if he couldn't, he was fine with it just spawning more D-grades to hunt down later. Even if he didn't hunt them himself, the cloud was pretty close, so perhaps some people from his city could go in the future.

Back in the present time, Jake was still a bit annoyed as he entered the barrier but felt quite a bit better after ranting at the two birds. He had, of course, been attacked on the way back by a bunch of ignorant vultures that hadn't seen him earlier. He was happy that his hawk-buddy wasn't an asshole that just attacked him at first sight. These two hawks at least seemed somewhat polite, and he did consider Hawkie a friend of sorts, and treating your pal's girlfriend or wife decently was just common courtesy.

Yes, Jake was now 100% sure that Hawkie was the guy and the Mystsong Hawk, the girl. Speaking of Hawkie...

"So, what should I call you?" he thought, looking at the Mystsong Hawk. The bird looked back at him with confusion as Jake stood there, thinking deeply. "Well... you are a Mystsong Hawk, so... how about Mystie? Yeah, let's go with that. Hawkie and Mystie."

Now, Jake wasn't actually delusional enough to think that those names were in any way good, but quite frankly, he didn't care. Even if other people heard them, who would disrespect a level 97 hawk and its D-grade partner? Well, besides himself.

The bird didn't particularly mind either, perhaps finding the entire concept of naming things novel. Hawkie had already gotten used to the weird human long ago, so it just ignored the human's antics as it looked intently at the Storm Elemental Orb in his hand.

"Anyway, here is the Orb," Jake said as he tossed the Orb to Mystie, who easily caught it with some kind of magic as it levitated in mid-air. *Telekinesis? It looks pretty weak, so likely not used in combat.*

Jake saw the two birds continue working after both giving a thankful screech. The human wondered what to do as he looked at the magic circle being redrawn in new patterns. It didn't take a genius to figure out that it was to allow the use of the Storm Elemental Orb. But it did give him an idea...

"Can you also use the Beastcore?" he asked as he took out the core from the Thunder Roc.

The Mystsong looked at him and the orb for a bit before sadly shaking its small head.

"Is it because it isn't just pure energy like the orbs?" he asked, pointing between the orbs and the core.

That one got him a nod.

"Say, what if I somehow mess with it a bit and make it more like an orb? Can it then be used?"

This time he got a confused look from Mystie. Hawkie made some bird noises that made the hawk look at him again with interest before screeching at him in response.

*Yeah, I'm just going to take that as a solid 'maybe.'*

Now, what did Jake plan on doing? Something he had no idea if he could even do. A bit of a gamble, if you may.

Jake understood that in the eyes of many beasts and pretty much all humans on Earth, a D-grade Beastcore had to be a priceless treasure, but to Jake, it really wasn't. He would kill countless D-grades in the future, so to mess a bit with one for a mad experiment wasn't a waste at all in his eyes.

He wanted to see if he could somehow change the core into something useful. And what better way to do that but poison the hell out of it?

But... he wanted to do it in a bit of a unique way. So the cauldron he had taken out wasn't his usual one, but one he had yet to use.

***[Cauldron of Myriad Essences (Epic)] - A cauldron made by infusing a vast array of essences within it, granting it the ability to far easier and more efficiently transform mana affinities. Allows the user to change affinities to elemental affinities the user doesn't possess himself. The cauldron has very high mana conductivity due to the material and the runes inscribed upon it, but it is somewhat fragile compared to many***

***other types of cauldrons. Enchantments: Mana conductivity (Very High). Mana Transparency (Medium). Durability (Low). Myriad Essences.***

***Requirement: lvl 50+ in any alchemy-related profession.***

He wasn't quite ready yet, though. While this was a mad experiment, he still needed at least some kind of plan or approach. Closing his eyes, he entered meditation as he dove into his inner self. More accurately, a small drop of blood within himself.

The drop contained Records of the Malefic Viper that Jake could dive into and explore with his Sagacity of the Malefic Viper. Naturally, it wasn't all the mighty god's Records but a mere fraction of a fragment, but that in itself was nearly boundless to an E-grade like him.

And while the knowledge was primarily related to alchemy... not all of it was. As he dove into it, he felt like he got some kind of response as he briefly felt the influence of Villy himself come down and give him a nudge in the direction he was going – his amusement apparent.

Jake found the knowledge wanted as he dove in. Knowledge about Records and, more importantly, the evolution of beasts and how to support them in their evolutions. He didn't look for a recipe or anything like that, but just an idea.

And an idea he got... but surprisingly, it wasn't from what was within the blood but the drop itself.



*If the Viper can somehow implement Records into a drop of blood like this... can't I do something similar? Not the same way, but something similar...*

Thinking about it – his Thoughtful Meditation on full display as he was entirely in his own little world - didn't every part of him already contain a part of his Records? *Yeah, I'm giving it a go.*

Still inspired by his thoughts, he opened the lid of the cauldron and, without any hesitation, poured in his own blood, infused with Blood of the Malefic Viper. Nonchalantly he threw in the Beastcore and began focusing everything he had on the cauldron.

The blood instantly tried to dig in and corrode the core, but Jake didn't allow it to. Instead, he began helping the core fight back. This was the reason why he used this cauldron. The mana he infused into the Beastcore was made to mimic the current mana within it, amplifying it instead of weakening it.

His blood surrounding the core tried to dig into it but instead found itself consumed by the lightning.

Lightning-affinity had the inherent ability to break down mana. Getting hit by lightning magic would also destroy the mana of what was within what it hit. This also meant that if you used lightning magic on a person, it would drain some of their mana along with their health if you managed to do damage.

What did this mean for his blood? It meant that the lightning from the Beastcore eliminated the mana in the blood around it. Draining its toxicity at a rapid pace as Jake allowed it to win out. He wasn't sure exactly how long it took, but soon the blood was entirely drained of all traces of toxicity and seemed almost inert.

But Jake knew it wasn't... because it still contained some elements of Jake that the lightning couldn't destroy. Because while the lightning could destroy all the mana-based poison, it failed to destroy the poison that was entirely based on vital energy.

Harkening back all the way to the time he consumed the amalgamation to pass the challenge dungeon where he encountered his first real vitality-based poison. During the Trial of Myriad Toxins, he had been inflicted with even more types of vitality-based toxins as well as countless other kinds. He had learned from it, and now parts of the poison within his blood were vitality-based.

He took control of this energy as he began forcing it into the Beastcore, meeting much resistance. With most other kinds of poison eliminated in the blood, it was far easier to isolate what was vitality-based and move it.

More time passed as Jake slowly infused this vital-energy into the Beastcore, careful not to break it. After he was done, he quickly emptied the entire cauldron and once more poured in new blood. He continued the process once more as slowly the Beastcore was affected.

Hawkie and Mystie, as this was apparently officially their names now, had been done redrawing the circle a few days earlier already. The human was still sitting there doing his weird ritual of sorts. Hawkie had already expressed that this was the same method he used to make the small bottles that restored resources or concocted deadly poisons, so Mystie was somewhat interested.

They looked on as he kept working, and on the fourth day, they saw a small smile grow on his lips. The two Hawks thought the human was about done, and just as they were trying to inspect closer... something happened. His hands began to glow a dark green color as he injected something into the entire concoction. A few seconds later... they felt a shift.

A presence suddenly appeared for but a fraction of a second, but it was enough to make them both completely freeze up and black out for a moment. Like the harbinger of death and destruction itself had appeared, a phantasmal scaled hand emerged from the void and touched the cauldron before disappearing just as fast.

They both knew it hadn't actually happened but was just a representation of a concept or power far beyond their understanding... but what they did know was that a supreme existence was associated with the human. Only affirming their decision even further.

Jake opened his eyes as he was close to finishing the crafting process. He activated Touch of the Malefic Viper for the final push, injecting the most concentrated poison he could. He tried to imitate the vitality-based poison he had made so long ago, and while it was only partially successful... it got the job done.

His inspiration faded as his smile grew.

The first thing that greeted him was a notification he hadn't seen in a very long time.

***\*DING! \*: [Malefic Viper's Poison] has been activated! The transcendent power of the Malefic Viper has forcefully increased the rarity of your creation to Rare, increasing all effects substantially.***

It was the kind of passive skill that you so easily forgot. Everything it did, it did behind the scenes. Especially the bonus effect that had just triggered. It was an effect that quite frankly seemed too strong for a mere rare skill... but then again, it barely ever triggered. But when it did, it led to something good.

***\*You have successfully crafted [Malefic Beastorb (Rare)] – A new kind of creation has been made. Bonus experience earned\****

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 72 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Profession: [Prodigious Alchemist of the Malefic Viper] has reached level 73 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

***\*'DING!' Race: [Human (E)] has reached level 84 - Stat points allocated, +5 free points\****

Two levels may seem like a lot, but Jake had spent four entire days within his Thoughtful Meditation to make the item. It was still above his current average speed, but not by overly much. It wasn't really him that had crafted a rare item after all.

Jake knew that what he had created was a Beastorb, an item that beasts could consume much like how humans could consume elixirs. Instead, it often had a different kind of effect... sometimes it would help them with an affinity, sometimes it would increase a stat, but it would usually do nothing. Well, *nothing* isn't entirely accurate as it would marginally help the beast's Records, allowing it to potentially reach higher levels or evolutions than it otherwise would.

Looking at his specific creation, it didn't really look that impressive.

***[Malefic Beastorb (Rare)] – A Beastcore of a Thunder Roc that has now been thoroughly infused with vital energy from an outside source and has been forcibly transformed into an orb. It contains the remnant Records of the Thunder Roc and fragmented Records of the alchemist that has crafted it. Unknown effects if consumed. Unknown uses in alchemy. Beneficial effects if consumed by a beast.***

Jake took the Beastorb out of the cauldron and displayed it to the two birds gawking at him.

“Will this be of any use?”

## Chapter 164: Rituals

It took another day to once more reconfigure the magic circle for Jake's new addition. Both hawks were more than happy with doing the extra work required to use the Beastorb.

Their egg had been slowly fed mana for the last one and a half months as it slowly grew, but here towards the end, they had slowed it down to do a final push. A final infusion of energy and Records to kickstart the growth and boost their chick's future potential.

Jake had inadvertently become a part of it all as he spent most of his time observing the birds redraw the formation while trying to understand how it worked. Quite honestly, he wasn't doing well, but he did get a few ideas.

He also helped speed the entire thing up a bit by liberally giving out mana potions, allowing Mystie to work even faster.

After the entire thing was done, they all went to their positions. Three focal points were created inside the formation, each corresponding to an item. Of course, Jake was aware of the Beastorb and the Storm Elemental Orb, but he wasn't aware of the final item before now.

***[Mystbone (Unique)] – A Mystbone granted by the system to the newly integrated 93rd Universe. Contains a vast amount of energy and Records that will allow any beast that consumes it to grow far faster and gain magical skills and abilities related to the path of mysticism.***

*That... actually answers a lot.*

Jake had wondered how there even were so many D-grade beasts on Earth, especially in an area like the Cloud Continent with only two of them. They clearly didn't have anything to hunt, so they must have evolved by consuming special items like this or through some kind of natural talent.

He knew that beasts could grow in level without fighting in several ways. Consuming special items, simply through time, or being in select areas and absorbing the energy in their surroundings. But it appears that the system – quite literally – threw them a bone.

From the looks of it, the bone had clearly already been partly consumed. It was doubtlessly what had allowed the Mystsong Hawk to evolve, and now it wanted to use the remaining energy within for its chick.

In his position in the magic circle, Jake was at the Beastorb, Hawkie was at the Storm Elemental Orb, and Mystie was at the bone. While the hawks couldn't talk to him, he understood what he had to do. He just had to feed mana into the circle and help power it. Mystie would be in charge of everything else.

At this point, he was just taking this all as a learning experience. He got insights into the birth and evolution of beasts, magic circles of a mystical nature, and all while helping out a friend.

Slowly, the formation hummed to life as Mystie began the ritual. All of the Cloud Elemental Orbs began shining as the mana within them were drained. In moments the interior was entirely covered with extremely dense wind-affinity mana.

Jake felt as if small blades were continually trying to cut his skin. It didn't cause him any harm, but he could imagine an average human would be cut into little pieces in seconds. All of this incredibly dense energy was slowly being poured into the small egg in the center.

He saw it being filtered before entering the egg, allowing only the densest and most profound energy to affect it.

Around ten minutes later, the second part began. Hawkie lifted its wings as it began channeling mana into the circle, instantly awakening the Storm Elemental Orb.

It erupted with energy as the dense wind-affinity mana was soaked in the potent storm-affinity mana. Small bolts of lightning began jumping back and forth but were quickly eliminated by the formation. Hawkie fell tired to the ground after fifteen minutes or so as the last bit of lightning disappeared, and now only pure mana and wind-affinity mana remained.

Hawkie quickly downed a mana potion – naturally provided by their resident alchemist – as it prepared to help support the circle.

Next up was the Mystsong Hawk, Mystie. It activated the formation with the Mystbone in it. This part was, without a doubt, the simplest for a variety of reasons.

First of all, Mystie was far more accustomed to manipulating the energy found within the bone than any other. The energy within it was also less than the Beastorb and Elemental Orb, as it was mostly drained already.

Clearly, the purpose of this formation had been to infuse the egg with the Mystbone and mana from as many Cloud Elementals as possible, meaning the formation was primarily designed to accommodate the use of those two. While it had been significantly altered to allow for Jake's contributions, it wasn't a complete overhaul.



Deep blue energy exited the bone as it flew through the air, lightly coloring all the wind-affinity mana a teal color. It slowly began being filtered into the egg as Mystie also consumed its own mana potion. This part hadn't taken as long, but the bird had still spent a significant amount of mana keeping the magic circle going from the start.

Finally, it was Jake's turn. He placed both his hands on two small magic circles on the ground as he began channeling in mana. It didn't feel that much different from doing alchemy; the main difference was that he didn't have to actually control it much.

It was just like opening the faucet; the only thing he had to control was the output.

The small Beastorb in his part of the circle cracked and spread its energy just like the Storm Elemental had before. Dense lightning ascended, looking very similar to what the Storm Elemental gave off too. It was pretty clear that their source of power was the same, likely the giant lightning tree on the cloud continent.

Slowly these bolts of lightning were eliminated, too, as the mana density only grew. But the mana from the Beastorb was not mainly that of wind or lightning, but pure mana. He had managed to transform all the vital energies within it to his own pure mana, allowing it to mix with the Thunder Roc mana.

Pure mana mixed extremely well into any environment and easily integrated itself with the dense wind-affinity mana. Pure mana was colorless, and the only thing that could make one notice it was the mana density increasing. Yet despite it all being pure mana... a small part of it had a distinct green sheen. It was incredibly faint, but they all noticed it nevertheless. The mana from that green energy just felt... ancient.

After all the lightning mana was eliminated, and only wind-affinity and pure mana - albeit some of it with a green sheen - should remain... a third element persisted. Tiny purple sparks that refused to be culled. None of them noticed this, not even Jake with his immense perception or Mystie controlling the formation. They were like pure mana, but... somehow rawer.

They continued to go unnoticed as they were slowly channeled into the egg together with the wind-affinity and pure mana. They were flawlessly integrated with the pure mana and only seemed to help strengthen it.

The ritual continued for hours as the three channeled mana into it and consumed a mana potion whenever possible. The small egg in the middle of it all looking no different than before as it got infused with extremely pure energy and Records.

Jake didn't exactly know what he was doing but just followed along. He just went with the flow as he fed his mana into it and mentally gave his well-wishes to the small chick.

*May you grow big and strong and one day peck a dragon to death*, Jake thought, going all-in with the positive vibes. Or his version of positive vibes anyway.

The better part of a day later, the ritual completed as the barrier surrounding the magic circle dispersed, revealing Jake, two hawks, and a single egg.

Casper stood and channeled his skills into the steel-like surface as he slowly carved the intricate Magiscript. Each rune was smaller than a fingernail, but it went smoothly with the small pen in this hand. It was quiet work that he enjoyed a lot.

In the corner sat the ghost of a woman in meditation as she focused on absorbing the nearby death-affinity mana. The entire area was already slowly getting soaked in it as the first pillar was erected not long ago. With the support of the Pylon of Civilization, the spread of death-affinity-mana only went faster.

They had been the 4th to claim a Pylon, which quite honestly was a lot slower than anticipated. To slay a D-grade this shortly after the integration was nearly unheard of, especially for a relatively small planet like theirs. Sure, there were still billions of survivors, but the vast majority didn't amount to much, to put it kindly.

A lot of discussions had been had around the camp. The general consensus was that the Holy Church had managed to claim the first and associated rewards. They mainly reached that conclusion because Casper hadn't bothered to speak up.

He knew it was Jake. It had to be.

Heck, anything else would be ridiculous. Jake was a Progenitor, and hence he had managed to slay the D-grade during the tutorial and thus had first dibs on the associated Pylon. Unless Earth had a second Progenitor, he was bound to be first. Something Casper very much doubted.

One was already far too many for their measly planet. Heck, Casper even knew they weren't the only humans in the 93rd Universe and that their population of less than 10 billion was considered low.

Yet planet Earth had turned into an epicenter of action. Influenced by many outside sources with far more resources poured in than usual for a world their size. All of it started by the Primordial Eversmile and further amplified by the Progenitor, Jake. In other words, Casper's tutorial had brought with it immense benefits and challenges to their entire planet.

He was one such perfect example himself as a human turned undead through a ritual and challenge dungeon - Lyra, his ghostly girlfriend, even more so.

Looking over, he Identified her and noticed she had once more grown in level.

**[Blightwraith - lvl 73]**

The level was high, but the main reason was that... a monster like her tended to level up quickly. In this case, the word monster was not used in any derogatory way but simply as a means of classification. Because Lyra truly wasn't like the others anymore.

She had truly died during their tutorial. Casper had made a deal to preserve her soul, and that promise had been fulfilled. Her soul had been sealed in a necklace, and Casper would have to find a way to help her himself.

Yet one day, he had been whisked away from his training chamber with an S-rank Archlich. That he was training with such an entity was in itself weird and had made him respected by the other undead, but what happened next was even more surprising to him.

The Blightfather, creator of the enlightened undead race and one of the twelve Primordials, offered him a blessing and even, with a casual gesture, created a legendary item for him in the form of the locket around his neck.

He later found out it was due to Jake being so outstanding that the Primordial even bothered with him. Casper was thankful for that, even if it had placed a lot of undue stress on him.

And if he was treated differently for having an S-class teacher before, it sure as hell got worse when the Blightfather blessed him. Amplified further when they saw the name of the race of his ghostly girlfriend: Blightwraith.

Called Noble Ghosts by many, these spirits were of the highest echelon. Blessed with human intelligence from their inception, they would often lead hordes of specters. They could also only be found within the Ghostlands, the homeland of the undead.

This was because they required the power of Blight. It was conceptual energy that only a select few could use as it was a concept created by the Blightfather himself, hence his name. And as he had transformed Lyra's soul directly... he had made a monster of the highest echelon.

One would think this would give Lyra respect... but it all went to him. Because she was bound to Casper through his locket, she was by most just considered an extension of his powers. A... servant of sorts, as much as Casper hated that sentiment.

Speaking of the other humans... or well, Risen Humans... undead... they truly had quite a bunch gathered by now. Nearly ten thousand undead had already reached this settlement, which was quite a lot considering only around 135.000 Risen exited the tutorial.

As undead naturally didn't exist before the integration, the system's way of fixing this was to give everyone who died in the last 24 hours before integrating a second chance. That had meant around 150.000 undead in total. Some had died during the tutorial, though, so 135.000 exited.

But for ten thousand individuals to reach their base within a month would be impossible... if they were all undead. Which, in fact, the majority weren't. They were just people seeking safety or had family there.

If they weren't undead, they would surely have way more, but ten thousand was still really good. Many people had worked on crafting small tokens to sense other undead while within the tutorial and handed them out to their fellow Risen.

This is how they managed to team up so fast. And the second function of the token was to locate the closest Pylon infused with death-affinity mana.

The purpose of the undead faction wasn't some large world-scale domination. It was just to carve out their own little corner of Earth and create a foothold.

"I am done," Casper said as he finished up the small metal plate.

Lyra opened her eyes as she looked at him. “Great, let’s get going then! The diggers and earth casters should have the cave prepared by now.”

“Yep,” he said, getting up and stretching a bit. Lyra didn’t hesitate as she flew over to him, gave him a small peck on the chin, and jumped into the locket.

Walking out of the house, he saw the sun was out as he shielded his eyes, more out of habit than necessity. A few people instantly turned towards him, but he ignored them all as he walked through the bustling village that was quickly turning into a full-on city.

Large houses were under construction everywhere, and walls were being built to keep beasts and other attackers out while at the same time making a great medium to place protective enchants on later.

Casper avoided people as best he could as he made his way to the epicenter of the city. There, he saw Priscilla, as she had clearly been waiting for him.

“Is everything prepared?” she asked, clearly excited.

“Yep.”

“Great work as always, Casper!” she said with a big smile as she playfully went over to him and patted him on the shoulder. More just brushed her hand on him, really.

He felt his locket glow a bit as he felt the ghost's dissatisfaction. Priscilla noticed it, too, but ignored it as she kept smiling.

"You should really focus more on controlling the Blightwraith. It would be wrong to waste a gift from the Blightfather," she said nonchalantly.

Casper didn't even bother arguing with her as he just ignored her comments and stayed on point. "Her name is Lyra... and she will do fine. I reckon you guys are also done with your part, so let's go."

The two of them – three counting Lyra – entered the central building constructed like a castle. They then sought downwards into deep tunnels beneath the castle until they reached a giant underground cavern.

In the middle was a large pillar with many steel-plates on it, all of them made by Casper earlier. The wall around the cavern had also been reinforced with metal, and they were even covered in intricate scripts. The entire cavern a giant ritual chamber. They had moved the pillar there earlier that day, and this entire cavern was made with one purpose in mind.

Allowing for the living to join the dead.

## Chapter 165: Taking Charge



Jake had asked a straightforward question before leaving to fight the Storm Elemental:  
“What’s in it for me?”

Now, in all honesty, Jake had kind of forgotten this after fighting the Storm Elemental and getting emotionally invested in helping with the egg and all that stuff. He had even gained an upgrade to his Archery skill and a few levels, so he’d already gained plenty.

This is why he was surprised when the two hawks offered him their payment...

Jake was currently flying rather slowly back towards his small city, carefully holding the small egg with both hands close to his chest as if afraid of dropping it. He was pretty sure it was more durable than a rock, but he didn’t dare risk anything.

He had a hawk on each side, following him nonchalantly while keeping an eye on him.

It turns out his payment was twofold, though Jake was unsure if either of them even qualified as payment. The first thing was the egg itself. The mother and father bird had pushed for him to pick it up and carry it. They would clearly still follow, but he felt like they were trying to push a parental role on him.

The second reward was the birds themselves, according to what he could gather. They clearly weren’t that attached to their nest as they both just motioned for Jake to lead the way once they were done with everything.

Jake wasn't quite sure what to do with all of this. A peak E-grade bird and an early D-grade were both willingly following him back to his small base of humans. A base where the strongest was Neil... and in all honesty, Jake had a strong feeling that Hawkie could give him and his entire team a run for their money... with Mystie naturally able to beat the living shit out of them.

The entire egg-situation was also a lot to handle. What did the two hawks expect of him? He couldn't just carry around the egg like this forever, and he couldn't put it in his spatial storage either as it counted as a living thing.

It was very close to hatching after the ritual, so... maybe they just wanted to relocate their nest to his city? Yeah, that makes sense. And as Jake was the only one of them with hands, he would surely be the best to carry the egg. *Yeah, let's go with that*, Jake thought, trying to delude himself.

The journey back was very relaxed. The two birds and one human had already spent a few hours resting after the ritual to regenerate some resources before heading off, so it wasn't that they were tired.

They all just enjoyed a relaxing flight, Hawkie still giving small pointers here and there but clearly not daring to peck Jake anymore. Not because it was afraid of his mighty power, mind you, but because he was carrying the egg.

Jake wondered how the small city had developed while he was gone. They had around 60 people when he left, and he doubted they had gained many more. It was located in a very remote location, and it wasn't like they were actually recruiting. Well, he didn't actually know if they were... he was a bit hands-off.

It had been more than two weeks since he left last time, leaving Miranda, Neil, and Hank to deal with everything. He wasn't afraid of some disaster happening with Neil and his party around... besides, his guts told him things were fine.

The entire city thing was very paradoxical. On the one hand, he was aware that having a bustling city under his ownership could earn him countless rewards, but on the other hand... it did sound like a lot of 'stuff' to deal with.

*Well, a lot for Miranda to deal with...* he chuckled, getting a glance from both hawks, who didn't even bother questioning the human's weirdness anymore.

He should probably be a bit less of a shitty boss and at least hear her concerns. Go the whole visionary/guru leadership style? Well, with less pretentiousness.

Jake already had his next plan made, and this one included staying put for a while, so he should have time to deal with some making-a-magical-city-in-the-middle-of-a-forest-stuff.

Jake spotted the familiar trees and the small hole in the canopies that marked his valley in the distance. He felt them enter the Pylon range soon after, both birds clearly also noticing the peculiarity of the area.

"Relax, this is my area," he explained.

While it wasn't a very elaborate explanation, they both just accepted it without further questions as they followed him down to the valley below. Jake saw that the barrier around the lodge was still active, and from the looks of it, no one had come there since he left.

Well, maybe Miranda had, but that was fine. He didn't know if some of her skills required proximity to the Pylon or something like that, but the fact there weren't many signs of activity meant they didn't have to take refuge in the lodge.

Jake looked at the lodge as he walked through the barrier without any issues. The two birds outside tried to follow but were unable to get through. Yet, just as Jake thought about how to let them through, they could suddenly enter.

Both of them looked confused at him, but he just shrugged. "System-stuff."

An explanation that even the birds bought wholesale.

Inside the lodge, Jake could see that he was mistaken about one thing... there had been people there. Several pieces of wooden furniture were placed around the lodge, such as a table and chairs. They had even moved the bookshelves he had placed inside to a better spot.

Jake saw that the chair close to the bookshelves had been used and reckoned it was Miranda that had come there to read and check out the books. She likely didn't dare take the books out of the lodge as it was his property... not that he would have minded.

The two birds jumped on the floorboards as they slowly made their way towards him. They looked around curiously, Mystie going over to one of the walls and leaning in real close. Jake was pretty sure the bird was looking at whatever magic Hank had used to reinforce the building, but he couldn't be sure.

“Well, if you two are settling here, I think the valley would be the best place. It's meant to be my private area, so there shouldn't be others coming in here that often,” Jake explained. “Make a nest somewhere, and... please take back the egg?”

Jake still stood awkwardly, holding the egg cupped in both hands. He hated feeling like he was carrying precious porcelain, but he couldn't just put it down somewhere...

The birds gave each other a playful look before they jumped out of the house, completely ignoring Jake. *You better make a nest, or I will make an omelet... oh, who am I kidding...*

Jake went into the bedroom and sat down on the bed, carefully bundling up the blanket and making a nest-like shape to place it into. *Does it need heat like a regular egg? It shouldn't, right?*

That and many other difficulties bothered Jake as he saw the two birds land on top of his lodge in his sphere. They appeared to look around while making bird-sounds at each other, both flying off in different directions.

The poor human stayed in the lodge as the two hawks found a nice spot to place down their new nest. Jake patted the egg with his hand, feeling how warm it was and the dense energy within it. It had changed slightly after the ritual but still looked like a normal egg in most ways.

Time ticked by as Jake sunk parts of his consciousness into the environment to inspect the area affected by the Pylon. He could only get a general feeling that the area affected had expanded and not much more. He reckoned Miranda had better skills to manage the city than him due to her profession.

And speaking of Miranda... the woman had just arrived at the entrance to the valley. He didn't know if she knew he was there, so he did the polite thing and got up. He bundled up the blanket and the egg as he carried them out the door.

Miranda had been meeting with Hank about the newly finished longhouse and who to assign to it. They had gained a small group of 15 or so survivors who had stumbled on their city by accident. Well, not entirely by accident, as they had a caster with a mana-sensing skill like her own, and he had noticed the peculiarity of the area.

That is when she sensed a presence enter the area affected by the Pylon. The massive presence made her shiver internally as she tried to keep her calm. She already knew from experience that she couldn't detect when the owner was there... so this was clearly something *more*

.

She wasn't sure if there were one or two... but she had to somehow not panic. The issue was... they were making their way straight towards the Pylon.

*Are they trying to take it away?*

Her first thoughts were logical. Whatever had entered was far stronger than anything before. Even compared to the combined aura of Abby and all her goons, this felt far more dangerous. Yet her intuition skill didn't react at all. Of course, it was entirely possible that whatever had come was too strong for her skill to work on, but she had to do something.

Steeling her emotions, she excused herself from the meeting, getting a worried look from Hank, who had clearly noticed something was off.

She rushed out of the building as she made her way to the valley. She felt that the presences were already there... right at the Pylon.

Carefully she snuck over as it felt like the invaders were searching the area. At this point, she was sure there were more than one. All she wanted to do was confirm that the barrier was still there... Neil and his party were out currently, but they should return in only a few hours. *If they stay occupied till then, maybe we can... can...*

She stood frozen just as the lodge entered her line of sight and she saw the owner sitting on the steps leading up to the lodge's small veranda. He was cuddling a blanket with a small egg in it, looking over at her.

Next, she saw two birds land on the roof of the lodge, their combined aura bearing down on her. She couldn't help but use Identify them, getting a much-expected response for the first one...

**[Galesong Hawk – lvl ??]**

But tensed up when she saw the second.

**[Mystsong Hawk – lvl ???]**

*That... D-grade?*

What the hell was happening?

“Oh, hey Miranda,” Jake said as he waved to the woman who stood frozen, just staring at him and his feathered friends. “Come on over; these two aren’t going to do anything. Right?”

He asked the last part to the two birds, who looked curiously down at the female human. They did the bird-version of shrugging before continuing to assemble a nest in one of the smaller trees close to the lodge.

Miranda slowly walked over as she saw the not-D-grade-bird summon wind magic to cut the tree into their desired shape as they slowly assembled a nest-like structure on top of it.

“What is going on here?” she asked, confusion clear on her face.



“Ah... well, the Galesong Hawk is my friend Hawkie, and the other one is Mystie, his mate. This is their egg,” he said, showing off the small egg in his bundle of blankets. “I helped them do some things, and now they decided to stay here.”

The woman stood a bit there, trying to process all of it. She took a few moments before finally asking. “Is the Mystsong Hawk D-grade?”

“Yeah?” Jake answered, a bit confused. Wait, was the question rhetorical... it didn’t sound rhetorical.

“Are you certain about this? Isn’t it... dangerous?”

“Why would it be? Unless people are stupid and annoy her too much, I doubt she would bother with a bunch of E-grade humans. Besides, she understands that this is my territory, and we play by my rules,” Jake explained.

“Shriek!”

The Hawk gladly affirmed this. Without noticing, both Hawkie and Mystie had truly recognized Jake as the superior being among them. The fact that he was the strongest, or at least able to kill enemies they couldn’t, helping to cement that.

“I... how?” Miranda asked, still trying - and failing - to understand the entire situation. Had he tamed a goddamn D-grade beast or what?

“As I said, I helped them. More specifically, I killed a D-grade elemental for the two of them, and then I helped them with a ritual for this little guy,” Jake said, once more displaying the egg.

“Al... alright,” Miranda said, rubbing her brows. She could feel a headache coming on but decided to focus on the matter at hand instead. “If the situation is safe, can we talk? Quite a few things have happened during your absence.”

“Sure, let’s head inside,” he said as he got up and led Miranda into the lodge, where they both sat at the table.

Miranda began explaining what had been going on while he was gone and informed him about the newcomers, her steps to root out potential troublemakers, and their current construction projects.

He was happy to hear that they had marked his valley as off-limits as he did like his privacy. He also didn’t doubt that a D-grade beast and its mate now living there would also help keep people away.

Constructing longhouses was also a good idea for now, and he agreed wholeheartedly with leaving most trees standing to not ruin the foresty mood. It also helped the area in general by providing cover from above, and he was sure some classes or professions could use the trees for something beneficial.

Next, Miranda talked about their plans of expansion and their plans of contacting the nearby fort. Or well, she was more asking Jake permission.

“We don’t know how many people are there or their levels, but it should be at least a few hundred... maybe even a few thousand. It could prove dangerous to have them integrate with us without our whole base just becoming assimilated. If they truly outnumber us by that many, it wouldn’t be weird if they demanded some kind of leadership position, maybe even the title of City Lord, and if-“

“Miranda,” Jake said. “I appointed you City Lord, end of the story. If you want to give them positions with influence, it’s up to you, not me. Just don’t abdicate your position without at least asking me first if you don’t want it anymore.”

“It isn’t like that... I am just unsure how we are to deal with overwhelming numbers. We aren’t even a hundred people, and they will likely have tens of times our number. If they oppose us they-“

“Then they can fuck off. Period. This is our city, *my* city. If they can’t accept that, they can just stay where they are. I am fine with allowing them to come... but it’s on our terms,” Jake said, not leaving any room for arguing.

“I think it will be hard for people to accept that...”

“Well, tough shit. The world has changed. And I have a pretty good idea how to convince them,” Jake said with a smile. “Tomorrow morning at dawn.”

“Huh?” she exclaimed, confused.

“We go and give them the offer tomorrow. Gather those you think should come.”

“Are you coming along?” Miranda asked, a bit expectant.

“Yeah, I am,” he answered with a slight chuckle as he looked out the window and saw the nest just about done. “And I think I’ll bring a friend.”

## Chapter 166: Jake & Mystie Airlines

”We’ll be back later today, Hawkie, so just take care. If things get dangerous, just go into the lodge with the egg. I doubt anything can really destroy that thing in a short amount of time,” Jake explained as he gave the egg a final pat before parting.

Hawkie gave an affirming screech as Jake and Mystie prepared themselves to leave. Well, there weren’t really any preparations besides telling Hawkie to take care of the soon-to-be-chick.

Since last night after Miranda left, Jake had gotten a good night’s sleep, and this morning he went for a bath in the pond, cleaning himself off properly. He felt great, even if he was a bit worried about what he was about to do.

Of course, he planned to have Miranda do most of the talking, but he still felt unsure about approaching strangers. Yet he knew he had to do it if he wanted to improve the small outpost that was their city. Miranda clearly wanted to make some kind of contact; she just needed that final push.

So Jake would support her by standing behind her as she went to negotiate. Make it absolutely clear that while they didn't have to be allies, they sure as hell wouldn't want to make Jake and his little city an enemy.

He knew that he would be a bit intimidating himself but more due to mysteriousness. He was intimidating because he was an unknown threat. It was a lot easier to just bring a known threat along. Such as a D-grade beast.

*Yeah, this is just work. Regular old office work where you have to visit a potential customer, so you bring your best people. Yep, totally normal. Also, using animals in marketing is also not out of the ordinary.*

Jake did a lot of mental gymnastics to justify it in his head, but ultimately they would without a doubt be seen as a threatening invading force. He wanted just to make sure that they were the kind of invading force that didn't result in the other side thinking they could actually put up a fight. No, they would be the kind of invading force where you just give up and let them in.

Mystie flew around above him as he walked out of the valley, finally getting a good look at the small settlement still under construction. They had already made three longhouses and were planning on another.

The fifteen newcomers had also begun making some smaller buildings for themselves, having quite the versatile caster with earth magic among them. Hank had apparently given them the approval to do this and told them where they could make it and how big it could be.

It appeared that Miranda and Hank had the whole construction-thing well under control and had even done city planning. No doubt Miranda got experience from doing such things, and chances are Hank would get some too as a builder.

A few people noticed him and threw him a cautious gaze before scurrying away. Jake was wearing his mask and full get-up, not comfortable walking about with his face out in the open. Miranda had also emphasized that keeping up his aura of mysteriousness was beneficial to her. It made it all a lot easier when he seemed like an unapproachable entity that only she could manage rather than if he was just another random person living there. Even if he was strong.

And today, he amplified that aura of mysteriousness and power even more as the Mystsong Hawk descended from above the trees and landed on his outstretched arm. As he was practically in the middle of the settlement with nearly a dozen people throwing glances his way, it sure made a bit of an uproar.

Miranda came out of the central building, a large two-story wooden building that served as the City Lord's residence and office, and she threw him a slightly admonishing smile for his theatrics but still greeted him with respect as she put on her professional persona.

"Sir, the expedition force is gathered inside, if you and your companion would follow me," she said with a bow as she motioned towards the office building.

Jake followed her into the building, which was already covered with a barrier of sorts. Jake quickly recognized it as Neil's work, and a quick inspection made him aware of its functions. It was quite simple, actually, just blocking out sound.

The office windows were also enchanted with something that allowed them to switch from see-through to one-way. It was quite nice and impressive that they have constructed it all in such a short timespan. Skills and magic were sure a game-changer for the construction industry.

Inside he saw Neil and his party as well as a scarred woman he recognized as part of Abby's entourage and a man he hadn't seen before. He reckoned he was one of the newcomers.

"Most of you know him, but this is the owner of the city," Miranda said, introducing Jake. Yet the people's attention wasn't on Jake but the hawk that was sitting on his arm.

Neil looked shocked while Christen subtly moved Silas behind her, and Eleanor took a step back to create a bit of distance between them. Levi was the only one that didn't move much, but he did slightly move his hand towards his sword.

The scarred woman and the man Jake didn't recognize both reacted widely differently. The scarred woman barely reacted while the man took several steps back with a frightened expression while speaking up.

"Is the owner a beast!?" he said with disbelief as he looked at the hawk.

*What?* Jake thought. Wait, did he think he was the servant of the bird or something?

“Of course not; this Mystsong Hawk is the owner’s companion,” Miranda answered, clearly experiencing a sense of schadenfreude towards the man. Jake got the impression that he was the annoying type.

“The Mystsong Hawk is D-grade, is it not?” Neil asked after collecting himself. His party also calmed down, as clearly nothing was going to happen. “Truly surprising... this is my first time seeing a D-grade beast up close. Quite the aura...”

Jake looked at Neil and used Identify, seeing that the space mage had also grown a bit over the last few weeks.

**[Human – lvl 57]**

He had been level 53 when Jake first met him two or so weeks ago, and while 4 levels didn’t seem like a lot, it was a decent pace. Everyone in his party had grown a few levels, though he guessed the majority were from profession-levels.

They had insinuated that they wanted to take a break, and Miranda had said that they had spent nearly all their time within the small city. They had been on the run for a while based on what Neil had explained, so it made sense that they wanted to relax. Not everyone was a junkie for improving themselves and finding new challenges like Jake.



Miranda, noticing that Jake didn't plan on saying anything, continued the conversation. "Sir, these two are Lillian and Miquel. Lillian has taken the role of my assistant, and Miquel was the leader of our newest arrival of citizens. He led a small caravan of 16 people to join."

Jake just gave them both a nod before walking into the room and taking a seat on one of the chairs. All the furniture in the room looked new, which made sense... as it was.

He Identified the people around the room and got a feel for their levels.

**[Human - lvl 49]**

Miquel was level 49, which was quite respectable. He had likely been above 40 by the end of the tutorial, making him well-ahead of the curve. Of course, he was still beaten by people like Neil and his party and monsters like Jake, but he was better than someone like Hank. Hank had been considered strong in his tutorial's context by being barely level 30, so it did make sense that Miquel would be looked to as a leader.

**[Human - lvl 34]**

Next was Lillian at level 34. He didn't remember what level she was before or if he had even identified her, but he was pretty sure she was quite a bit lower than that. *Is assistant to the City Lord a profession?* he asked himself before noting the level of said City Lord.

**[Human - lvl 41]**

Despite the relatively low level, Jake found it very impressive. When he left last time, she was level 34, and now she had grown 7 race levels in total. Her profession clearly grew at an impressive speed, but Jake also heard from her that she had gained class levels too. She still hadn't evolved her class before, so the levels came easy with the many bonus stats.

It was good that her level improved. It would give her more credibility to be of a high level, and of course, the stats would make her stronger and make it easier for her to defend the city. While she wasn't much of a fighter, Jake was sure that there existed ways for people to fight even without direct confrontations.

The lighting in the room was done by a small crystal-like stone hanging from the ceiling. Jake reckoned it was the work of some profession he didn't yet know of, so he just ignored it as Miranda began laying out their plan as everyone had calmed down and at least partly adapted to the presence of the D-grade bird.

"We will approach the fort with the people we have here and establish contact. As I explained, we will offer them to come here for refuge and help build the city. But it will be on our terms and our terms only," she said.

"Some diplomatic concession should be made if we don't want to create dissatisfaction, and if a large number of individuals come, it will be hard to not give some political power to them... it would be easier to just approach with a promise of partnership," Miquel said, still throwing glances at Mystie.

"I discussed this with the owner... and there will be no concessions," Miranda said firmly.

“But what if-“

“None,” Miranda reaffirmed. “If we - or more specifically I - find it beneficial for the city to give them influential roles, I will do so. But it will be at our discretion, not a concession.”

“Are you sure about this?” Neil said, looking a bit worried. “This seems like a very heavy-handed approach...”

“We aren’t forcing any of them to come here; we are offering it. While we do need them, based on the reports that your own team brought back, they need us even more.”

“That is true...” Neil said as he sat silently in contemplation.

“Do we even have the capacity for them to come here if they all choose to?” Eleanor asked. “While I couldn’t get a good headcount, the fort is big, and I saw a lot of movement... I doubt they have anything less than two thousand people.”

“I am sure they will gladly help shape the city as founding citizens and contribute to the construction. We made it without houses for a while, and so can they. We already have a new longhouse prepared we can use if they have some people with special needs, and construction is fast,” Miranda said as she continued her explanation.

“As for land to build on, there are no issues there either. We have plenty of space on the ground within the owner’s domain, and Hank and I have also considered building

vertically. The trees are far more robust than anything before the system, and I am sure some profession or classes can make the idea of building on them feasible.”

While she spoke, Jake just sat there stoically, Mystie not bothering much with the conversation either, but inspecting the peculiar enchants around the building. Jake was actually very invested in what she said, mainly because he had to admit that the thought of giant magical treehouses sounded awesome.

“If that many people come, we will have issues with security... they will just assimilate us, and it will be us joining them and not the other way around. What stops them from just claiming leadership?” Miquel asked skeptically. He was clearly against the idea of even making contact with the fort.

“Why are you here?” Jake asked. It was the first words he spoke, and it got a small jump out of the man.

“I came here with my companions and-“

“I am talking about this room. Why are you here?” Jake clarified.

“As a representative of my comrades and me, I-“

“You are here because Miranda allowed you to,” Jake finally said, answering the question for the man. “And so will you leave if she tells you to. They will be no different.”

The man looked like he wanted to say something more but didn't dare to. Jake understood his perspective; he truly did. He just didn't agree with it, not anymore. Miranda has also begun to come around, likely empowered by having him support her.

Jake could totally see the other side wanting to fight... and if they did, he would be sure to instantly crush their spirits. He and Mystie would release their auras, perhaps an attack or two, which should be enough to stop the opposition from daring to fight.

It was like showing up to a fistfight in a tank. Sure, the other side could have many times more people, but they sure as hell weren't going to start punching the vehicle.

The rest of the discussion centered around their general method behind their approach before leaving the building and setting out. Miquel was coming along together with two other men from his entourage. Both were level 39, so they weren't that bad, but not good either.

It would only take a few hours to get the 130 or so kilometers with their fast speed, though to Jake and Mystie, it was slow as hell.

*Who even walks places these days anymore?* Jake jokingly thought as they had just set out. Eleanor explained a bit on their way about the area's layout and the harassment of beasts that the fort dealt with.

After having walked only for fifteen minutes, Jake could clearly feel Mystie feeling restless. Jake made eye contact with the bird that was flying overhead and saw its

annoyance and slight anxiety. It wasn't hard for him to piece together that the mama-bird was worried for the egg back home and wanted to get this over with as fast as possible.

Jake looked up at the bird, and it looked at him questionably, the human understanding right away.

"This is too slow," Jake said. "Let's fly."

They all turned to look at him, confused as Jake summoned his two wings. Miquel and his two followers looked frightened, with the others only looked a bit surprised.

Jake began weaving two solid ropes of mana as he motioned for Miranda and Lillian to come over. At the same time, Mystie touched down as it landed on the ground.

The Mystsong Hawk shone in a magical light as mana extended out from her figure towards Neil and his party, along with Miquel and his two men.

"Don't resist," Jake said, not even considering that Miquel and his two followers didn't have any idea how to properly resist foreign mana.

Jake wrapped his two own ropes around Miranda and Lillian as he lifted them off the ground. He had practiced lifting boulders for so damn long, and it was finally time to put that training to use.

Skillfully, Mystie took to the air with eight people being lifted along with it, some of them trying to suppress screams as they were forcefully lifted.

Jake, on the other hand, struggled quite a bit to keep the ropes stable. Not in the sense that they wouldn't break, but in the sense that it would be very... uncomfortable for the two women to be lifted as if were they just tied to him, dangling beneath his flying figure.

It took him a bit longer, but soon they took to the air - a winged human and a magical blue hawk flying through the air with ten people telekinetically lifted along.

## **Chapter 167: One-sided negotiation**

Jake concentrated as he flew with Miranda and Lillian in tow. It took quite the toll to keep himself moving fluidly and make sure that the two women weren't tossed around by any sudden pulling. He couldn't do the tactic where he just touched them with mana as it wouldn't work on living beings, so he had to use the mana ropes.

Mystie had just used her mana to directly affect the outer layer of the nine people's bodies; it was an application of mana far above Jake's own. He wasn't even sure if it was a skill. But hey, the bird was D-grade; it only made sense.

He already knew that the Mystsong Bird had a larger mana pool than himself by quite a margin from the ritual. Once more, not surprising, considering it was a D-grade beast focused solely on magic. He did take a bit of inspiration and visibly improved while flying, making the ride for Miranda and Lillian a bit smoother.

Miranda looked like she was using every sliver of her willpower to remain calm, while Lillian looked relaxed, like being carried after a winged human wasn't that far-fetched. Jake couldn't help but think about what kind of shit Abby had dragged that entire group through...

Neil and his party also all looked relatively calm. They were more experienced and had spent plenty of time doing teleportation and what-not. Of course, it also helped that Mystie was a pretty damn smooth flyer and mana-controller.

As for Miquel and his goons... they looked like they were contemplating the life choices that led to them being carried through the air by a bird that could kill them at any point if it got annoyed. At least they had the decency to remain still to not make it harder on Mystie.



The trip that should have taken hours was completed in thirty-five minutes. Fifteen minutes of that spent walking when they first began, and the rest finished soaring through the air.

They landed a few kilometers from the forest but still a fair distance from the fort. The area was the same plains that Jake had traveled initially to reach the woods, but another section. This part had many more hills, and the grass was rather tall in most places.

It actually reminded him a bit of the Lucenti Plains... though no stags or deer anywhere. Well, he did spot a few from above when flying over the forest, but none of the Lucenti variant.

Touching down, Jake – pretty elegantly if he had to say so himself – put down Lillian and Miranda. Mystie landed together with him, depositing all nine human packages on the ground too. A bit harder than Jake, as one of Miquel's men fell on his butt.

“Alright, that was awesome,” Christen said as she didn't mind her ruffled hair. “I want wings now.”

“I am sure there are ways to fly or at least levitate without wings,” Levi said.  
“Heck, I can nearly fly with my wind-armor.”

“Who cares,” Neil jokingly said while trying to get his hair under control.  
“Teleportation is way better.”

Eleanor and Silas both just shook their heads. Silas did go over and check if Miquel and his two followers needed any help, but they were clearly okay, just a bit shocked at the entire situation.

Why did we even bring them along? Jake wondered. Well, it was Miranda who had decided who would go, so it was on her.

Bringing Neil and his party Jake understood. They were all useful to some degree and relatively strong. They worked well as a team, and there was something to say in power in numbers. Also, it would allow Jake to not bother with weaker things and just let them handle it.

Their band of 11 people and one bird walked the rest of the way at a more than steady pace. It didn't make sense to just casually stroll when they all had

rather high stats, so it didn't take long for the fort to enter their view after passing over a small hilltop.

Jake observed it with his high perception, allowing him to practically zoom in on it; he quickly got a grasp of the fort.

It was large and clearly some kind of medieval exhibit or maybe even an event-spot before the world changed. It didn't look damaged in the least but looked like an old fort from the 1600s transported to the present day.

The fort was the kind of defensive structure build in the past with functionality prioritized over aesthetics. The walls were thick, placed on the top of a hill with an open view of all sides. It looked very easily defensible.

A good spot, Jake nodded internally, approving of those who had taken refuge there. The old cities were dangerous as they had many nooks and crannies for monsters to lurk in. Powerful beasts didn't necessarily have to be large, Hawkie and Mystie, case-in-point.

But.. the fort also had its issues. Not many beasts were in the surroundings, and it was the only structure for many kilometers. Jake guessed it had wells

for water as the ground was well-moisturized, and hunting beasts were, of course, an option when it came to nutrients.

After evolving, humans needed way less food or water. Jake practically didn't need either after becoming E-grade, and whatever he did need, he got through eating random herbs for his Palate of the Malefic Viper. Eating was instead done to gain potential benefits from the food or to regenerate resources faster.

Breathing was a bit of the same. Breathing increased both mana and stamina-regeneration by a very minor amount by drawing in some of the atmospheric mana. Jake didn't know if all living things had some kind of hidden ability to transform it into helpful mana and stamina, but clearly, it worked.

Water was, of course, in the same boat.

But that was for E-grade. F-grades still needed some food, and with so many people, there were bound to be many F-grades to feed. The environment, such as the wind and weather, wasn't an issue for any humans, really, as the body's natural resistance made regular sickness a thing of the past.

I guess that also confirms viruses and bacteria don't get levels, Jake thought as he stood there considering all these things. Oh, but fungi does... oh shit, I can already imagine someone getting a fungal infection from some high-level mushroom... like that D-grade Indigo-fucker... I really need to get rid of that damn thing.

"Sir?" Miranda asked as she saw Jake just stand there staring into the distance. The fort little more than a small blob in the distance, even with her relatively high stats.

"Let's go," Jake said, coming out of his stupor. But not forgetting... the mushroom would soon meet its maker. But first, time to do some one-sided negotiations.

Jake gave Mystie a nod as the bird summoned several runes that swirled around her. First, he felt her aura disappear, and then she vanished from sight, turning invisible. Damn those magic birds and their many tricks.

Of course, Jake himself could still see Mystie. Not with his eyes, but in his sphere. He had long realized that all those magical techniques didn't work against it. Like back in the sewer dungeon, his sphere was just too damn overpowered.

They had decided to have Mystie remain hidden, at least in the beginning. This was mainly due to the encounter with Miquel, who somehow got the idea that the bird was controlling them or that they were willingly serving it. Actually, considering the magic bird, that could totally be true.

Eleven people and one – now invisible – bird made quick progress towards the fort in the distance. As they had passed the hill and were now within line of sight from the fort, Jake felt it. A gaze had landed upon them from a distance, and he returned the look.

A human stood on the fort's wall in the distance and looked through something that resembled binoculars. Jake made eye-contact with the man through the device, and he saw the man quickly turn away in fright as he turned to yell something. Of course, Jake was too far away to tell what he said, and lip-reading wasn't in his skill-set. Does lip-reading even work correctly with the translation skill? It should... shouldn't it?

"We have been spotted," Eleanor said a few seconds later. Jake had already seen a few more people appear on the wall, and it was likely that movement she had caught.

An aura of nervousness spread in the group, and Jake purposefully walked so that he was all the way in the back. Miranda and Lillian took the front with the party of five, and Miquel and his two goons followed at the sides.

Their speed was fast even though they didn't rush, and soon they saw something coming their way.

A small drone was flying towards them with a net hanging beneath it. Jake could see the small net held what looked like a walkie-talkie. Well, this is unexpected...

He hadn't encountered much technology since his return to Earth... in fact, he had encountered none. Back when he made his way out of the city, he did spot some people with tools that resembled more modern weaponry, but he didn't think much of it.

None of those with Abby or Miquel had any modern weapons either. All were using the same medieval weapons as Jake and the others. Yet now he saw a drone flying towards him. The others were also surprised but quickly collected themselves as Miranda stepped forward.

The drone was clearly remote-controlled as it floated down. It was a quadcopter-type, but Jake did notice something when it got closer. He felt mana coming off it. A magic drone... nice.

Not seeing a camera on it, Jake wondered how the person controlling it knew where to go. Though he had to guess that the individual controlling it had a skill to make it all possible. It made him wonder if it was a profession or class or maybe someone with great synergy between the two. Robot builder or engineer coupled with a class for controlling them? These were just some of the distracting thoughts jumping around his head as Miranda got to the actual negotiation-part.

Miranda threw a glance back at the masked man before the drone landed, hovering with the net holding the walkie-talkie right in front of her. He just gave her a small nod as she took it out of the net, and without any prompt, a voice came out of it.

“Please identify yourself,” the voice said in a rather authoritative tone.

The woman just picked up the walkie-talkie and inspected it for a while. Her face was stoic as she said. “I must admit, I believed all technology to be gone, but then again, it was only a matter of time before human ingenuity allowed them to recreate things. Tell me, how does this device work?”



“... A craftsman made it. Now identify yourself and your intentions for coming here,” the voice answered, sounding a bit surprised at Miranda’s casual demeanor and question.

Miranda smiled as she had already considered her approach before coming here. She had come to realize... that they genuinely did hold all the cards. The question was never if the forest was a better settlement than out here or if it was worth it for the fort’s humans to join them. It unquestionably was.

No, the issue had always been the disparity in numbers and the fear of diluting her own influence. But... the masked man had opened her eyes to how little that mattered now. No matter what happened, he would be in charge. No leader would be appointed without his say-so. She could be replaced if he so wished... and she wouldn’t be replaced if he opposed it.

She had utter faith in the owner's capabilities too. She had spent plenty of time with Neil and his party ever since they joined their little city, and he had also spoken of D-grades and how they were all absolute monstrous existences. They knew they wouldn’t stand a chance against one. He told her that the disciple of Kallox in the tutorial he was in also served as the final boss. That disciple was only a projection of what the disciple had been capable of just after entering D-grade... and that was already enough to dispel

any thoughts both he and Abby had ever to challenge him, as well as cementing how powerful D-grades were.

Yet the masked owner had casually waltzed in with a D-grade bird companion that he called Mystie, and the D-grade beast clearly listened to him. She saw the relationship between them... and it was clear that it viewed the owner as superior in power.

So with that in mind, she realized that she indeed held all the cards in this negotiation. Would they like more people in the city? Sure. Did they need it? No. There was plenty of time for people to come naturally like Miquel.

This entire thing was them offering something to the fort. Not the other way around. In fact, it couldn't even be called a negotiation... it was just extending an invitation and proving how much the fort truly needed them.

With all that in mind, Miranda happily answered the man at the other end of the walkie-talkie with her pre-prepared sales speech.

"My name is Miranda Wells, City Lord of a nearby settlement. We have come to offer you and the other residents in the fort a place of refuge and a safe

zone to build a home. Away from the hordes of monsters, a place where no beasts dare enter.”

“ ... ”

What followed was silence from the other end for five or so seconds before a voice came from the other end. One different from the first: “I find that sentiment hard to believe. Moreover, we have not noticed any settlements in our immediate surroundings.”

“That is understandable; there is a bit of a way there,” Miranda said with a light smile. “Of course, we would also assist with travel as much as we can. But who might I be speaking with now?”

“Phillip Morgan, the one currently in charge of this settlement.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Phillip,” Miranda said. “How about we stop playing telephone and have a sit-down to discuss things?”

Once more, there was hesitation on the other end. Several seconds passed as Miranda had thrown the ball in their court. They would have to admit weakness to refuse for a small group with less than a dozen to approach, or they would get a face-to-face meeting.

“I am uncertain if that is wise,” the voice said from the other end. “I believe it is safer for all parties to negotiate at a distance, free from the interference of any skills that could affect the situation.”

Ah... a cautious one, Miranda thought. She hadn't considered that one. It was actually quite wise to use a drone and communicate like this to avoid any auras or other mental skills. Heck, she had an aura herself making her appear more trustworthy, as well as some other things she had gained with her Principal City Lord profession.

“While I do certainly respect and even applaud your caution... I can assure you, we did not come here with any intentions of bringing harm to anyone. We only wish to extend this offer and talk it over. Fighting would be unproductive for both sides,” Miranda said, adding. “So with that in mind... see you in a bit.”

She threw the walkie-talkie in the net of the drone, gave it a friendly wave, and turned to the others.

“Let’s go.”

Miranda couldn’t help but throw a look towards the masked man who stood with his eyes closed. Once she laid her eyes upon him, he opened them and looked straight back at her, making eye-contact. With a small nod, he seemed to approve of her way of doing things...

Feeling a lot more confident in her actions, she turned towards the fort with a big smile on her lips.

## Chapter 168: Phillip

If anyone asked Jake how confident he was in their current strategy, he would give it a solid eight out of ten. Miranda had shown an adequate amount of courtesy without seeming weak or meek while also making their position clear.

She had emphasized that they were not coming as enemies but to negotiate. The strategy revolved around not needing to fight or even having to reveal Mystie. No, Mystie and Jake were the backup plans if things went south and the primary strategy failed.

But... Jake also knew one other little snippet of information. 90% of all strategies fail.

The primary cause of failure was outside sources, or emergent factors from within that didn't conform with the organization's existing culture - individual actors taking on roles to operationalize undiscussed tactics.

Such as shooting a bullet straight towards them.

Now, individual actors making these decisions sometimes had severe negative impacts on the organization as a whole - a media manager making a lousy tweet or a salesman trying to go off-script and losing a big client. But sometimes, it ended up having close to no impact, as the actor simply didn't have enough institutional influence or social capital to accomplish anything.

This did result in quite the uproar and not from the party of 11 - except Miquel, who jumped with fright - but from the direction from the fort. Miranda couldn't help but flash a small smile that Jake caught with his sphere. And he got it.

They had just significantly weakened their own position by being the first aggressors... effectively justifying any violent retaliation. Or, as Miranda planned to leverage it, make them appear benevolent for not counterattacking. It even had the added benefit of making absolutely clear how unthreatening they found the attack - and how big the power-disparity truly was.

Neil and his party alone were enough to overpower most forces, Jake reckoned. They were all above level 50 in their races, and all of them appeared to focus mainly on their classes. His barriers were even stronger than Abby's had been, which meant that he could easily block almost all physical attacks. Of course, a monster like Jake could still shatter it, but he doubted anyone at his own level could do it without using a powerful skill.

The fort was clearly restless as they approached, but no more bullets were fired. Instead, a few dozen people jumped down from the tall walls while a line of gunmen lined the wall itself. And while they didn't point their guns at Jake and his companions, they looked ready to do so at a moment's notice.

Jake observed the people that had jumped down and noted the man in front. A large man with a buzzcut, followed by a squad of people with similar hair and demeanor. *Military*. Annoyingly so, their stances and aura reminded him a bit of Richard...

He used Identify on the frontman and got an unexpected response.

**[Human – lvl ?]**

Jake felt like something blocked him from seeing the level. The others around him were clearly also surprised at being unable to Identify him correctly. Jake himself was the only person he knew of where it was blocked, and that was due to a divine-rarity skill.

But... while the others were stumped, Jake instead sharpened his gaze. He refused to believe that it was impossible to see through. His yellow eyes lit up as small parts of Gaze of the Apex Hunter activated. He peered through whatever obscured the man's level as his soul lay bare before him... and he used Identify.

**[Human – lvl 59]**

He saw the man on the other side shiver and throw a look towards Jake. Jake quickly averted his gaze to one of the other men, trying to act innocent. *Likely not a good idea to spook them.*

Inwardly he was happy that he succeeded in circumventing the skill. It likely wasn't a very high rarity as it only blocked a basic Identify. He was a bit surprised he didn't get any notification about his Identify upgrading or anything like that.

On the other hand... was it even an upgrade? Even Jake, with his transcendent instincts, couldn't tell when someone used Identify on him – other than the apparent staring – so his current use of the skill that was far more invasive couldn't be called strictly superior. He didn't even really do anything different... it was more like stepping around a wall that obscured your vision to see something better.

“Well, that was a rather rude welcome,” Miranda said, breaking the silence with a light jab at the other side.

The man broke out of the stupor created by Jake as he steeled himself and answered. “I apologize; he got nervous because a group of strangers was threateningly approaching us.”

“I believe threatening is a strong word. Besides, why would we threaten you?” Miranda answered, still smiling. Neil's invisible barrier remained in front of her, in case anything went bad, with Jake a single One Step Mile away.



“You never know with which intentions people approach in these trying times. We have had... issues before with new people,” he answered.

“Well, Phillip,” Miranda answered with a bright smile. “We truly have no interest in the fort at all. To my knowledge, you have nothing of interest besides potential citizens for the settlement, no, city, we are creating.”

Jake saw the man frown a bit, clearly not expecting things to go as they currently were. Jake got it... he doubted many people would come here, and the only reason to do so was to seek refuge.

“I find this entire matter highly questionable. You claim to come from some enigmatic location safe from beasts and want us to follow you there? I don’t want to insult your intelligence, so please don’t insult mine by acting like that sounds reasonable,” Phillip said sharply.

“It is an acceptable outcome for us just to leave now, but it would be a disservice to all the survivors within the fort,” Miranda said. “I haven’t lied; we truly have a safe-zone.”

“I came by here before joining them a few weeks ago,” Lillian added from the side. “I and the others who joined were under... unfortunate circumstances then, but they helped and allowed us to stay. It truly is a safe place.”

“I second this,” Miquel spoke up, finally making himself useful. “A small group of a bit over a dozen I was leading stumbled across their settlement a week ago, and I truly haven’t seen a single aggressive beast in the area.”

Phillip looked at the two people and considered them. “Even if what you say is true, the fort is already a safe have-“

“Lie,” a voice spoke.

“Silas, please,” Miranda said with faux outrage before apologizing. “I am sorry. Silas here has the skill to determine lies from truth. It is a bad habit of his to call out lies.”

The military man clearly looked uncomfortable, and a few of the men behind him also shuffled a bit on their feet. Not as much from the fact that he could apparently determine lies, but more so that their leader, with his silence, clearly admitted that the fort indeed wasn’t safe.

Jake was thoroughly enjoying all of them working together to ‘negotiate.’ They seemed to have things under control, and he could just stand at the back and observe. Way more relaxing than being forced to negotiate himself, that’s for sure. *Delegating tasks for the win.*

Mystie was sitting on the grass at his side, clearly bored by everything that was happening. Jake could feel its impatience as it wanted to get home as soon as possible. If these matters took too long, he planned on letting her return early to lessen her anxiety. She spent a long time guarding and nurturing the egg... it was understandable that she would prefer to stay with it till it hatched.

“Fine, while we do face our difficulties, I find it very hard to believe that there is a place more defensible than this. We have a clear view in all directions, and tactically it is impeccable. We have yet to have a single casualty to any beasts entering our premises,” Phillip said, arguing back.

When it had become a discussion if the fort was safe, Jake didn’t know... but he still decided to inject himself into the conversation to speed it up.

“Are you the strongest one in the fort Phillip?” Jake asked, bringing the attention of everyone to him.

The man looked over Jake. A few people had their eyes on him from start to end, clearly already aware that they failed to identify him.

“I am among the ones with the greatest fighting capabilities, yes,” he answered. He likely knew that the human lie-detector would call out a bluff, so he decided to remain honest while still hinting at others with around equal strength to himself.

“I sense no worthwhile enchantments on any of the walls, and while the shield generated by the magic circle is commendable, it won’t matter if a powerful beast comes,” Jake said with disappointment.

“What are you getting at?”

“This fort isn’t safe at all. You have no magic circle or formation able to ward off enemies and no individuals strong enough either. Unless you or others make massive progress within a short time, I can only see this place falling within a few months at most.”

“Then we would evacuate if that happens. We will see any beast coming from far away and can react adequately if that happens. They won’t even get close, and I doubt there are many beasts out there we can’t collectively hold off. Nothing is sneaking up on us,” Phillip answered, making his stance quite clear. He obviously wanted to keep his valor in front of his men and not lose face. There was just one issue...

“I find that doubtful... considering a beast powerful enough to destroy the fort already did,” Jake said, shaking his head. “Mystie.”

The bird was more than happy to dispel its own invisibility and let its aura lose and finally get things moving at a more bearable pace.

As for who wasn’t happy? Well, practically everyone else. Miranda, Neil, and his party, and even Miquel handled it okay-ish, but the opposing faction sure didn’t.

Clearly not used to the aura of a D-grade beast, many of them whitened, and a few men even stumbled back. Phillip and the men around him all went into a defensive position as his eyes darted to the small hawk sitting lazily in the grass beside Jake.

Jake thought it was a bit funny that the bird didn't even have to look intimidating at all. She just looked bored as she propped herself up a bit, trying to at least look a little majestic, which was quite easy for her with her vibrant blue feathers.

"Wha-!?" one of the men yelled as he raised what looked like a small handgun and aimed it at Mystie. Phillip was too slow to react as the second premature discharge of the day was released.

A bullet flew towards Mystie but was blocked by Neil's barrier.

"STAND DOWN!" Phillip yelled, red in the face. He seemed incredibly flustered, yet he never took his eyes off Mystie or the man standing beside it.

Miranda turned towards Jake and Mystie and gave them a nod. Jake reacted by poking Mystie with his foot, making the bird disperse its aura once more with a small huff. Jake just smiled beneath his mask, finding the entire situation oddly entertaining.

"If I didn't know better, I would think you were looking for a fight..." Miranda said calmly to Phillip, who tried to remain stoic as much as he could. But Jake could clearly see the drops of sweat running down the military man's back, as he was a mess internally.

"I told you before... we didn't come here with any bad intentions. Because if we did... we wouldn't be talking."

Phillip managed to collect himself as he answered. "Is... that beast D-tier?"

“Yes,” Miranda answered, happy that at least the man knew about them. “The Mystsong Hawk is one of the owner’s companions. The owner is the one in possession of the land where we built the safe haven, and I am the one he appointed to manage it.”

“I assume you are this owner?” the man asked, turning to Jake.

Jake just stared back at his eyes, letting Gaze of the Apex Hunter go a little as he nodded. He felt like he had spoken enough and would let Miranda handle the rest. He had already discussed his role in all this with her beforehand, and that role had now been fulfilled. His only job left was to look scary and enigmatic.

He was taking this entire thing as just a work-thing. It somehow felt more relaxing to put it in a corporate context than to really think about the social situation.

Phillip shook once more from the Gaze, freezing him for a fraction of a second before he looked away.

“So, should we go inside and discuss things or stay out here under the sun?” Miranda asked, breaking the silence that Jake had created by tickling the opposing leader’s soul.

“... will you force your way in if I say no?” Phillip asked with defeat in his voice. He had begun to realize that he was solidly out of his depth.

“No, of course not,” Miranda said, seeming genuinely offended. “How many times do I have to tell you we are here with good intentions? I’m just saying that it would be easier to discuss this somewhere that isn’t in the middle of the plains.”

“Alright,” he sighed. “Let’s head inside. Please allow us to escort you... but... does the Mystsong Hawk need to come? Having such a powerful beast inside the fort will only lead to panic.”

Miranda threw a questioning gaze at Jake, who turned to the Mystsong Hawk. It just tilted its head a bit as runes swirled around it, and it disappeared.

“Is it...?” Phillip asked, unable to sense any trace of the hawk any longer.

“Does it matter?” Miranda said a bit helplessly. “Let’s just head in.”

The man looked a bit hesitant but motioned for them to open the gate anyway. Jake followed along with the others and an invisible bird floating behind him, looking around at all the different kinds of enchantments made on the gates and walls.

All were of a low level, but as a magic bird, Mystie liked to study them nonetheless. It was magic of an entirely different philosophy, and Jake was sure that it would help her develop. *As long as she doesn’t begin ripping the walls apart to test their durability*, Jake thought, chuckling internally.

As he walked, he also looked around him and noticed that the fort, quite frankly... sucked. It was just too small for the number of people. He saw hundreds just inside the gate, all looking cautiously at the newcomers - some of them gasping at their high levels and at being unable to identify Jake at all.

Phillip motioned with his hand to calm them down as they headed towards the fort's central building. It was one of the few intact buildings, as most other structures were just tents placed around a big courtyard in the middle of the fort. Once more... it kind of sucked.

He also saw something he hadn't yet since returning from the tutorial - children.

The Viper had told him children would find themselves in tutorials where they could safely reach level 10 in their race and evolve to F-grade no matter their age... but no such safety remained once back on Earth. It was up to the parents or the kindness of strangers to make up for it. They were mostly hidden away in the tents or hiding, all looking rather... lost.

Jake saw a small smile creep onto Miranda's lips as they saw how bad the circumstances were... and he perfectly understood. With the fort in this state, even Jake believed he could convince a majority of the decrepit survivors to leave.

## Chapter 169: The Fort

The inside of the keep was quite spacious, but what hit Jake first was how hot it was. The building was split into several sections, and he felt heat emanate from one of the side rooms he looked towards. The others also looked at it. Phillip explained with a bit of pride, perhaps just happy to feel like he was not 'losing' any conversation currently.



“Inside there, we have our smithy. Lots of talented men and women who focus on their professions have managed to create old-world technology with new magical means,” he said, leading them into the room, happy to show off the good parts of the fort after walking through the terrible situation outside.

Inside the smithy, Jake truly felt the heat as he saw several contraptions and worktables scattered around the room. It all looked somewhat chaotic, with the only real order being to split the furnaces and anvils away from the workbenches. Nodding his head towards one of the men sitting in the corner, Phillip brought their attention to a small thin man intensely working. The man hadn’t even noticed them, or maybe he didn’t care. He was sitting with what looked like tiny electronics, and Jake saw a drone on the table like the one they encountered earlier.

“That there is Arnold; he is the one who made the drone and nearly all our more advanced equipment. He made the walkie-talkie too - a real genius, that one. The rest mainly focus on weaponry and armor, and we produce a wide variety of both cold weapons and firearms.” Phillip explained proudly.

“Interesting. How do firearms work with the system?” Miranda asked.

“Calling them firearms is actually a bit silly now. They are more like magical weapons now and generate their own bullets. Not that much different from wands in many ways. They also use mana, of course, so there honestly isn’t much difference between a mage and a gunman,” he said before continuing his explanation.

“Yet guns do retain one of their most useful features from before the system: they are easy to use. While each weapon has a level requirement to use, they aren’t that different

to operate than a pre-system gun. As a ranged weapon, they are far easier to use and still vastly superior to something like a bow.”

Jake scoffed, getting the man’s attention, but he didn’t dare enquire further. While the hunter did see some usefulness in guns, he vastly preferred bows. The reason for that being relatively simple. A gun only used your magic-stats, and it was far easier to, one could say, customize your attacks with a bow.

When using a bow, Jake used nearly his entire body. He even used his magic-stats with Infused Powershot, and in cases where he didn’t use them for the shot itself, he used it with his Arrow of the Ambitious Hunter or his poisons. Oh yeah, that was another major thing. It was far easier to poison arrows than bullets.

Sure, you could build a gun specifically to use pre-made bullets and then make poison-bullets, but at that point, you should just get your shit together and use a damn bow. The only possible advantage Jake could see bullets have was with range and while using a sniper rifle. But even then, one just had to ask the Storm Elemental if Jake wasn’t also deadly at extremely long range.

“Anyway,” Phillip said, trying to act like he hadn’t noticed Jake’s protest. “We have managed to arm nearly every individual, and with our tall walls, we have managed to defend the fort from any beasts. As a large settlement, we appear to attract a lot of attention.”

“Not surprising,” Neil said, cutting in for the first time. “You are effectively a bag of experience waiting to be claimed by those strong enough. I reckon there are quite a few levels to be earned for any beasts managing to break through and enter the courtyard.”

“Yeah,” Eleanor added. “The only reason you haven’t been overrun is that you aren’t worth it for the stronger beasts. While you all level and get stronger, you will also begin attracting stronger and stronger enemies. It is just a matter of time before a D-grade comes.”

“What makes your settlement any different from ours?” Phillip asked. He appeared to understand their logic, and a part of him knew the fort couldn’t stand forever, but that didn’t mean some other place was safer.

“Because it’s my territory,” Jake answered without even thinking.

Everyone turned to him as this part certainly wasn’t part of their practice. They instead had planned on Miranda explaining how the forest was safer, how they had a talented space mage and then finishing by mentioning that the owner and the D-grade beast would defend them. Mainly the D-rank, actually, as that was a kind of power more quantifiable than the enigmatic Jake.

“I don’t see how that matters, an army of beasts could still easily de-“

“Beasts aren’t as stupid as you think,” Jake said. “They know to stay away from where they don’t belong. it's simply pure instinct. A beast does not willingly enter the domain of a hunter.”

When he said those words, Jake came to a realization he probably should have a long time ago. The area claimed by the Pylon was *his*, that was clear. His mana signature was in the atmospheric mana itself, making it clear it was his. And like a beast marking its territory, so had Jake marked what was under the influence of the Pylon.

It wasn't the Pylon keeping beasts away. It was that it was Jake's Pylon. They all felt the faint aura of Jake, and their instincts made them aware that they should stay away.

Because it was the territory of the Primal Hunter.

As Jake stood there, he had unknowingly let some of his aura spread out as he came to the realization. And while he wasn't a D-grade, that didn't mean his aura was any less powerful. But it was different because it didn't stem from the natural suppression of grade, but from everyone's instincts warning them.

Even Mystie looked uncomfortable as she was clearly affected too. It wasn't the kind of suppression that had any physical effects. No, it was purely mental. The bird gave Jake a small nudge with its wing, and Jake noticed what he was doing and swiftly retracted his aura.

*Shit....* he thought, afraid that he just ruined Miranda's strategy.

The owner had truly gone above and beyond! Miranda felt cold sweat run down her back as he proclaimed the city his territory. She felt his presence even more than when the Mystsong Hawk had released its aura. Like every fiber of her being – especially the small lizard brain all humans had – practically yelling at her that she should *not* mess with the man in front of her.

Phillip looked like he had just been splashed with a bucket of cold water, the sweat visible on his face. He looked genuinely scared, and it appeared he just realized. The Mystsong Bird was not the strongest member of their group.

“Sir, please,” Miranda said, throwing the masked owner a look. She needed to communicate that even with his power, he was still human and at least listened to her advice. It would strengthen her position not just in this negotiation but even more so if they decided to join.

He looked back at her with those yellowed beastly eyes and almost seemed... apologetic? No, she must have read that wrong. Truly skills that could read others weren't flawless, especially not with one so much more powerful than herself.

The aura had already dispersed as the room became calm once more.

“I apologize if I offended you in any way; I didn't mean to question your words,” Phillip apologized while not daring to even look towards the owner.

“It's alright... being skeptical is to be expected and even encouraged. Now; should we find a place and talk about what comes next? I would also be very interested in hearing some more about the fusion of magic and technology.”

Miranda skillfully led Phillip away as she sent a glance towards the owner, asking him to stay. Neil and his party followed while Lillian stayed with the owner. Miquel also followed her, likely just wanting to get away from the scary masked man. The setup was perfect. Miranda believed she would never have an easier time convincing the man than now. The owner had truly played his role well.

*She is so mad at me*, Jake thought as he stayed in the room while Miranda led Phillip and the others away, leaving him only with Lillian. She went over to his side and just stood there, Jake not entirely sure what to do now.

Miranda didn't want him to follow; that was clear. He had made everyone uncomfortable by forgetting to restrain himself. He had known since childhood that one had to be controlled or you would scare others. Before the system, Jake had just thought he had a scary face when he got mad or something, but after the system, things began to make a lot more sense.

*Thinking about it... that was clearly the bloodline, wasn't it?*

His parents had never had any reactions to him, but his brother had. He remembered that Caleb would be scared if he got too close while emotional, and it was only when Jake got older and more reserved and meeker in front of him that his brother stopped being afraid.

As brothers, they naturally developed a rivalry. Jake unconsciously always competed with him, and Jake assumed that must have been hard for him.

*I really need to sit down and figure out what exactly this whole bloodline-business is about.*

"Sir?" Lillian asked as Jake had now just been standing still for a good fifteen seconds, deep in thought.

Jake blushed slightly below the mask as he praised the Malefic One for no one being able to see his face. “Yes, let us go check out his fort.”

The three of them – two humans and one invisible bird – exited the keep, and many eyes turned to them instantly. Jake just did his best to ignore their gazes while Lillian seemed to genuinely not care. As the only woman surviving the hellspawn that was Abby and her sadistic fuck of a father, Donald, she, without a doubt, had a strong mental state.

Jake walked away from the keep as he looked around the fort. And man, did he mention that it sucked?

It looked like a sad campsite mushed together in the courtyard. The courtyard was large but far from large enough to accommodate this many people. He took the time to try and determine how many people lived there, and a conservative estimate would put it at around two thousand. Likely closer to two and a half thousand.

That was a lot of people, but his territory was also big and expanding by the day. He could already imagine the many levels Miranda would get from recruiting this entire base, and he reckoned Lillian would also get her fair share. On that note:

“Did Miranda allow you to get a profession related to the city?”

The woman looked at him a bit before she waved her hands. A barrier appeared around them. It was invisible to the eye and only had the simple function of blocking out sound. *Neat skill... and handy for an assistant.*

“Yes,” Lillian answered. “Principal City Lord’s Assistant is the name. She also granted me the title of Lord along with it. I believe there was discussion about making Neil a Lord as she could appoint three lords and one Baron, but nothing is settled. She gave me the title as, without it, I would be unable to access certain functionalities of the Pylon of Civilization.”

“I see. So she told you about the Pylon?” Jake asked, frowning. He was pretty sure that was meant to be a secret between them and not info just to spread willy-nilly.

Lillian seemed to get his meaning and quickly clarified. “Yes, but only after I signed a system-enforced contract that bans me from discussing anything related to the Pylon with anyone but Miranda and you, sir.”

“A contract, huh?” Jake asked. He had read about contracts in the books, but he always assumed they were just regular old contracts like the one he made with Miranda. Was it possible to make them system-enforced? *It must take a particular skill.*

“What is the punishment if you break it?”

“Death,” she answered calmly. “But I can only break it if I do so willfully. As an example, if I am under the influence of anything affecting my mind or someone can listen in without my knowledge, it does not count as breaking it. If I purposefully try to break it, I get warned by a massive headache, and if I break it anyway, I will cease to be.”



Jake looked her over as he nodded. He could hear in her voice, she had experimented with it. Without even caring for her life, apparently. But... Jake didn't really have much to say about other near-suicidal people. He had done equally stupid stuff himself. And in the end, that stupidity had led to gains. Also, he would have totally done the same thing as her and pushed the contract to its limits.

"I see. Well, keep up the good work," Jake said in acknowledgment. *Wait, didn't I just tell her to continue to do reckless shit?*

"I will," she said with a smile. *Well, who cares? Everyone likes positive reinforcement,* he thought in response.

Jake walked with her through the fort as he looked the place over, and at the same time, considered if it was really wise of him to come along. Mystie alone could have done the same job of being intimidating, and at least no one expected a bird to make conversation.

But on the other hand, he didn't want to be just a freeloader. While he was totally fine with having Miranda do 99% of the work, he did feel like he should at least do *something* to contribute. He was technically her boss. *Shit, that means I am Lillian's boss's boss...*

Without really noticing it, they had made their way up to one of the walls. Lillian was just following along silently while everyone they came across got out of the way. It was somewhat unsurprising that people just tried to avoid the unidentifiable masked guy whom even their leader looked meek in front of.

Jake stood on the wall and looked out over the landscape. There were a few soldier-like people on the wall too, but they all kept a good ten to fifteen meters from the two of them. He honestly found it a bit annoying as he wanted to borrow a gun from someone.

As he stood there, a somewhat unaware soldier was walking while reading something and passed by. Jake stepped in front of him to ask if he could see the rifle he had strapped over his shoulder.

Lillian instantly noticed that Jake was staring hard at the rifle and went up to the soldier. "Excuse me."

"Hm?" the poor guy said as he looked up, seeing a scarred woman and a masked man with piercing yellow eyes both staring at him. He recognized them from when they entered, and he remembered seeing that monstrous bird too.

"Sorry, I didn't notice that I-" he began, but Lillian interrupted him.

"The city owner would like to ask if he can have one of your firearms to inspect."

"I- of course!" he said as he quickly ran off. He returned less than half a minute later with a rifle nearly identical to his own.

"Here you go, sir and madam! This one is unbound and even better than my own!" he said as he handed the rifle to Lillian.

She, in turn, gave it to Jake, who stoically accepted it. *Couldn't I have just asked for it myself?* he wondered. *I guess she knows what she is doing, so let's just go along with it.*

He held up the rifle and inspected it, and it was nearly as disappointing as the state of the fort.

***[Bolt-action Imitation Rifle (Inferior)] – A rifle that can conjure and fire inferior-rarity bullets, made to mimic a bolt-action rifle of old. It is created by a newly integrated craftsman, and while there is much room for improvement, it is nevertheless solidly built and durable for its rarity.***

***Requirements: Lvl 20+ in any humanoid race.***

*Well, I guess if it works, it works...*

Jake had to remember that these were mass-produced by crafters with only a few month's worths of experience at most. That they could even make these rifles, to begin with, was impressive.

He spent the next period of time inspecting the rifle's enchantments, and he even felt the subtle probing of Mystie. It indeed was relatively simple, but the magic circle scribbled on the inside of the rifle was still a bit impressive.

Jake bound the rifle to himself as he tried injecting mana into it and felt as a bullet was conjured in the chamber. It appeared only to be able to create a single shot at a time, which was disappointing. As for how strong the bullet was... well, he had a feeling he would soon be able to test it.

The soldier that had given him the rifle had never left but kept staying a few meters away, almost as if waiting for orders. It had been nearly two hours since Jake got the gun and began tinkering with it, so the young man jumped a bit when Jake spoke.

“You got incoming.”

“Huh? Incoming what?” the soldier asked, confused.

Jake pointed out into the horizon. “Quite an army of beasts. Big, four legs, looks like fat hairy cows.”

The man looked out into the distance and saw absolutely nothing. He looked confused back at the masked man again. He stood there confused for a minute or two before one of their snipers called out: “I think I see something approaching in the distance!”

The young man instantly went white as he yelled to those below: “SOUND THE ALARMS! STAMPEDE INCOMING!”

## Chapter 170: The Battle of Fort's Deep

Jake had to admit that the fort was *really well*-positioned when it came to defending against enemies approaching on the ground. He had seen the beasts nearly ten minutes before they would get there as they were approaching from a slight downward angle.

With Jake's insane perception, it was effortless to spot anything getting close. From a small watchtower, the sniper that had yelled out earlier had also finally been able to spot the beasts, and now the entire fort was in full swing.

Jake just stood there with Lillian as people ran around him, looking out at the approaching beasts. The soldiers all narrowly avoided him, and he heard Phillip and Miranda in the courtyard below making their way towards him.

"Does this happen often?" he heard Miranda ask as they moved closer.

"At least once a day... it is exhausting, but it allows us to rake in levels and materials," Phillip answered, walking up the small rampart to the wall together with the woman.

"Is it always a horde like this?"

"Yes... it's always a stampede of weaker beasts, few reaching above level 30. Sometimes stronger ones up to level 60 are present, but the strongest so far was 71, so we have yet to encounter anything we couldn't handle. But it is getting worse..." Phillip said with a bit of resignation.

“Well, just a better reason to go with us,” Miranda smiled.

Phillip smiled back as he subconsciously made a small nod.

*It looks like Miranda is doing pretty well,* Jake thought, seeing the man borderline convinced already. Well, they had spent a few hours in the building, and it seemed like he just needed the final push to agree.

As they got onto the wall, Phillip and Miranda spotted Jake, and both went over. They seemed relatively relaxed despite the apparent panic of the soldiers earlier. Well, the man was a higher level, and from what he had seen, the charging beasts were pretty damn weak.

He Identified one of them for the heck of it, and it was a bit disappointing.

**[Roughhide Bovine – lvl 33]**

“Sir,” Miranda greeted, bowing slightly towards him. *We really need to find something else to call me,* Jake thought. Wait, did she even know his name? Thinking back... he had never introduced himself, and when he signed the contract back then, he did it with a cursive abomination his dad taught him to make. Because apparently, the more illegible your signature, the more professional it is.

Phillip gave him a nod, too, as he turned his gaze to the approaching horde.

“More Roughhides... most seem to only be standard bovines, with a few bulls mixed in. No Herd leaders spotted as far as I can tell,” he said as he scouted the group, speaking out loud to both Miranda and some of the other men that had followed him.

Turning to the young man they saw in the workshop with the machinery earlier, he ordered: “Get a drone in the air and try to get an estimate of how many there are.”

The man nodded as he brought out the same small drone he used earlier. It flew up quickly, and the man somehow projected a screen in front of him showing all the drone saw. *Very neat*, Jake approved internally.

Jake looked at the screen and saw the horde from above. Well, he could just summon his wings and go for an aerial look himself, but it was pretty entertaining to watch the screen instead.

There really were a lot of them. He also spotted quite a few larger versions of the normal bovines, and he assumed those were the bulls. Finally, towards the back, they saw one larger than any of the others.

“A Herd Leader...” Phillip said with a bit of resignation before explaining to Miranda. “The Herd Leaders are far tougher than the others and higher level too. The strongest one so far was level 71, and it took quite a while and many injuries to bring it down. It was a miracle we didn’t lose anyone. Hopefully, this one is wea-

“73.”

Jake had already Identified it as he looked out over the wall long ago. Identify didn't work through the screen.

**[Roughhide Herd Leader – lvl 73]**

Neil and his party had also made their way over together with the others, and Levi cockily spoke up. “Heh, worst case we just handle them, we have taken down wo-“

“No,” Jake said, getting a few confused looks from everyone, Miranda included.

Needless to say, the fact that the fort would be attacked during their visit was not a part of their strategy and thus not discussed. So Jake was not going by practice to be seen as enigmatic or like a mysterious being... he was just saying his genuine thoughts.

“This is not our fight. It's theirs. It would be rude of us to butt in and steal their experience points or challenge. Besides... what is there to gain from slaying a bunch of weak beasts? Have the ones who have something to gain do the fighting.”

Everyone was looking at him at his point, and Jake honestly felt a bit awkward. What was up with their looks? Did he say anything unreasonable? It wasn't like he was telling anyone to go die or anything; he just said that people should do their own fighting.



How else would they gain any levels?

“Can we interfere if it gets dangerous?” Neil asked. Once more, Jake felt a bit awkward that he was asking permission, but then again, he had basically just given them an order.

“Fine,” Jake answered. He reckoned having guardians behind them would negatively affect the soldier’s experience gain, but based on their sighs of relief, he got the feeling they didn’t mind.

“Ahem,” Phillip said, getting the attention back to him. “I believe we should get in formation. You are all free to stay and observe, but please do not get in the way unless you plan on assisting.”

Jake nodded, and so did the others. Miranda and Lillian stuck to him while Neil and his party stayed with Miquel and his goons.

Miranda, Jake, Lillian, and the invisible Mystie walked back into the courtyard as they tried to stay out of the way of the many people running about. The people just living there seemed to barely react besides the many that got up and grabbed a rifle and headed for the walls.

It indeed appeared like these attacks were a usual thing for the inhabitants of the fort. But if it could occur more than once a day, it made sense that they had begun being desensitized.

“Let us watch from above,” Jake said as he motioned to the invisible Mystie. She understood his intentions, and without any warning, Jake and the two women began floating upwards with the still-invisible bird.

“Woah!” Miranda exclaimed, surprised at suddenly being lifted.

“Did you?” she asked, looking towards Jake as they slowly ascended.

“Mystie,” he answered, motioning with his head towards the invisible bird. From Miranda’s point of view, it looked like he was just pointing towards the air, but she seemed to understand right away as she just nodded slowly. Lillian didn’t have any significant reactions from all the happenings.

Quite a few glances were also thrown their way, but they soon turned back to the approaching horde. Apparently, the thought that the mysterious masked man with a D-grade beast following him around being able to make people float wasn’t that amazing.

“Are you certain we should not interfere?” Miranda asked, floating well out of range of any listeners.

“Yes,” Jake answered. “These beast hordes are a golden opportunity for these soldiers to earn experience. When else can you sit comfortably behind a wall and have the prey run headfirst into you?”

“I understand your point, but would it not also be worth it to display a show of force?” she asked, looking at the still approaching herd of bovines. They would soon be within the range of the first shooters.

“Perhaps, and if it becomes necessary, we can still do that. But as it looks, we won’t need to. This will also allow us to get a feel for the fort’s overall power-level and abilities. I am personally quite a bit interested in the fighting style they have developed with their modern weaponry.”

“Alright... I just hope we can avoid any unnecessary deaths. We do hope to have these people be our new citizens, after all,” Miranda answered with resignation.

Jake nodded, agreeing but not intending to interfere still. They could handle this, and he would just be the observer. He wanted everyone to at least hold some power. If he always had to be around to address minor issues, he wouldn’t have time to focus on his own challenges.

As he waited for the herd to make it, he couldn’t help but take notice of the magic that was currently affecting him.

Using pure mana for telekinesis was something Jake had practiced quite a lot, but he had only really done it with inanimate objects. For a stone, he could just inject mana into it through a tether and lift it like that, but that method didn’t work for living things.

What Mystie did was very similar, but instead of injecting mana into an individual, she erected a membrane of mana around the person. The mana was flexible and perfectly coated the body, making it so no movements could really affect the membrane.

Yet, it was also fragile. Jake felt that he could dispel it with little to no effort. He wasn't sure if Miranda or Lillian knew how to dispel it, but he reckoned most people at a high level did. All it required was to release some mana from your body and blow it away.

But... the membrane also reminded him of another technique he had developed: his water-walking. When he walked on water, he basically erected a membrane around his feet with a small constant upwards lift. It allowed him to more or less act like he weighed less.

And now... Jake was considering why he hadn't taken that further.

He closed his eyes and focused on the mana around him. Mystie lifted herself with the same mana technique she was currently using on all of them, meaning she could clearly lift herself with it too. Jake concentrated, and invisible mana soon covered his feet, pushing away Mystie's.

Mystie noticed what he was doing, and Jake opened his eyes briefly, throwing her a look. The bird understood as she dispelled the mana that kept Jake floating... yet he didn't fall.

Instead, he fell a few centimeters before he stopped. Standing solidly in the air.

*Air-walking successfully unlocked*, he cheered internally, wondering why the hell he hadn't thought of it earlier. Well, it took quite a bit of concentration, and he was unsure if he could use it in combat for anything, but it was a neat thing.

It was handy for a situation like now, where he didn't bob up and down from Mystie keeping him afloat.

Miranda and Lillian didn't even notice that Jake was now standing in the air instead of floating, both being somewhat distracted...

Distracted by the loud war raging at the walls of the fort below.

*Whoops, nearly forgot about that*, Jake internally joked as he turned his gaze to the war below, and man, was it a war. It was right out of some fantasy movie, except the elves with bows were replaced with humans with guns, and the orcs and trolls were replaced by cows and even bigger cows.

The humans stood valiantly at the wall as they fired out over their defensive line, hitting the cows below. On the other hand, the cows were either smashing into the wall or trying to climb it by... well, smashing into it.

He saw an explosion go off from the ground below, and inspecting it further with his insane perception; he saw fragments of what looked like a mine fly up. That one took out an entire cow while it injured two others, but the herd appeared almost endless.

Jake wondered... what was the goal of those bovines? They appeared to have no plan and seemed almost to be berserk as they just kept charging. The bulls had yet to make it to the wall, having all stopped a reasonable distance away, out of range of most attacks.

They stood with the Herd Leader that didn't appear to have any interest in entering the fray quite yet.

The constant sounds of explosions from different weapons were deafening, as the humans didn't hold anything back. The rifles themselves didn't really make any noises, but the mines and mortar-like weapons they had sure as hell did.

He turned his gaze to Phillip and saw the man fully in his military-mode. He was yelling out orders left and right, while also attacking plenty himself. His rifle looked like most of the other soldiers, but his bullets' power was more potent than anyone else.

Moreover, he was clearly using several skills as he shot. Some of his bullets exploded upon impact, some penetrated through a target, and some appeared to stun the beast it hit temporarily.

His most impressive display was when he suddenly began firing his rifle like a machine-gun; every bullet exploding, as more than 10 giant booms sounded out every second from him alone - the bovines below cattle to the slaughter.

Jake had to admit that while the soldiers with guns did work... they weren't the only ones. Not every individual had chosen a firearm as their preferred weapon but fought with styles closer to those he already knew.

He saw quite a few Powershots being fired from archers, bolts of all different kinds from casters, and some healers and other mage-like classes were even buffing up the soldiers. One formed a cloud of poison gas that swept through the plains, another made the earth tremble and spikes fly up and penetrate into the cows from below.

Jake did notice that these people tended to be of higher level and were gathered together. If his guess was correct, these were individuals from other tutorials that had joined them later on. He would have to ask Miranda if Phillip had talked about that...

To be honest... the fighting was just dull to watch. Like shooting fish in a barrel, it couldn't even be called a fight.

He saw snipers on the towers above shoot at the beasts below as they killed ones strategically to make some bovines stumble over others. The human side had yet to take a single injury, but Jake had already realized the Herd Leader's plan long ago and hoped that could lead to something interesting.

By now, the many dead beasts were beginning to form a ramp up to the fort. Phillip had also clearly noticed and ordered some of the mages or those with explosives to get some of the corpses away. Sadly... it appeared to be too late for that.

The Herd Leader made a roar – Jake was pretty sure cows, or bulls for that matter, couldn't usually do that – as the eyes of all the remaining cows turned red as their bodies began to swell. At the same time, the bulls all began charging straight for the ramp of their comrades.

*Let's see how you handle this one, Phillip.*