

World 321

Chapter 321: Rearranging The Formation

Jack let the ridicule slide, if this guy could hatch a plan that dealt with their quandary, he did not mind suffering a few of his unpleasant words.

"We have two main problems," John explained. "One, our sizable presence scared off most monsters. Two, the army was too vast that even if it was attacked, no guarantee it will be at our position."

Jack and Jeanny nodded in agreement at his words.

"So all we need to do is pretty simple. Cut down the size of the army so it won't scare the monsters away and put it in a position where they will be the first to be attacked."

"Huh?" Jack did not catch his drift.

"A vanguard troop," John spelled it out. "Go and tell the commander that a vanguard troop can help to speed the march up. On the last two occasions when the army engaged the monsters, the whole army had to slow down so the side that was having the battle did not get left behind. By having a vanguard troop goes in advance and deals with any possible hindrance, the main troop can continue to march at a stable pace. Of course, you need to make sure that our force is the one selected for this vanguard troop."

"That is a good one," Jeanny commented.

"Of course it is. Now, leader, go tell the commander. Chop, chop! We have wasted enough time as it is," John said to Jack.

"All right, I will head over right away," Jack said as he controlled his steed to take him to where the Duke and the Commander were at.

As they watched Jack went away, Bowler said to The Man, "from what you just saw. Who you reckon looks more like the leader?"

"Do you even need to ask?" The Man replied.

Jack weaved his way to the heart of the army formation, where the Duke and the Commander were located. The elite guards parted way as they already recognized Jack.

He saw Prince Alonzo and Lieutenant Bailey there. Bailey seemed to fashion herself as the personal bodyguard of the prince. Considering their past relationship as student and instructor, it made sense for her to take up that role. With her sticking to the prince like that, his second faction quest might be completed without him needing to do anything at all.

There were several other high-level individuals around the Duke, they seemed to occupy a special position in the army as well if they were with the Duke. A more noteworthy one was a man in an elaborate white robe. Jack used his God-eye monocle to inspect him.

Laurent (Special Elite Human, High Priest), level 70

HP: 390,000

Level 70? This was the highest level NPC he had met. Even though he was one grade lower than the Duke, his level was higher.

"That is the high priest Laurent, he is from the Church of Creation," Commander Quintus said when he noticed Jack's gaze.

"Church of Creation? I thought everyone here is from the kingdom faction," Jack asked.

"Laurent is a good friend of the Duchess. They and the Duke often went out adventuring together in their younger days. When he heard the Duke had organized this expedition for getting a cure for the Duchess, he had volunteered to join."

"It's a beautiful thing to have a caring friend," Jack commented.

"It is. Now, what is your business here? You do not come here just for a chat, do you?"

Jack then relayed John's idea to them. He especially noted that the company under him would like to be this vanguard troop. Duke Alfredo had come over to listen as well when Jack was proposing the idea.

"But having a small advance troop ahead might just expose it to unnecessary combat, I don't see why we should take the risk," Commander Quintus said.

Duh, that combat is exactly what we are looking for, Jack said in his mind.

"If it can let us keep our pace, I think it is worth a try," the Duke offered his opinion.

Jack guessed the Duke was eager to reach the destination as fast as possible. After all, it was his wife that was at stake here.

After the Duke's approval on the idea, Commander Quintus gave his blessing, "all right, but I will give you another three hundred soldiers. It is still better to be safe about this."

Another three hundred, won't that make the troop large again? The monsters might get scared away again by the numbers. Anyway, he did not stay to argue with them. With that approval, he went back to where his friends were.

"Another three hundred? Then that made the vanguard troop become six hundred strong. That will still be an impressive force when all the soldiers marched together. I doubted the monsters would dare to approach," Jeanny expressed her concern after listening to Jack's report.

"That's easy," John said. "Just divide the six hundred troop into three groups. Send them out to march at three different fronts, left, middle, and right. Not only will we cover more grounds, that will make each troop only two hundred strong. The monsters should not be fleeing with this number."

"Then we should appoint a leader for each of these groups," Jeanny said. "How about the three of us here take command on each?"

"Okay, but please make sure no death on the NPC soldiers if possible. I am the one that has to take responsibility if there are too many casualties," Jack said.

"Well, if it is only you that will bear the responsibility, then I have nothing to worry about," John said.

"Do you want me to kick you out from this quest?" Jack asked.

"You can do that?" John asked back.

"I don't know. Care to give it a try?"

"I will take good care of the troops."

Jack then called for Captain Salem and had him helped in organizing the troops. The three hundred addition from Commander Quintus arrived and they divided them equally between the three groups. Each now had two hundred soldiers.

The players were also divided amongst the three groups. They were still in one party and although they would be at a distance from the other two groups, the distance would not be too far so the experience sharing would still be working.

Jeanny's friends without a doubt joined the group which she was in charge of. Bowler, Flame, and The Man's people came to Jack's one, leaving John's side only with Weird Trap and Pointy Tip. John did not seem to care about his lack of players, but he made sure the only other healer in the group, Sunset Walking, was there by his side.

Jack asked The Man to order some of his people to John's side. The Man refused at first, Jack needed to use his Boss status which The Man usually imposed on him to force the guy to relent some of his men over to John's side. The Man reluctantly sent four of his men over.

Now all three groups had an equal number of NPC troops and an almost equal distribution of players. Jack took the center group, Captain Salem stayed on his side. John was on the left-wing, while Jeanny was on the right-wing. When everyone had finished arranging their formation, Jack gave the sign to move forward.

They galloped their mounts faster and left the main army behind. John and Jeanny on the sides led their troops to fan out further away from Jack, so they could cover more ground.

Not long after, they could see several packs of monsters some distance away. The monsters did not come pouncing at them when they entered their range of perception, but the monsters also did not run away from the presence of around two hundred opponents.

It is working, Jack thought with glee. He then gave out the order to the NPCs, "attack!"

Chapter 322: Vanguard Troops Advance!

The monsters that were in front of them were large humanoid creatures. They had a broad physique and short legs, Their entire bodies were covered by reddish-brown hair. Their hands were large and they clenched their fists to form knuckles that were no less intimidating than a sledgehammer.

These humanoid monsters were called Violent Ape. It was amongst the ones in Jack's hunting quest list. In the grassland that the army was passing at, there were giant trees situated sparsely. These trees were

the Violent Apes' home. When the army approached, the Violent Apes came out from these trees and put on an aggressive posture.

Perhaps it was also because their house tree was there that these Violent Apes did not flee. Either way, Jack did not let this chance go. He gave the order for the army to attack. The soldiers all dismounted and unsummoned their steeds before engaging the monsters.

Most of these Violent Ape was level 30. The proportion between Elite grade and Basic grade within the monster's rank was around forty to sixty. More and more elite-grade monsters could be easily found as the monster's level increased.

Although the monsters' levels were high, the NPC soldiers Jack commanded were also level 30 on average. The squad leaders amongst them were all Elite Human of at least level 35. Combined with the soldiers' numbers which far outnumbered the monsters, they had no problem taking on the apes.

The Violent Apes fought with very simple methods. They mostly relied on their physical strength and used their hands as their main weapons. Their speed was also fast and they fought aggressively. Once they caught onto an opponent, they would club at it incessantly until the opponent was down. Jack doubted if he could fight against such a monster toe to toe with his current level.

Good thing that the soldiers had good cooperation with each other. The ones bearing heavy shields went to intercept the Violent Apes' charge, while their comrades behind used long spears to stab at them. Archers stood behind the melee unit and shot volleys of arrows which traveled in an arc and hit the monsters in front of the melee units. Although rare, there were also mage and healer units within the soldiers' ranks. They stood at the back and used their offensive and healing spells to support the melee units that clashed directly with the Violent Apes.

The players also stayed at the back. Their levels were too low to provide any significant contribution to the fighting soldiers. Still, they gave whatever small aids they could give. Bowler joined the healer units' rank and cast his Heal spell on the front-line soldiers. Flame learned from the archer units and copied the angle of their shots to hit the Violent Apes that were beyond the front-line units.

Jack fearlessly moved forward to get closer to the front line, since he had the highest survivability rate amongst the players. He cast Mana Bullet and Energy Bolts whenever there was an opportunity. He did not dare to use Arcane Turbulence for fear of inflicting friendly fire on the soldiers.

Only melee players like The Man and his underlings were completely useless in this battle. Considering their love for combat, it was really torturous to not be able to join in on the action. The Man tried to sneak closer to the front line, but Jack caught the guy and scolded him back to the rear. He would just get clubbed to death by the Violent Apes if they caught him.

The Man was morose with their situation, but then streams of experience points came in as the Violent Apes started falling. All the players were surprised by the amount of experience they received, except for Jack, who had fought many high-level monsters before. Those Violent Apes were level 30 monsters, after all. Many were even Elite grade. There were around twenty to thirty of the apes in total, not yet counting the ones that were defeated by the other two wings.

It was no wonder that the experiences these low-level players received were enormous, even after being divided by a total of twenty-five of them in the party. Some lowest level members which were level 19, had their level increased to level 20 once the battle was over.

"Bro, this is awesome!" Bowler exclaimed in elation. "I will get to level 21 soon with a couple more battles like now."

Jack smiled at his comment. He was glad that the plan finally worked. Otherwise, he would feel bad for inviting them all into this expedition. Captain Salem went around checking the wounded soldiers. Jack followed him, the troops were his responsibility after all. The ones who were not healed by the healers took out recovery potions and drank them. No one was killed, to Jack's relief. They rested for a bit to let everyone recuperate.

Jack took the chance to message the other two wings. He could see them at a distance but he was not sure of their conditions. They appeared to also have combats just now. He soon received reports that both wings had won the battles without any casualties.

The main army was approaching from the back while they stopped to rest. Jack could see them getting closer. He went another round again to check on everyone. After making sure everyone had rested enough, he gave the command for them to re-summon their steeds. Everyone mounted up and started to gallop at high speed again, putting some distance from the approaching main army.

The cycle continues, as the three vanguard troops continued to engage the monsters to pave a smooth pathway for the main army's march.

Bowler indeed leveled up to level 21 after a few more battles. Many others also leveled up. Jack's level still stayed the same as the amount of experience he received was shared between his two classes, but it should also not long anymore for him to get his level up. If he did not have the Hard-working Achiever title equipped, he would get left behind even further from the others.

The army made a stop once the sun was set and the sky turned dark. Same as the night before, the soldiers started setting up tents for them to rest in. The tents they constructed were large ones that could fit many people inside, unlike the small personal tents that the players possessed.

As a guest to the army, they were also provided such big tent. Three such tents were provided to them, each one could hold a maximum of ten occupants. Jack wondered if players could get their hands on one such tent in the future. This type of tent should be at least rare-grade, right?

He asked Peniel about it, who confirmed that one might get it if one had the chance. However, the tent they were using now was only an uncommon grade, not a rare one. It did not have any special function, its only advantage over the common tent was only its larger occupancy.

The players had dinner together circling a large bonfire outside their tents. Jack and the others who had higher than average cooking skills made the meals.

"Yo, Sunset. I have to ask. Why did you pick a healer class, man?" The Man asked the latest addition of their group.

"What's wrong with being a healer?" Sunset Walking asked in return.

"Yeah, what's wrong with picking a healer class?" Bowler asked as well, since he was also one.

"Well, I just find it strange," The Man said.

"I think what our man here trying to say is, it doesn't suit your hobby," John chimed in. "You see, if you are like our friend Bowler here who enjoys latching onto other people, you being a healer makes much more sense..."

Bowler was about to hurl the meal he held in his hands at John, but Jack caught his arm and said, "I'm not cooking another portion for you if you throw that away."

John never stopped talking, "... but since you enjoy traveling, and the fact that you are alone here when we found you among the army. That shows that you like to travel by yourself. Now, the prospect of survivability for a lone healer traveling through a world filled with monsters is not very bright. Whether in this world or in any other past RPG games, a healer always needs company. Well, at least that is the way for games that use classic pure healer class. There were several games where healers were defiled into having excellent damage-dealing as well but we are not talking about those craps. Anyway, you don't look like a beginner, you should know the limitation of the healer class as well, which will limit your ability to travel alone. Even if you like magic, picking a mage class is more in line with your hobby. So back to The Man's question, why becomes a healer?"

Chapter 323: Another Monster Settlement

"To tell you the truth, it's not that I like to travel alone," Sunset replied. "Healer class is what I have always used when I played RPG games in the past. I have a gang who I used to play together. Unfortunately, after coming into this world, I can't find them. So I have been traveling by myself all this time."

"Why not just make a new gang with new friends?" Bowler asked.

"I'm not exactly good at making friends..." Sunset replied.

"Well, no worry. You have me as a friend now," John said as he clapped Sunset's shoulder.

"Don't you mean 'us'?" Bowler protested.

"We are all friends now, if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask," Jeanny said to Sunset.

Sunset was touched by their friendliness, "that's very kind of you, thank you."

"Well, that was a surprisingly simple reason," The Man commented.

"Are you expecting a mystery backstory?" Bowler asked.

"Sorry to disappoint," Sunset said.

"Don't mind him," Bowler said to Sunset, and then back to The Man, "Since you asked him, then how about we ask you then. Why did you pick the Warrior class?"

"Isn't it obvious? Because I am THE MAN!!!"

Jack shook his head with a laugh. He had finished his meal. He went away to take a walk by himself around the camp.

Roaming around the army camp at night, Jack found there was also an army supply station near where the Duke was. It provided a place for the soldiers to restock their recovery potions. Jack went over and asked if he could get some potions as well, the caretaker said he could but he would need to pay for them using coins.

So it was a mobile shop, Jack thought.

As he browsed through the wares in that supply station. A couple of potions caught his eyes.

Healing potion (Normal consumable)

Recover 500 HP instantly

cooldown: 3 minutes

Energy potion (Normal consumable)

Recover 300 MP/Stamina instantly

cooldown: 3 minutes

It was a higher grade recovery potion than the basic healing potion and basic energy potions. The amount of HP and MP or Stamina they increased was more than double compared to their lower-grade counterparts.

After seeing these potions, he thought of something and then he asked Peniel in his mind, 'Peniel, is this healing potion considered the same types as the basic healing potion? If I drink this healing potion, will the cooldown time cause me to be unable to drink the basic healing one?'

"No, they are considered different. You can immediately drink the basic healing one after drinking this healing potion," Peniel answered.

That meant he could recover an instant of 700 HP if he drank both potions simultaneously. That would be a huge help, for one with such high HP as him, a 200 HP replenishment from the basic healing potion was too minuscule.

He asked for the price of those potions. The caretaker told him one bottle cost 12 silver coins.

It's expensive, it was more than ten times the basic ones, Jack thought. Peniel told him that if he bought the potions in the city, the cost should be slightly less. This price should be because it was a mobile shop where supply was limited.

Jack asked if that meant he could buy such potion from a city's shop? Because he never saw these potions before in those shops. Peniel said there should soon be such potions available for purchase. Supply was probably not yet available before.

Jack thought about it, did she mean that the wares in the shop would scale following the players' improvements? After some thought, he also realized that he had not yet seen weapons and armors

above level 20 being sold. On the first time he visited the shop, most of the equipment was even only around level 10.

Wait a minute, why did this world seem to cater to the players? As the players' level increased, so did the equipment and ware's availability in the shops. This aspect showed as if this was genuinely a game made for players, not the real world.

This was too complicated, he thought. This was not something that he could do anything about, so he stopped thinking about it. He told the caretaker that he would like to buy ten healing potions and ten energy potions. He gave the caretaker 2 gold and 40 silver coins for them.

Although he was rich, he was not going to spend too many coins for them. Not if he could buy them cheaper at the capital later. These ten bottles each were just in case of emergency.

He shared his findings with the others, who then went over to look at the potions as well. Some made purchases. Some did not, partially due to the price, another reason was because not many of them had an HP pool reaching 500 points, especially the non-warrior and non-knight classes.

Same as the first night, the second night went on without any suspense. There were many guards doing shifts watching the perimeter, so if something happened, they would be able to react. Still, Jack did not think there would be monsters brave enough to ambush this army camp.

Jack did not forget to practice the trial spell formation which was given by Janus. When the others first saw it, they asked what spell it was. To which Jack explained it was not. He told them about the league faction called Order of Magi, and this is the requirement to join. John stated that he would go there first thing when he was back in the capital.

The third and fourth days on the journey went on without a hitch. They left the territory of Violent Apes and met two types of new monsters called Poisonous Giant Bee and Giant Scorpion, both of which were also in Jack's list of hunting quests. He could now complete three out of the ten on his list.

The Poisonous Giant Bees were generally weak, but they could fly. Although not fast, it still made them hard to hit. While Giant Scorpion had sturdy scales all over them, typical of the insect type, which gave them excellent defense. Same as Violent Apes, their average levels were also level 30, with many Elite grades amongst them.

The two monsters could both perform poisonous attacks, which was the most problematic aspect of them. Luckily many of the soldiers also carried antidotes with them. The healer units also could cast Cure spell, which removed all negative effects on a target, including poison. Bowler also had access to this spell when he reached level 20.

The vanguard troops' strategy worked superbly. Even if the two monsters' numbers were higher compared to the Violent Ape, the soldiers still outnumbered them. Many of the players leveled up on the journey. Jack himself increased a level for both his Warrior and Mage class, bringing them to level 22 and 21 respectively.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, the right-wing vanguard troop noticed a series of gigantic beehives hanging over one side of a cliff. Jeanny reported this to the others, Jack and John went over to take a look. The Man and Bowler also trailed alongside them.

'Is that...?' He asked Peniel in his mind.

"Yes, it is a monster settlement," Peniel's voice gave him the answer, affirming his guess. "Apparently, it was one formed by the Poisonous Giant Bees. Looking at the size, this one seemed to be of the normal-sized one."

Jack was ecstatic, he remembered the bountiful rewards that he had received from just a tiny-sized settlement. This one was two steps up, its rewards should be even more generous. With the help from the army, they should make short work on this settlement.

"There must be hundreds of monsters inside there, thousands perhaps. Great, let's head over and do battle!" The Man, as battle-crazed as ever, exclaimed.

"Are you crazy? We should avoid that!" Bowler expressed his disagreement.

"Spineless jerk," The Man mocked.

"Jackass!" Bowler shot back.

"Lively duo, aren't they?" John commented from beside Jack.

Jack was about to tell them about the monster settlement, which he thought should jack up their interest in engaging this monster settlement. But before he could tell the others of his thought, Captain Salem's words doused his excitement.

"We should take a slight detour, circle around that monster settlement," the captain said.

Chapter 324: Grim Sand Drake

"Why? I think our army can take care of that no problem," Jack protested.

"We can, but dealing with this monster settlement will take up a large amount of our time. We will not be able to finish them quickly. Not to mention there will be casualties when dealing with such a large force of monsters."

"Casualty is natural in battle. We should destroy this monster settlement or else they will become a problem to passing merchants or adventurers," Jack tried to persuade. He was unwilling to let go of this opportunity, not while he had the might of the army by his side.

"Under normal circumstances, yes, we should vanquish them, but we are on another mission. We should make haste, we can't afford to be tied down by this. We will deal with this on our way back after we finish our mission. I'm sure the Duke will agree as well."

Jack could not argue with that, he knew the Duke would also prioritize on hastening the journey rather than spend time dealing with this monster settlement. Since he could not persuade the army to engage this settlement, he could only mark the settlement's coordinates on his map. He would come back another time to deal with it, if it was still standing at that time.

Captain Salem relayed the existence of the monster settlement to the main army. The Duke, as expected, chose to deviate their course a bit to avoid the settlement.

Their journey was largely uneventful after. It did not mean that their journey was anyway boring though, they met various kinds of monsters which opened their eyes to the danger of the wilderness.

There were large slugs that could turn invisible, by the time the soldiers found out about it, those slugs were already attaching themselves onto the soldiers' bodies, sucking their HP. These monsters also inflicted Paralyze status on their victims. If the victim was alone, then these monsters would prove to be very problematic. Luckily there were many soldiers, the ones that saw their comrades got attacked by this slug immediately gave assistance. Good thing these slugs were easy to kill, it was a simple race of time whether they could kill the slug fast enough before the victim's HP was sucked dry.

There was also the Shadow Bat, which was on Jack's hunting list. These bats attacked at night when the army was at rest. They attacked at range using soundwaves, but the most problematic thing about them was that they were very difficult to see in the dark. Their bodies were constantly covered by black fog and blended with the darkness. Luckily the magic units of the army possessed the Illumination spell. A simple spell which only function was to light up the dark, it turned out to be very useful under such circumstances. Jack who also had this spell assisted by casting it at the place that was needed.

Bowler also had an exclusive spell which he had gotten as a member of the Church of Creation, which was highly effective against these bats. The spell was called Brilliant Radiance. It created an intense light that not only removed the fog covering the bats, but also caused them to go blind. And because the bats were categorized as darkness creatures, the spell also dealt them some damages.

One unfortunate thing was, that Bowler did not warn them before he cast this spell. As a result, not only the shadow bats went blind. All the others in the vicinity, players and NPC soldiers, were also blinded by that spell. Fortunately, the blinding effect lasted longer for the darkness creatures so the others recovered first before the bats.

After the battle was done, everyone had a lengthy talk with Bowler about his application of the spell.

There were also strange and dangerous environments. There was one time where they came into a huge valley where one of its sides was lined with floating gigantic roots. Captain Salem warned Jack and the others to not go underneath those roots. Peniel gave the same warning. As a healthily curious creature, Jack had to ask, why?

Instead of answering, Peniel redirected Jack's attention to an ox-like creature in the distance that was being chased by a lion-like monster. The ox-like creature was forced to run into the area underneath the giant roots. The lion-like monster, on the other hand, stopped before it went into the roots' shade. It did not dare to take another step inside. Jack soon saw why. A giant tree stump came down from the floating roots above and squashed the poor ox-like creature below.

Jack winced when he saw the happening. The stump slowly lifted up again, leaving the remaining of the creature which was no more than meat paste.

It was uneventful in the sense that those events and monsters did not pose a threat to the army. During that uneventful but not boring journey, the vanguard troops continued to laboriously collect exp points for the players.

It was on the first day of the second week in their journey that an eventful occurrence finally happened.

Jack had been wondering what would happen if they met an existence like the Land Behemoth. He doubted that numbers would give an advantage against a colossal monster like that. Maybe the army would need to retreat and went a different route like what they did with the monster settlement.

And then a similar existence appeared, he saw it on his radar. A large and dark red dot. The worse thing was, the dot was not slow like the Land Behemoth, it was moving rather fast, and headed towards them.

Not taking any chance, he immediately sent messages to John and Jeanny, "retreat! Retreat! Back to the main army!"

John and Jeanny both sent a confused reply, "why? What's wrong?"

"Just do it, damn it! There is no time to explain!"

He then gave the order for the center wing to immediately retreat. Captain Salem was similarly puzzled but he did not question Jack's command. He helped to organize an orderly retreat.

John and Jeanny saw the center wing moving back and knew that Jack was not kidding. The left and right wings followed suit and turned back.

Soon, the main army was in sight already. However, Jack's heart sank when he saw how close the red dot was. He looked back and saw the monster. It was an enormous reptilian creature.

"A dragon?" Jack exclaimed. The monster looked similar to a classic dragon. It had a reptile head with four large legs and a long tail, except it had no wings like the classic dragon. Its body was covered with crimson yellowish scale. There were spikes at the back of its head extended to all over its back. It was running on all four legs towards them.

His shout caused Captain Salem to look back as well.

"It's no dragon, it's a drake!" Captain Salem informed, then he said, "there is no time, we won't reach the main army before that drake arrived. Battle formation!"

There was no hesitation on the soldiers. They followed the command and quickly got into formation. The left and right wings had been traveling right beside them when they started to retreat, hence now all three wings had recombined into one army ready to face the drake.

The players stood behind the army. They looked at the approaching drake with trepidation. The monster looked even bigger now that it was getting closer.

"Crap! How are we going to fight that?" Bowler spoke out. "How about we retreat further? There is nothing we can do here anyway."

The Man gave him a glare, "I tolerate your cowardice at times, but not now!"

"I hate to agree with him, but I think he is right... this time," John offered his opinion.

"Take out your weapons!" Jack called out, he ignored those talks about retreating. The army was standing their ground, how could he left them behind.

The drake cried out a deafening roar as it charged closer. It was close enough for Jack to use an Inspect.

Grim Sand Drake (Rare Elite monster, Draconic), level 55

HP: 630.000

Okay, they were done for sure, Jack made a final thought.

As the Grim Sand Drake was about to crash into the army, a massive hammer made out of light suddenly appeared out of thin air. It smashed onto the drake's head, causing damage in the thousands and stopping its advance. The hammer then transformed into a large fist and punched at the drake's body. Pushing it back a large distance.

As everyone was astounded by what just transpired, they saw a human figure floating over them towards the drake.

"It's... It's the Duke!" Bowler exclaimed.

"He can fly?" The Man said.

The Duke stopped in the air above as he looked down at the Grim Sand Drake. The drake itself looked up with scorn. The attack just now had surprised it but it did not suffer any significant damage. It roared out loudly as if challenging the Duke.

Chapter 325: The Battle Between The Elites

'Everything should be fine, right? The Duke is a level 65 rare elite. A whole 10 levels higher, he should be able to deal with that drake without a problem, shouldn't he?' Jack asked Peniel.

"Not necessarily," Peniel replied. "It usually takes several humans to deal with same grade and same level monster. Not to mention this is a drake. Though it is not a true dragon, it is considered a lesser one. It had the bloodline of a dragon, which is the strongest of all monsters, crossing through its vein. The battle will not be easy."

The Grim Sand Drake made another roar before a cloud of yellow dust shot out from its mouth. The dust swirled with high speed at Duke Alfredo in the air.

The Duke twirled his left hand and a spell formation formed rapidly. A large rectangular Magic Wall was formed in front of the Duke. The yellow dust slammed at the Magic Wall which trembled significantly. Many cracks appeared on the Magic Wall but it stayed intact.

The Drake roared again, angry that its attack had failed.

'Luckily the Duke can fly. The drake can't do anything to him as long as he is in the air,' Jack said in his mind. 'Peniel, is that flying a spell too? Can I fly as well?'

"You can, so hurry up and level up," Peniel replied.

'Yeah! I am fired up!' Jack exclaimed inwardly. The anticipation to be able to soar the sky with such freedom was too hard to pass up.

Duke Alfredo made his move again. His two hands extended out and runes started forming on both sides.

Dual-casting? Jack thought after seeing it. The Duke also did not use any magic weapons like wands or staffs. However, his gloves had large gems attached to the back of his palm, which were now shining with unnatural light. Jack assumed those gloves were a substitute for the magic weapons.

The drake shot out another yellow dust at the Duke. Perhaps the Duke knew that his Magic Wall won't last another shot, so he flew away. Which was the right call, as the Magic Wall shattered after being hit by this second shot and spread out to where the Duke was a moment ago.

The residue of the drake's yellow dust fell to the ground and corroded it. A large stone that was touched by this residue started melting. Jack was alarmed by the sight. If that yellow dust hit him directly, he was sure that he would be gone in an instant. The soldiers which saw the sight instinctively and simultaneously took a uniformed step back.

Jack returned his attention to the Duke and saw that he had completed his spells. There were five runes on both the spell formations.

Crimson chains shot out from all around the Grim Sand Drake as one of the Duke's spells took effect. They spun around the drake and clamped themselves onto the drake's body, keeping it in place.

The Duke then cast his second spell. Hundreds of spears materialized around the drake and shot forward with high speed, impaling the drake all over its body, making it look like an extremely oversized porcupine.

There was no movement after that. Everybody was watching with bated breath. Then a low growl was heard from that mass of spears. Jack could feel the rage within that growl. A growl which slowly increased in intensity, and culminated into a thundering roar.

All the spears were shattered into particles as the body of the Grim Sand Drake was back into full view. The crimson chains holding it were stretched to the limit before they finally succumbed and broke into pieces.

The Grim Sand Drake stared at the floating Duke as its eyes glowed an eerie yellow. A surge of aura exploded out with the drake as its center. The Duke's body suddenly plummeted as the aura encompassed him.

"Gravity pull!" Jack heard Peniel's voice.

'The drake can use magic?' Jack asked.

"Dragon can. Drake is part dragon, so some of them possessed a few magical abilities too."

The Duke tried to fight the pull as his body slowed its descent, but he was having a problem just to maintain the altitude, much less casting a spell.

The Grim Sand Drake was waiting down there with its maw open wide, ready to gobble the Duke up.

As the Duke was in a critical situation, Jack saw several figures rushed out with their mounts from the side. He looked over and found the one leading was Commander Quintus. There were four of them. They dismounted once they entered the Gravity Pull area of effect, as their mounts could not proceed any further.

Jack wondered if they would be okay. Although the commander was at a higher level than the Grim Sand Drake, he was one grade lower than the monster. The others should be around the same level and grade as the Commander.

Three of them rushed ahead to meet the Drake head-on while the fourth who was a female stayed outside the area. She pulled out a very large bow and started releasing arrows. Each of the arrows shot had sparks of lightning following it. Every time an arrow hit, a lightning bolt came down from the sky and struck the exact same spot.

The three that attempted to engage the drake in melee, layers of golden plates suddenly came down from the sky and enfolded their bodies. Jack looked up and saw the high priest Laurent who was also floating in the sky. The golden plates came from him. The golden plates absorbed damages that were inflicted on the three melee NPCs engaging the drake.

Laurent cast another spell. Ring of light encircled the Duke. The strong pull that kept him anchored was suddenly no more. He immediately flew higher. He said to the others, "hold it down for a few minutes!"

The Duke pointed both his palm to the sky. Runic symbol started forming slowly above him.

It's huge! Jack thought after seeing the beginning of the rune that was still forming in the sky. What kind of spell was that? Why was the rune so big?

On the land, Commander Quintus and the others kept the Grim Sand Drake busy. The commander was using a two-handed long blade as a weapon. The blade was so long that it was even longer than the commander's body if measured from head to toe. Yet, the commander handled it with great fluidity.

Jack remembered when he sparred with the commander. At that time, the commander was using a simple long stick. That stick could be considered short if looking at his current weapon.

There was a time when the Grim Sand Drake forcefully snapped its maw at the commander. Jack thought at the time that the commander was sure to enter the drake's stomach already. But when the maw clamped close, the commander's body disappeared as several black shadows appeared all around the drake's head. These shadows slashed at the drake with light speed before combining back into the commander who was unscathed.

Damn, that was one cool skill! Jack exclaimed in his mind. He wondered if he could ask the commander to teach him the skill.

'Hey Peniel! Can a native teach a skill to an outworlder?'

"No," Peniel's voice replied shortly.

Dang, such a pity!

"But if you have a high scroll-making skill, at least master grade, or find someone who is. You can ask that person to work with the native to create a technique book, which then you can learn the skill from said book. Of course, that is considering that the native is willing to go through the troublesome process of making that book."

'Oh, so it is not an impossibility. Okay, I will keep that in mind,' Jack said.

"By the way, do you plan to steal the final hit again like last time?" Peniel asked.

'Do you mean kill-steal? Do you think I am crazy? With that thing's level and grade, I doubt if I can give it any damage even if I use my strongest attack. Unless the Duke purposefully left its life hanging by 1 HP, and holds that thing long enough for me to get near, there is no way I can kill-steal. One sneeze from it is enough to kill me.'

"Good. I guess there is still hope for you," Peniel commented.

The heck, did she really thought of him as that reckless? Jack thought.

Laurent who was in the sky kept on casting support spells on the combatants below, occasionally healing them if they were wounded. In the meantime, the Duke continued to form the gigantic spell formation.

There were already five completed runes on that bloody thing, the sixth one was in progress. How many runes were needed for that spell? Not to mention the lines and symbols inside the runes were much more complicated than the normal ones. It was even more complex than the trial spell formation which Janus had given him.

Chapter 326: The Expedition Resumed

The drake spewed out its yellow toxic again. Commander Quintus managed to anticipate the drake's attack and ran away from the affected area before the yellow dust hit. His two other comrades were not so lucky.

One of them who was holding a large shield put the shield in front of him, but the shield could be seen to deteriorate rapidly. It was as if the shield went through an accelerated decomposing process. A process where the change could be visibly witnessed.

The other one suffered even worse, as he had no shield to protect himself. He was a light armor combatant who used two tomahawk axes as weapons. He was screaming in pain as the yellow dust covered his entire body. Jack could see his HP bar going down rapidly.

When everyone thought he was a goner. A thick stream of light washed down at him. It was a recovery spell cast by Laurent. The man's HP bar was locked in the middle as the healing provided by the spell balanced out the devouring effect from the yellow dust.

The yellow dust soon receded. The one with the large shield threw away his shield as it was no longer usable. Even his thick armors were full of holes. The one with the tomahawk axe fell to his knees in exhaustion. His life had been saved by Laurent spells, but his HP was only one-third left.

"Everyone move aside!" The Duke's voice resonated above them. Jack looked up and saw seven large runes rotating above.

Commander Quintus came and helped his comrade with the axe to move away. The others also backed away with haste.

The Grim Sand Drake sensed the power of the spell and looked above. Before the Duke could release his spell, the drake abruptly turned downward and burrowed into the ground with impossible speed. In an instant, the drake disappeared from everyone's view.

Did the Duke's spell scare it away? This was the thought on everyone's mind, except for Jack. He watched in dread as the red dot in his radar came closer. It was not running away, it was targeting the weak soldiers instead!

"Everyone, disperse!" Jack called out as he started running.

Everyone was startled by Jack's unforeseen command, and confused by it.

"Move! Now!" Jack bellowed when he saw them not moving.

Sensing the urgency of Jack's tone, John and the others started to run following after him. Captain Salem also gave out the command. The vanguard troops parted into two separate divisions, one going left, another going right.

Though puzzled by the command, the soldiers were disciplined enough to carry out the command with haste. They heard a sudden rumble at their back as they were making their way, and felt the faint tremor on their feet. The tremor getting stronger by the seconds. They turned back and saw the ground where they were standing some time ago, broke apart and the Grim Sand Drake burst out from underneath.

The Grim Sand Drake looked around, befuddlement on its eyes. It was expecting many of the weak humans at this place. Though it was a beast, it carried the blood of a dragon, so it had a certain amount of intelligence. It knew itself was in danger when the Duke completed his spell, and was planning to cause havoc amongst the weak soldiers. If it was within the mass of humans, the human flying above would not carelessly throw his spell at it.

Seeing the Grim Sand Drake resurfaced and the soldiers were out of danger, the Duke cast his spell at this time. An enormous prismatic construct of multiple colors fell upon the drake. The prism was large enough to cover the drake's gargantuan body and still left some spaces around.

The drake's body became sluggish, as numbers after numbers of damages appeared above it every second.

"Everyone, attack!" The Duke shouted out.

Awakened from their daze by the Duke's shout, all the range soldiers started throwing attacks at the Grim Sand Drake inside the prism. The female archer who was with commander Quintus also shot her arrows at the drake. Jack noticed that the damage the arrows inflicted was higher than the previous times.

Apart from immobilizing and damaging the drake, the prism also weakened its defense, Jack thought.

Not wanting to get left behind, Jack also rushed forward and cast his Arcane Turbulence at the drake. Other players except for the melee class joined in the attack. The Man and his underlings were gloomy again, why are they the most useless ones in this entire expedition? They thought.

Laurent cast another spell which caused the entire battlefield to be bathed by glimmering lights. Jack and the other players received notification that they had received a buff that increased their damage output.

Such a wide-scale buff spell, Jack wondered if the player's healer branches would get access to such spell.

The Grim Sand Drake's massive HP pool went down in a rapid manner. It tried to retaliate several times by spewing its deadly yellow dust at the surrounding soldiers. Everyone was terrified at first when it did that, but the yellow dust was blocked by the prism.

The Duke's spell allowed outside attacks to pass inside, but preventing the inside attacks from going out. It even prevented the drake from escaping. When it tried to ram itself on the prism wall, it was as if it had hit an extremely hard wall.

It could only ransack its surroundings in frustration.

When its HP was down to around 30%, it suddenly stopped moving about. Everyone thought it had given up, but its scale slowly turned red. Reddish smoke was exuded from its body. Its eyes glowed bright red this time. An explosion burst out from where the drake was. The prism shook heavily from the explosion.

The prism still managed to hold the force from the explosion. If it was released outside, Jack had no doubt everyone out here would have been obliterated. Yet, there were many cracks on the surface of the prism.

"Move back!" The Duke warned. He probably knew his spell could no longer hold the drake after its last outburst.

As if to make his point, the prism shattered. The multi-colored pieces of the prism fell to the ground before dissipating. Everyone looked at the Grim Sand Drake with apprehension as they took several steps back. Commander Quintus rushed forward, intend to hold the monster while everyone was retreating. The Duke started to prepare another spell.

The Grim Sand Drake gave the Duke one scorned look, before turning down and burrowing itself into the ground again.

Once the drake disappeared into the ground, Jack immediately looked at his radar. He was ready to turn tail again if he saw the red dot coming his way. This time, however, the red dot went away to where it came from originally, away from the army.

After making sure on his radar that the monster had truly fled, Jack finally exhaled a relieved breath. But he also felt a sense of pity, if they had managed to kill the drake, the players would at least receive some experience points since they and the vanguard troops delivered some damages to it as well. Not to mention NPCs did not take interest in the drops from monsters, so the items dropped by the drake should it be killed would be all up for them to take.

"Huh?" He just realized by now that everyone was looking at him. It took him a while before he realized the reason. He had been the one that had detected the monster's movement after it went into the ground, so everyone was expecting him to tell them of its position again.

"It has left," Jack told them.

The soldiers looked at each other, they were still anxious if Jack was wrong and that the drake might suddenly erupt from underneath them.

The Duke flew down next to Jack, followed by Laurent. "It's a good thing you warned everybody. Otherwise, there would have been lots of casualties," he said.

"Good work, lad," Laurent added.

Jack felt slightly abashed. He was simply taking advantage of his God-eye monocle's radar. "The troops' safety is my responsibility, too," Jack finally responded after trying to think about what was the proper thing to say in this situation.

"Very good, it was the right decision to let you bear the command of this vanguard troop," the Duke said.

Ah, he ended up with more praise, even though most he did the entire time was running away from the Drake, Jack thought.

"You praise me too much," Jack said sincerely.

The main army had almost arrived at this time. The Duke floated up and surveyed the area one more time to make sure the threat had gone. He then declared to the others, "let's resume the expedition!" Before flying back to the main army. Commander Quintus and the others also went back with him.

After they left, the vanguard troop rearranged their formation back to before they were assaulted by the drake. They look at Jack with eagerness as they shouted at the same time, "awaiting orders, sir!"

Chapter 327: Worries

Jack was taken aback by the yell. The heck? He thought.

"Hehe, you seemed to have gotten their loyalty," Captain Salem who stood beside him said to him.

Jack looked again at the faces of the soldiers. Though they had always carried out his commands all this time, it was all because of their self-control and military disciplines. Now he could feel their zeals. Although they had failed to kill the Grim Sand Drake for its loots, perhaps its assault still brought a benefit to him.

"Alright, let us proceed forward!" Jack gave his command.

"Sir, yes, sir!" The soldiers replied.

'By the way, are all spells with seven runes are that massive and powerful? Only casting that one spell can already almost score us a victory against that terrifying drake,' Jack asked Peniel in his mind once they resumed their journey.

"No, that spell the duke cast was not a normal spell. It was categorized as Mega Spell," Peniel answered.

'Mega spell? What's the difference?'

"You can identify such spells from the size and complexity of its runes. Even for one of Duke's caliber, he still needs several minutes to cast the spell. This shows how special the spell is."

That was true, Jack thought. The duke could simultaneously cast two five-runes spells with ease, but when it came to that mega spell, he took his time.

"Mega spells only appeared for spells with five-runes spell formation or above," Peniel continued her explanation. "But these mega spells are really rare. Even the factions had very few of such spells to offer. You need to be very high in ranking and possessed tons of points in order to get them. Otherwise, you could only hope to get them from the wilderness, but the chance of finding them is minuscule."

'Never mind, I don't think I have much use of such spells if they took that long to cast.'

"There are three ways to increase the casting speed of mega spells. The first is the old-fashioned way, you train until you get used to it, but the speed you can improve is limited. The second is casting a mega spell that is way below your ability. Like for example casting a five-runes mega spell when you are already adept at casting a nine-runes normal spell. The third, the most favorite one and also the most efficient for mega spells, is cooperative casting."

'Cooperative? You mean as in multiple mages casting the same spell?'

"Technically, that is correct. Although the implementation is more complex than simply casting the same spell. They have to stand in formation and one caster needs to handle at least one rune. The same rune cannot be formed by different casters. Also, their speed of forming the runes cannot be too far different from one another. Still though, this third method is easier said than done. It is the most difficult to achieve amongst the three."

'How so?'

"Because can you imagine the fortune of finding the same mega spell technique book multiple times to allow multiple people to learn it?"

'Oh...'

"Exactly. Don't worry about it. It is still beyond your capability. You have not even mastered forming that measly five-runes trial spell from Janus, thinking about mega spell is ludicrous."

'Thank you for your optimism,' Jack said sarcastically.

The rhythm of the expedition was back again to the usual eventless yet not boring journey. The experience points accumulation continued as the vanguard troops served their function, with much better efficiency since the soldiers were more enthusiastic this time.

They vanquished another two of the monsters from Jack's list, Vanishing Lemur and Eight-legged Mare.

The Vanishing Lemur was as its name suggested, it could turn invisible. But unlike the invisible giant slug from before, these lemurs were noisy as hell, which kind of defeat their own special ability. One could determine their position from their sounds. Once they were hit, their invisibility coat would cease to work. They needed to break off from combat before they could turn invisible again.

Although their voices betrayed their positions, there were a great number of them. When a mass of these Lemurs turned invisible with their noises coming from every direction, it would still be a very intimidating experience. It's a good thing the soldiers were not easily affected. The ones with shields

formed a solid line of wall in the direction of the noises, while the mages and archers bombarded the area in front. Once the Lemurs turned visible again, the melee units swooped in and finished them off.

The Eight-legged Mares were more troublesome. Their extra legs were not just for show. They possessed the fastest speed Jack had seen on normal monsters, almost as fast as the Ice Troll Sentinel Jack had fought. Their pattern of attack involved running around their opponents until they saw an opportunity, then they blitz in and struck using their four front legs. They could also occasionally discharged small electrical range attacks. These attacks caused little damage but they paralyzed their targets, which made them vulnerable for their blitz attacks.

The vanguard troops were at a disadvantage at first fighting these monsters, but then John instructed his left-wing vanguard troop to gather into a circular pattern with the shield units at the outer layer, forming a turtle-shell formation. This would leave the troops with no weak spot that the mares could exploit.

When the mares lost their patience and decided to still come with their blitz attacks, Mages who hide in safety from the back of the shield units would use Magic Bind to hold them in place. Magic Bind was an advanced spell, so most of the Mage soldiers possessed them as well. Once the mares' mobility was taken away, they were easy to be disposed of.

Jack and Jeanny soon copied his method in dealing with the mares.

Although the journey could be said as smooth, Jack was having a worried expression the entire time. The reason was due to the large dark red dot on his radar. It was that Grim Sand Drake, it was stalking them.

At first, Jack thought that it was because they were still within its territory. But two days had passed already, they were already some distance away from where they fought the drake. Yet it still doggedly stayed with them. It did not attack though, it kept itself at a safe distance. Jack could not help but thought that the monster might have borne a grudge against them.

'Another monster with an emotion,' Jack thought. Only emotion would drive this kind of behavior. Normal monsters would have left them alone after getting beaten back.

Jack had reported this to the Duke. The Duke told him to just let it be unless it decided to attack. Even if they chased after it, it could easily escape again like last time. They could not waste their time dealing with it. The Duke believe it would eventually lose interest in them after some time.

The Duke estimated by tomorrow they should be arriving at the border town of Thesewal to resupply. He believed by then, the drake would have stopped following them. High-grade monsters such as the drake usually avoided cities and towns.

Jack did not carry the same optimism, but since his power was limited, he could just follow along.

On that night, when everybody had gone into their tents for rest, Jack stayed up outside as he did his regular spell-formation training. He could now better concentrate on forming three runes at the same time, though the speed was still slow.

"It was almost midnight. Why are you staying up so late?" Peniel asked him.

'Can't sleep,' Jack answered.

"You are still worried about the drake?" Peniel asked him when he sensed his uneasiness.

'Well, that and another thing.'

"Another thing? What other thing?"

'... This chain quest of mine.'

"What about it?"

'Remember when I first received the quest, we both thought we are going to need a lot of time to deal with this quest? Something like two years? But hey, the fragments had been merged and we are heading to a destination that might be the end of the quest. It's only just a bit more than one month since then. I'm only a few levels stronger than then. How do I expect to complete this friggin SSS quest?'

"Hm... That's true. Your prospect is bleak."

'As usual, thank you for your vote of confidence,' Jack replied forlornly.

"Come on, it's not like you have to do this quest by yourself. Just stay with the Duke and don't do anything reckless, and you should be okay. You don't have to force yourself to complete it. Maybe you will have another chance after you become stronger," Peniel tried to reassure him.

'Perhaps. Or perhaps this quest only provide this single chance of completion. Miss completing it during this expedition might mean failing it.'

"Now who is being pessimistic?"

'Sigh, you are right. If there is nothing I can do about it, I shouldn't worry about it too much. I will just do my best,' Jack said after collecting his thoughts.

"Now that's more like it," Peniel said. "Furthermore..."

'Hm? What's on your mind.'

"To tell you the truth, I think there is something unusual about your chain quest."

Chapter 328: Arriving At Thesewal

'What's so unusual?'

"As I have mentioned before, quest with that kind of difficulty is impossible to appear at this stage. Furthermore, even though I said the SSS difficulty is representing the total quest as a whole and not its individual quest, the ones you have completed are still way too easy to be a part of the SSS chain quest. So, there is a chance that the difficulty designated here is a blunder."

'Huh? Is such a thing possible? Do you mean like a bug?'

"What bug? Why bring up insect all of a sudden?"

'No, I mean, like glitches... Mistake! Yes, do you mean there has been a mistake on my quest description? Is such a thing possible?'

"I would say no. But after being with you all this time, seeing all those alien entities, I'm not so sure anymore. There are things at work here that I have no knowledge of. Which irritates me, you know? Since I am supposed to know everything."

'Listening to you, it reminds me again about the time when I first met you.'

"What about it?"

'The Goddess Serenity, she mentioned that there are dark forces in this world that have tried to get rid of her. That it was these forces that were responsible for imprisoning her in the first place. At first, I thought that she being imprisoned and I being there to save her was some kind of a main quest's storyline that was made by the developers of this game world.'

"What is a developer?"

'Uh... Creator, the creator of this world.'

"Okay."

'Right, back to it. Now after I think about it. Me going to the place where the goddess was imprisoned was a total fluke, There was no quest to guide me nor any clue that point me in that direction. I was simply trying to find out what has caused the change to my world and was simply blindly chasing for an explanation. Furthermore, the place where the Goddess was imprisoned was guarded by a high-level and high-grade guardian monster that was impossible to be defeated by any player during that Tutorial Period.'

Jack did not mention that apart from that guardian monster, he could enter the room where the Goddess was imprisoned was also due to him possessing the Administrator Key-card, one which he had gotten from the poor sod who was killed, from whom he also had gotten the God-eye monocle and the item that gave him his second class.

Now that he thought about it, he was pretty sure that he was not meant to come upon the room with the Goddess and was not meant to free her. Whether the fact that he did was a good thing or a bad thing, he was not sure. He would hope it was a good thing. The Goddess seemed like a very nice lady. She had given him many great things, including Peniel.

"Hey, I can sense your feeling but I can't hear your thought if you don't project it at me. You are pondering about something?" Peniel complained.

'I'm sorry. What I'm trying to say is, that there might be as the Goddess had said. There are dark forces at work, something the Goddess was fighting against.'

"And you think this chain quest of yours is connected to these dark forces?"

'I don't know. Maybe? What I know is that the Goddess imprisonment had something to do with what you called alien entities. Such as my second class and this monocle I'm wearing. And since the trigger of this chain quest was also what you called an alien entity, perchance it is somehow connected?'

"That was quite a long stretch, but a good one. Are you trying to make up a reason to give you more confidence in doing this quest?"

'Ah, you got me there. All right then, I guess I will go take a rest now. No use to worry about these things too much. We will deal with them as they come.'

On the next day, Jack checked his radar and saw the Grim Sand Drake was still following them. There was nothing he could do about it. He just continued to pay attention to his radar, he would give out an alert sign once the drake made its move at them.

The Duke told him to inform Captain Salem if the drake is about to attack them. The captain had given him some kind of a tool that would send a sign in the air to warn everyone. Jack thought the tool was similar in function to the flare gun from his real world.

During their morning trip, they fought against another monster in Jack's hunting list, the Bewitching Spider. The monster's appearance was an overgrown tarantula. It had hair all over their bodies. Its attacks mainly in melee, its bite caused Poison status effect in addition to another new effect, Charmed. One affected by this Charmed effect experienced hallucination and would start to attack their own allies.

It also possessed range attacks that shot out silky web which bound its target's movements for a short time. Overall, the monsters posed not much threat to the vanguard troops. They only need to watch out for any soldiers that got the Charmed effect and quickly restrained said soldiers before they wreak havoc amongst the troops.

They traveled for half a day more before they reached the border town of Theseval.

Looking at the town from the top of a hill not far from the town, Jack could see this town to be much smaller in size than the capital Thereath. However, the walls surrounding it appeared to be as sturdy, if not sturdier than the capital's walls.

As they went closer, Jack could see a series of rune diagrams carved onto the walls. Commander Quintus explained to him that despite their small size, such border towns had protection as good as the largest city in the country. This was because they might need to defend themselves from an invasion of foreign forces.

Jack could also see several battalions in patrol in the area around the town. One such battalion approached their vanguard troops. Captain Salem went forward and showed his identification. The battalion then led them towards the town. They waited outside the town entrance for the main army to arrive.

All along the journey until this town which lasted around a week and a half, the players had reaped massive benefits. Every one of them had increased their levels with a record-breaking speed. Half of them were already level 25, with the other half at level 24. Jack himself had his Warrior level at 24 while his Mage at 23.

Jack had a stock of 14 free attribute points and 8 free skill points for both his Warrior and Mage classes. He decided to use them all. He dumped all his free attribute points to his Reflex. His previous 91 reflex points were boosted to 105 points. Now all his attributes except for luck were in three digits.

For the 8 Warrior skill points, he invested them all into Flash Step, bringing the skill to level 11. He could now instantly move to a maximum distance of 4.5 meters away with the skill, adding versatility in his maneuver. The stamina needed was increased to 15 though, a 50% increase.

For the 8 Mage skill points, he put them all into Body Double. After experiencing its effectiveness in the battle at Crestfall Plain, he thought it was time to strengthen this skill. It was now level 9 and his doppelganger could now last for 13 minutes long. His MP cost was increased to 65.

When Bowler asked about his level, Jack informed him honestly. John who heard, asked, "how come your level is among the lower of the team when before you are among the highest? Wait! Don't tell me. Are the experiences you received divided between your two classes? Hahaha! Doesn't that mean as long as we are in the same party, we will eventually leave you in the dust?"

The bugger didn't even bother to wait for him to confirm his hypothesis. Yet, his guess was spot on. Still, it didn't make it less annoying. Jack turned to Jeanny, "Jeanny, can you do me a favor and kick him out of the party?"

John laughed more instead, "hahaha. It was precisely because Jeanny is the leader that I dare to make a mockery out of you, because I know that Jeanny is not the type to..."

He suddenly went quiet.

"It's done," Jeanny said.

"Wahahaha!" It was Bowler who was laughing his ass off now. "Serve you right, you prick!"

"Sister Jeanny, I never pegged you as a person who liked to joke. This joke is a bit too excessive...", John said to Jeanny.

"Will you behave yourself?" Jeanny asked.

"I will," John nodded like a child who had just been reprimanded.

Jeanny then invited him back to the party.

Chapter 329: Maxing The Basic Skills

Apart from the enormous experience increases, they also received a bountiful harvest from monster drops. The monsters mowed down by the vanguard troops were substantial. Almost all of the players never stopped picking up the loots as the soldiers mowed down the monsters.

Even after being divided between the twenty-five of them, each player still received 26 gold coins and 59 silver coins. Jack now had 116 gold coins. There were also numerous common and uncommon equipment, ingredients, materials, and trophy loots which they divided equally. Sadly, no rare grade items though. The trophy loots themselves might fetch more coins when they turned the loots to the Hunters Association.

Regarding equipped weapons and armors, none in the party was using any common grade equipment anymore, all wore at least uncommon equipment.

They also gained Mana Cores which none of them knew what they were for, including Jack, since Peniel was still not telling. They still divided these cores equally though. Each of them received 58 mana cores. Jack's stock was now 80 mana cores.

All in all, everyone was glad that Jack had invited them into this expedition.

For Jack himself, his Cooking and Blacksmith auxiliary skill had also received improvements. As he was cooking and repairing durabilities for almost half the players. A few others helped as well, but Jack did most of them. The others just thought of him as a workaholic, but it was because he felt he had neglected these auxiliary skills for some time.

With the help of his Hard-working Achiever title, His Cooking skill increased to Advanced Apprentice. His Blacksmith skill still needed a little more points to increase. After the long days of continuously in a party, Jack's Leadership and Teamwork skill had also increased to Intermediate Apprentice. Now he could form a party with a maximum of thirty members.

There was, however, a surprising increase in another of his auxiliary skill, the Diplomacy skill, which increased to Intermediate Apprentice. These social auxiliary skills did not inform players when they gained proficiency, so he never knew if any of it was improving, just like his Leadership and Teamwork skill. Jack asked Peniel about it and she explained that this Diplomacy skill was increased by interacting with the natives. Jack had been communicating frequently with Captain Salem and the other NPC soldiers during the journey. This must have been what contributed to the increase.

He also asked Peniel what effect a high-grade Diplomacy had. The Fairy informed him that an increase in Diplomacy skill would increase the rewards from quests and could also affect a native's reaction to some extent.

Jack did not neglect to increase the proficiencies of his battle skills as well. He could not use many of his melee skills because he could not engage in a direct battle with those high-level monsters, but he was still free to use his Mage skills from a distance. As a result, his Energy Bolts and Heightened State had increased to the second star, while his Arcane Turbulence had increased to its first star. The first star of the Arcane Turbulence added a 10% increase on the area of effect of the spell. The spell now covered an area with a radius of 6.6 meters.

He had also continuously been using his Flash Step skill even though it was not needed. His constant shifting of positions due to the skill even caused some soldiers to complain, as it distracted them. Due to his diligent training, this Flash Step skill had upgraded to its first star. The star increased the effect of the afterimage left behind after the skill activation. The afterimage was now a more clear image compared to its previous blurry one, increasing the chance for the enemy to be deceived.

Yet, the most abundant reward was the soul points. The other gains were divided equally amongst the party, but the souls were all monopolized by him. Too bad the Container of Souls' scope of effect was not large enough to cover all three vanguard troops, but the souls reaped by the center wing was already very large.

The total soul points he had reaped within these eleven days were 86200 souls. It was enough to upgrade the advanced class 8 times or the basic class 86 times! After much thought, he decided to use them to strengthen his basic classes first.

He used 68000 souls to fully level up his Parry, Swing, Mana Bullet, Magic Shield, and Energy Bolts to level 20.

Parry, level 20/20 (Trigger skill, require melee weapon), star: 2

Damage received is reduced by 90% when the attack is blocked using a weapon

Swing, level 20/20 (Active skill, melee, require melee weapon), star: 2

Deal 220% physical damage to all enemies in a fan shape directly in front of the player

Stamina consumed: 25

Cooldown: 10 seconds cooldown

Mana bullet, level 20/20 (Active skill, range, require magic weapon), star: 2

Deal 400% magic damage

Range: 12 meters

Mana consumed: 24

Cooldown: 5 seconds

Magic Shield, level 20/20 (Active skill, melee, require magic weapon), star: 2

Create a shield in front of the equipped magic weapon. Serve as a shield with defense affected by intelligence stat.

Mana consumed: 3 each second

Energy Bolts, level 20/20 (Active skill, range, require magic weapon), star: 2

Create 8 homing magic bolts that deals 160% magic damage for each bolt

Range: 15 meters

Mana consumed: 30

Cooldown: 54 seconds

All the skills provided clear information on the increased effect of the level, except for Magic Shield, but Jack assumed his Magic Shield should be better at defense at his max level now. Too bad there was no more hidden reward like the last time when he received a Title after max-leveling his Power Strike skill.

He still had 18,000 soul points left. He was divided on upgrading the Natural Body Recovery or the Heightened State skill. After some thought, he used 8000 souls to level up the Heightened State skill. This skill provided him more assistance during a battle compared to Natural Body Recovery which only took effect after a battle was over.

Heightened State, level 11/20 (Active skill), star: 2

Increase mana regeneration by 60%

decrease skill cooldown by 24%

Duration: 4 minutes 40 seconds

Cooldown: 10 minutes

The remaining 10,000 souls left he intended to use for one advanced skill. He was just about to use them for his Sword of Light skill when Peniel interrupted him, "use it to level up your Body Double skill one more time."

"Why? Leveling up that skill only increases its duration. Another one-minute duration is not too useful. I wanted to power up my Sword of Light."

"Just do it, trust me," Peniel insisted.

Jack did trust the fairy, so he did as she asked.

Body Double, level 10/20 (Active skill), star: 1

Create two copies of self, cannot attack, cannot be attacked.

Can switch place with original body, copies will be destroyed after activating second switching.

Duration: 14 minutes

Cooldown: 1 hour

Mana: 50

'Two copies?' Jack asked after reading the description.

"Yes, every ten levels will add another copy," Peniel replied. "So if you max this spell. You will have three copies which you can switch around with. If you can max its stars as well, you can switch around those three copies a lot of times. This will confuse your opponents immensely. Now you understand why I asked you to pick this spell in the past, right?"

'Yes, yes. You were certainly correct to do that. Did I thank you before for asking me to get this spell?'

"No, you did not."

'Well, thank you!'

"Hmph, damn right you should!" Peniel exclaimed.

When the main army arrived, Commander Quintus instructed the army to build a camp outside of the town. There were not enough lodgings to accommodate the entire soldiers of the expedition. Only the Duke and his top retainers would stay inside the town. The commander informed them to take this time to rest, they would depart again in two days. The Commander also advised them that it might take at least another five days more of travel before they reached the Temple of Divine Squall which was their destination.

The Duke invited Jack and the other players to follow him into the town. The town's gate was manned by many soldiers that performed rigorous checkings. Jack assumed this town was not open to the public. They might not be able to enter it if they came by themselves.

Inside the town, it was not as crowded and lively as the capital. In fact, it was rather tranquil. Most of the occupants were soldiers. This town was like a big military base. There were only a handful of hawkers and most of what they sold were primary necessities.

The other players asked if they could check out the town. Commander Quintus let them go but warned them that several areas were restricted. These areas usually had soldiers guarding them, the commander asked them to pay attention, and not to cause any trouble. There was an inn near the town gate they just passed, the Commander told them to stay there for the night. The accommodation had been paid for by the Duke.

Jack was about to excuse himself to follow his friends when the Commander asked him to follow. He had no choice but to comply.

Chapter 330: Watchers From The Distant

Some of the NPCs following the Duke into the town also went away to do their own things. Only Duke Alfredo, Prince Alonzo, Lieutenant Bailey, Commander Quintus, and High Priest Laurent stayed together as they headed to the largest building at the center of the town. Jack assumed it to be the town hall.

Jack just trailed behind all these NPC big shots.

Not bad, he thought. They could be said as the equivalent of high-ranking government officials in his real world. He would not have this kind of experience if it was the real world. Now it was as if he was also one of these important people.

"There is a smug smile on your face," Peniel commented.

"Don't disturb me. Let me enjoy the moment," Jack replied.

Not far away from the border town of Theseval, two hulking figures were laying low as they observed the army that had arrived in front of the town. The two wore straw coats that covered their entire bodies, with a large straw hat that provided cover to their head. People would have to come closer in order to have a clear look at their faces.

If someone did, they would be frightened into a run, because the faces under these straw hats were not human ones. Their skins were dark greenish and rough. Their noses were large and their mouths were wider than human's, with two small tusks jutting out from their bottom jaws.

One of these figures was looking through a long round tool like a spyglass. He uttered some words to his partner, who then took out a paper from his pockets and started writing. The partner then activated a device that created a small wormhole. He rolled the paper and threw it into the wormhole before it closed and disappeared.

He then returned his attention to the resting army not far away, continuing his watch.

At a sand dune far away from border town Theseval, a large humanoid creature with the same features as the two watchers outside of the border town, stood and gazed at a sea of combatants below. Everyone was lined up neatly as they wait for his order. All of them had the same dark greenish skin and tusked mouth like him.

A dark wormhole suddenly materialized not far from him, a small roll of paper fell from the wormhole onto the sandy ground. He walked over and picked up the paper. As he read the content, his aide came over to his side.

"Warlord, is that a message from the scouts we sent to that border town?" The aide asked.

The warlord who was reading the paper crumpled it after he finished reading. He said, "it is. And that intelligence that was given by the human envoy was true. There was indeed a large force coming to that town. And from the direction, they should be heading into this region, as what that human envoy had informed."

"Can this be a trap? Why would they let us know about their own movement? They must have set this up hoping that we deliver ourselves into their hands."

The warlord chuckled, his voice was deep and reverberating, "You overestimated their race too much. Although they claimed to be under one kingdom, they had many clans within as well, especially amongst the princes who hoped to succeed the current ruler. The one that delivered the intelligence was from the second prince camp. The army that came to the border town is from the third prince one."

"How do you know which clans that envoy and this army are from?"

"Because I pried the information from the envoy himself, right until he could not bear to suffer anymore and begged for his death. As for the army, it was easier. The third prince himself was amongst them. Our scout had confirmed it."

"So the second prince wants to use us to annihilate his opposition? Does he think us his mercenary?"

The warlord chuckled again. "He does," he said. "Nevertheless, if we can cut down a force of Themisphere, it will be a huge glory. A force of a prince some more, our tribe will gain a great deal of honor if we can bring the prince's head with us. Our Lord Chief might have the chance to become the Grand Chief in the election this year. We cannot pass this opportunity."

"My warlord is wise. Then we shall prepare for war."

"Wait until they entered this region. It will serve as a better reason for conflict. They will not be able to accuse us of invading. This will also confirm if the intelligence that their army is heading into this region is true."

"I understand. I will make sure that our troops are prepared."

The guards of the Town Hall took the Duke's team directly into the main hall of the building. Inside there, several armed guards were having a discussion. When the Duke's entourage entered, the lead man in armor stood up and approached them.

The guy was a rough-looking man with a broad shoulder and a mustache. Jack felt the man looked oddly familiar.

"I have been expecting you. It's an honor to have you here, Duke Alfredo. I am Guss, the base commander and acting mayor of this town," the guy introduced himself.

Guss? It took a moment for the name to register. He then opened up his quest list.

Yep, this Guss was the one in his League of Champion faction quest, which was given by Gruff. Now he knew why he thought this Guss guy looked familiar. He and Gruff were very much alike, Jack figured they must be related.

"Is this..." Guss was hesitant when he looked at Prince Alonzo.

"This is Prince Alonzo," the Duke informed him.

"My apologies! I failed to recognize your highness. I deserve a punishment!" Guss said with a bow.

Very unlike Gruff, Jack said in his mind. This guy was way too formal, unlike that ruffian.

Prince Alonzo laughed at Guss' response. "There was no need for an apology, commander Guss. I rarely went out to socialize with officials, it is normal for you to not recognize me. Please don't treat me any differently. I am here to learn."

Guss nodded. He dismissed the other officers and invited the Duke's team to take their seats. Duke Alfredo then introduced the others to Guss. Guss' gaze lingered a while at Jack when the Duke informed him that Jack was an outworlder. The Duke and Commander Quintus exchanged pleasantries with him for a while. Jack just sat there boringly.

This was tedious, he thought.

Jack almost fell asleep when these politicians finally finished their chit-chats and started talking about important matters. Guss activated a device that generated a holographic map above them.

"I have sent scouts along the route to this ruins you mentioned," Guss informed them. "Mostly there is no problem. The monsters are pretty docile this time of the year. Sandstorms are also less frequent. All you need to make sure is to have enough supplies for the army. As you can see from the map, most of Fulgur region is dominated by desert. It will be difficult to find food and water once you enter this region."

Food and water. Jack wondered if the players would die from hunger or thirst. They still experienced them. They still ate food and drank water from time to time, but no one ever experimented about what would happen if a player stopped taking nourishment.

The Duke nodded. "That is why we stopped here. I hope you have prepared enough supply for us to bring for one round trip to the ruins."

"There is no need to worry, they have been prepared," Guss said. "However, there is another thing that I might need to bring up."

"What is it?" The Duke asked.

"It might not be something to worry about, but my scouts had informed me of an increased activity of Verremor's forces around the Fulgur region."

"What are they doing there? That region is mostly desert, there are no resources for them to acquire there," Commander Quintus commented.

"Exactly, that's why I have my patrols doubled up at the border. It was unlike them to waste their activities in that region. Perhaps they were just performing some sort of training exercises. Just be careful if you bump into them on your way to the ruins."

"Is our relationship with that country bad?" Jack finally joined in the conversation.

"Well, it's not exactly sunshine," Guss replied, not at all bothered by Jack's interruption. "We have had some bad skirmishes with them. But as long as we don't trespass into their territory, they mostly leave us alone. But then again, you never know how those Orcs think."

"Orcs?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Guss answered, as if he was simply stating a fact.

Noticing Jack's surprise, Commander Quintus said, "Verremor is a nation governed by the Orc race. Did I not mention this before?"

"No, you did not," Jack replied.