Chapter 29 Crab Surfing

The black hole looked somewhat ominous.  I looked at the two young women and wasn’t sure if we should proceed.  Jade spoke, “It is either night on the other side of the portal opened underground.”

“Could we be buried under the ground?” I asked concerned.  Iris looked uneasy not knowing the answer.

Jade said, “I doubt it.  Portals are two-way so if it is a dead end then we could return.” A large crab suddenly scurried out of the portal causing me to jump back. Jade draw the attention of the crab and it attacked her.  Its large claw was easily batted aside and the top of the shell was struck by her blade.  I hadn’t even seen her draw the short blade.  The blade bounced off the shell.

Jade circled the crab.  “It’s a cave crab.  Use your sledgehammer on it.  I can only kill it by stabbing it at the base of its eye stalks and it's not giving me an opening.  Bludgeons weapons are best for dealing with them.”

The realization came to me and I swung my sledgehammer into the crab going through its shell and right into the ground.  The crab twitched and then went still.  Amazed at my strength in stared.  Jade spoke, “It might have a tiny aether crystal in it.  I never took a class on harvesting monsters.  Too messy for me.”

Iris moved to the backpack and took out a gray ball of her fist and moved it over the crab.  There was a sound like the snapping of your fingers and a tiny rice-sized crystal was stuck to the ball and a tiny hole was burned into the crab. Iris looked up, “Only works on dead creatures but saves time.”  She smiled at Jade who looked a little shocked. Iris put away the ball and crystal and grabbed a stick and cast her light spell on the end of it, making a sort of torch.

Without hesitation, she went into the black hole.   Jade was on her heels showing no fear.  I guess we were doing this.  I looked at the crab oozing black blood and wondered what other monsters were on the other side.  I stepped through.

On the other side,  Iris’ light created shadows in a large cavern with stalagmites and stalactites.  I could see crabs in the distance scurrying over the rock cones on the floor and ceiling.  A brave crab came forward and I crushed it like first.

“They were here!” Iris voiced loudly a few steps away.  I went to join her while Jade kept an eye on our crab population.  Iris was huddled over some loose papers.

She looked up at me, “This is my dad's handwriting.  He was making notes on this cavern…he probably transcribed them neatly into a notebook and just tossed the paper here.  He was always messy.” Iris had a half smile as she looked at me.  Evidence that her parents were here at one point gave her hope.

I looked around and there were some candy bar wrappers and two empty Mountain House freeze-dried meal pouches as well. Jade yelled, “Incoming!”

I stood and moved beside her.  The crabs had organized and were coming in a wave of maybe a dozen or more at once.  Iris soon stood behind us with a fireball spinning in her hand.  Jade spoke, “Caleb me and you will meet them.  Keep their attention on us and away from Iris.  Iris pick off any of them that try to flank us.”

My heart was pounding as the basketball-sized crabs came.  A row of three came and I managed to crush two while Jade occupied the third.  The next wave hit and I couldn’t focus on what everyone else was doing as I kept swinging at still-moving whole crabs.

A fireball erupted to my right and the heat wave washed over me.  I don’t know how many crabs I crushed but the splatter of black blood was all over me.  It felt like a gross game of whack-a-mole.  A second fireball erupted behind me and I noticed I had moved forward away from the two girls.

I moved back to them taking two crab nips on the back of my thighs. They cut my jeans and I could feel the blood seeping out.  Maybe I should have dressed a little more like an adventurer.  I smashed the two crabs moving in on the girls and swung around to face the last two I noticed were still whole.  They seemed to be reconsidering their attack as their kin lay shattered and twitching in death throes around them.  They turned shells and ran away.

“Damn Caleb,” Jade said while breathing heavily.  “I only killed two and Iris got two…looks like you got…” she counted, “fourteen!” Her face had that same hungry look on it as her eyes dressed me down.  For my own part, the excitement of post-combat had my testosterone raging.  I wanted to lay into one or both of the girls.  My erection was straining at my jeans and I was thankfully facing away from them.

Even the gory mess before me didn’t curb my desire to take one…or both of the girls.  I retreated to my mind space on instinct and once I regained myself I returned.  I had only been gone a few seconds and was now able to combat my raging hormones.

“Caleb are you all right?” Jade was behind me and checking on my shredded jeans from behind.  She got on her knees and her hand snaked into the rips, looking for wounds.  She explored the back of my thigh and I let her.  She brushed the bottom of my now relaxed dick and quickly withdrew.  “I don’t see any wounds.  A little dried blood but the wounds appeared closed.  Do you have a healing spell?”  I turned and looked down at Jade kneeling before me.  I shelved some thoughts.

I improvised, “Just a minor self-healing spell.  Not very strong but I can easily deal with minor lacerations.” I actually wasn’t sure what the extent of my healing was. I bleed mostly like a human but healed maybe a thousand times faster. “Iris do you want to continue?” I asked her. We had found signs of her parents and maybe that was enough for this trip.

“We should continue looking. The footprints around here are pretty obscured by the crabs but I think we can figure out what direction they went in.” Iris had gotten out her harvesting ball.

“Does that thing catch monsters too?” I asked making a Pokemon reference. Iris looked at me very confused. Jade got my joke thought.

“Monster containment spheres can be found on the 20th layer and above,” Jade said chuckling, and when Iris looked confused Jade and I broke into laughter. Well, it appeared Jade was a fan at least.

“So Iris what are the aether crystals worth? Can w use them?” I asked as I kept alert.

“These lesser tier-1 crystals sell for about $200 each. Sometimes a little more if the market is thin.” My jaw dropped and I was adding up the corpses…20 or 21. We had made $4200 in about 20 minutes. That sounded too good to be true.

Jade broke me from my daydreams of floating dollar signs, “Caleb you should sweep our perimeter for solo crabs since you are the most effective fighter against them.” I nodded and shouldered my sledgehammer.

The stalagmites were pretty tall, at eye level or higher. I didn’t require Iris’ light spell to see, my abyssal eyes doing a great job. I wove in between the inverted cone pillars and chased a half dozen crabs away and crushed three others. I brought the crushed ones back to camp for Iris to claim their crystal. Would this be like a game where we divided the loot evenly or would I get all the loot from my kills? I shook my greed away. Iris had the device that made getting the crystals quick and easy. I wasn’t sure spending minutes cracking open a dead crab and searching through its innards would be worth it.

I increased my perimeter and my enhanced senses felt something was off. At first, I thought it was the crabs getting ready for another wave. I scaled a taller stalagmite and looked around. Oh shit! “Ladies,” I said calmer than I thought I could. “Our little crab friends decided to go and get their mother I think we should leave.” I scrambled down and back to them. They were packing up the meal they were eating until I said forget it.

I went to the portal site and connected with it to open the portal back to earth. Nothing my aether was at…78/1000. How did I fuck this up? “I don’t have enough aether to open the gateway,” I said irritably. “We should run. That thing is looking for us and is only about 100 yards away. I guess it can't see light because it would have been lined for Iris’ torch.”

Jade helpfully offered, “Cave crabs have a thermal vision.” We started moving in the opposite direction of the crab. The girls hadn’t seen it yet but I had. It was the size of a car in my estimation. Not something I wanted to tangle with. I got ahead of the girls and used my maul like a broom, batting away crabs that got bold.

We had moved maybe 400 yards and I could finally make out the cavern walls ahead. This large chamber wasn’t infinite. There! A color splash on the wall. “I think I see a way out of the cavern. This way!” I looked behind us and didn’t see mama crab but it could be below the stalagmites.

Six crab home runs later and the light got closer. It was an exit and not a fire for a camp of savage orcs…yeah maybe my pessimistic mind had wandered a bit. The tunnel in the wall was only about 25 yards long but when we emerged I was breathless from what we saw before us.

We were on a ledge looking down on a forest canopy. The trees varied in height and their leaves were red, gold, blue, and green with splashes of brown. It was an ocean of color. But that is not where the color ended. The sky was a prismatic ripple of green, blue, and silver. Jade and Iris stood next to me in awe as well.

Jade spoke, “The sky is the barrier to the Void. The threads between the worlds are sheltered from that nothingness. It is beautiful though…the barrier that allows us to traverse the layers.” We got lost in staring but I heard a stone crack behind us. I turned and looked. Mama crab was at the entrance, just 25 yards away. We had a steep rocky slope to reach the forest edge.

“Go! I will distract it if it comes out.” Jade didn’t hesitate to start sliding down and Iris reluctantly left me. I was on a short ledge and quickly climbed over the opening. If the crab queen emerged I would fall on it and crack into its shell. The backpack with Iris’ gear made it difficult to get in position…and it ruined my escape plan. I had planned to go incubus and use my wings to glide down the slope. Revealing myself as a demon to Jade was preferable to dying.

The crab saucer shell appeared below me and quickly located the noise and clatter the Jade and Iris were making. Before it could start after them I leaped. With the sledge hammer overhead, I planned to strike a crippling blow. Well, I misjudged a lot of things.

The first was the crab was not heavy or strong. My weight with the heavy backpack flattened it, its legs splaying out to its sides. The unexpected collapse caused me to drop my hammer. The crab's momentum was still forward so it went skidding down the slope with me on top. Now I had never been surfing in my life and I needed to learn or risk losing my life. Fortunately, my abyssal physical traits made me equal to an Olympian.

The crab fought with its legs to stay upright as we began our journey together down the mountain. This was fortunate for me because if the carb rolled I would have been screwed. Jagged protruding rocks knocked the orientation of the crab around and I struggled to remain n the center of its shell. I could here the cracks of its joints as it tried to arrest its momentum unsuccessfully. My vision caught Jade and Iris below us but they were well out of our path.

Being an absolute idiot I decided to wave to them as I passed them. I mean that would be the ultimate act of coolness, right? Well, I had been using my hands insistently to help with balance so waving threw off my balance momentarily. The crab hit a bump and I went airborne. The crab was now sliding below me and I was going to either land on its shell or join it in a desperate rockslide of death.

The crab was moving too fast…I wasn’t going to regain my ride. Then by some fortune, the crab hit a large rock that almost arrested its plight…it put it in my landing zone. I landed near the back of the crab and we continued our slide down the mountain.

One of its eyestalks peered at me and I could see anger and malice in that black eyeball. Well, I wasn’t going to wave this time. My focus was on staying on top of the crab…ah shit. I had forgotten about stopping. The tree line at the base of the mountain was looming…damn those were some big ass trees.

Ok, I should take off the backpack. Then I could go to my incubus form and use my wings…the front edge of the crab caught on a rock and the shell flipped forward tossing me into the tree canopy at a very fast speed.

Two things. First, flying was fun and scary. Two, I was about 200 feet above the ground and if I didn’t manage to stop and hold myself up here the fall below was going to be killer.

My body was whipped by branches and spun around constantly as I attempted to grab branches to arrest my body. I was smacked and spun around and soon began falling down…I grabbed a branch and held on. The branch was as wide as my body and I hugged it in appreciation. My crazy voyage is finally over. I moved carefully and sat up.

That was a serious anime stunt I smirked to myself. I couldn’t see through the branches but I hoped Iris and Jade were on their way. I checked myself over. Lots of scratches on my exposed skin that were healing. At least one broken rib…and my wrist…two dislocated fingers. Maybe a concussion as my thinking was slightly foggy. I set my fingers and felt my bones realign and fuse the fracture. Ok, this healing ability was stronger than just healing cuts.

I looked at the forest floor. It was far below me. I opened Iris’ backpack and some things sounded broken and there were fluids leaking. I did my best to clean everything out that looked like trash now. No rope, just a roll of paracord. I tied the backpack to the paracord and lowered it to the forest floor. Then with my climbing skills, I descended the massive truck. The bark was rough and there were plenty of handholds.

I oriented myself and headed back toward the mountain. I had penetrated the forest a lot further than I had thought. It was about a quarter mile to the edge of the forest. I was on high alert but only noticed small animals. Squirrels, birds, chipmunks, and even a few tree snakes.

At the edge, I looked up the slope. The crab was there in the throes of death. I could see black blood flowing from its shell and it only had one functioning pincer and one leg. I spotted Iris and Jade further up the slope, they had stopped their descent. They probably thought I was dead…hell, I couldn’t believe I was alive. I waved to them, my ribs still slightly tender.

It took them a moment to see me and they began to hurry down the mountain. I kept my eyes on the lookout until they reached me. Iris ran to me and hugged me tightly. Thankfully my ribs had completely healed or her embrace might have hurt.

Jade spoke as Iris was crying, “Caleb…we thought you were sacrificing yourself for us.” She looked at the crab uphill that had stopped moving. “That was crazy.” She looked at me in admiration as I returned Iris’ hug. I think she wanted in. Or maybe she was just jealous. I extended my arm, offering to add her to the hug fest. She looked apprehensive but moved closer and I wrapped her in the embrace.

“So our first life-of-death experience together,” I said as the hug timer in my head had reached its limit. “So should we head back up the mountain? The cave is straight up the rockslide so it shouldn’t be hard to find.”

We broke the hug and Jade was examining my body visually. She didn’t believe I was uninjured apparently. Iris answered my question, “How about we go into the forest for two hours and then turn around and head home? I don’t know if my parents came this way but we can explore a bit.” I was a little shocked.

My response was, “What about monsters? I mean if we encounter another of those crab things or something just as strong… I don’t think we will get as lucky again. I think we should turn around.”

Jade replied to me, “That was an apex spawn monster. You were right it was the parent of those crabs. They are extremely rare and the chances of encountering another are very small.”

“But not non-existent,” I retorted.

Iris and Jade looked at each other in some woman mental communication. Iris turned to me, “You are right Caleb. We will only explore for an hour before turning back.” They both started walking deeper into the woods from the direction I had just come from.

I threw up my arms in frustration. I grabbed a think study stick to use as a club as I no longer had a weapon. I went into my mind space. I had an upgrade. I was about to improve abyssal speed but paused. Although it would help me protect the girls and run away quicker I should wait till the moment I needed an upgrade. I caught up with the two headstrong young women and went on high alert.

Besides the trees being twenty feet in diameter and the canopy having a varied colored canopy it seemed like normal wood. I kept an eye on the time on my cracked iphone screen. At least it still worked.

We got to the hour mark and I reminded them it was time to turn around. “Just a few more minutes was said a few times.” I was about to take control when the forest suddenly went silent. My heart beat faster and faster. The forest going quiet meant an apex predator was here.

Then four tall thin people walked out from behind the trees. Three sported bows and the fourth had a futuristic rifle slung on her back. I was extremely relieved as they didn’t show hostility. Jade rasped under her breath, “Great, fucking elves.”