

D. Diver 141

Chapter 141

"I-Impossible... They actually got a Strengthening Fragment out of a Mutant...?"

I repeat the words I heard Tripp say moments ago over and over in my head. His words mixed with the expression of pure shock on the man's face give me a quite uneasy feeling.

Impossible? Why would it be impossible?

I look over at my team, then back at Tripp. It seems like none of them overheard his mumbles like I did. My 2 seconds of happiness have run their course after leaving the Titan's Domain. Now, another eerie spiraling sense of paranoia fills my head.

Technically, the Fragment didn't come from the mutant... That's what makes all of this even worse. None of the mutants I've defeated by myself dropped any fragments, and none of the ones we killed today did either.

Still, their drop rate is apparently 1%. It would be completely normal for us not to get one for a while....

We would be lucky if we got 1 all week at this rate. This quota should be impossible to meet...

"Impossible..."

I turn to Tripp. He's still staring at the black gem in Maria's hand from a distance with his mouth wide open and face white like he's seen a ghost.

There's definitely something fishy going on here...

After our celebration of collecting a single Strengthening Fragment after a long day of work dies down, Tripp calms himself down as well, returning to normal. The 3 others look to him for guidance, and I play along doing the same. He smiles and points behind him.

"Well, great first day of work. We should start heading back now, it'll take quite a while to make our way to the dungeon's entrance."

We all nod in agreement and follow our blond-haired guide back through The Great Plains. We face 3 more mutants and dozens of underlings, but they're taken out with ease, dropping nothing but mana crystals.

As we near the exit gate, Abby speaks up to the group.

"Hey, now that you're all a part of the Association, why don't we get rooms at the Vanguard Heights? We're all going to be spending a lot of time in the city, we might as well get a nice place to stay."

I look at her with a confused expression.

"The... Vanguard Heights? What exactly is that?"

Tripp grins and steps in.

"It's a residential building. Well, more of a residential tower. Only Hunters from the Association are allowed to stay there. It's a pretty exclusive apartment complex. I'd recommend it, my apartment

there is incredible. There's always space available for people with contracts, we could go and get you 4 situated tonight."

I look over to Arie and Maria. Both of them are grinning ear to ear. I nod.

"Sure, let's check it out right after we leave the dungeon."

Maria jumps in holding up the black gem.

"What about this? Aren't we going to hand in our loot soon?"

I chuckle.

"Sure, sure. We'll be meeting at the Association HQ tomorrow morning anyways, we can just hand it in then. Sound like a plan?"

With a firm nod, she replies.

"Hmmp. Okay, makes sense."

The 5 of us leave the dungeon and make our way up to the surface. It's late and I'm starving, the rest of my group feels the same way. Tripp leads us to the Vanguard Heights, telling us on the way that we can get food there.

It's about 1km for the Dungeon Hub, in the opposite direction of the Association's building. The dungeons are right in the middle of the two.

Once we arrive I take a long look at the towering blue glass building. The sun is setting, and the orange beams of light reflect off the 50-story tower with an incredible dazzling glow.

The front doors glide open in silence as we're greeted by a tall thin man in a black tuxedo with the Hunters Association logo in small print on his white handkerchief.

"Welcome to the Vanguard Heights Residence, It seems we have some newcomers today. How may I help you all?"

Tripp smiles at the tall man, nodding to him as he walks by. He waves and speaks up before disappearing into the lobby.

"They'll take good care of you all, I'm heading off for the night. Meet you at 9 am tomorrow, got it? Especially you Jay!"

Maria giggles at that last line as Arie approaches the tall man who greeted us.

"We'd like to rent some rooms. The four of us are new C-Class Hunters at the Association."

He bows.

"Congratulations on your promotions. Please, follow me."

The old dapper-looking gentleman turns and leads us to a long white marble desk where he scans all of our cards and collects the proper payment.

I look around the lobby as he does so. The floors and furniture are all completely white. There's simplistic art on the walls near the elevator doors. The tall ceiling sports a blue crystal chandelier matching the windows.

For a premium suite, it'll be 1 gold a month. I fork over another shiny coin looking down at my diminishing supply.

I need to go farm a lower-level dungeon and build up my balance again soon. If I want to pay rent here and continue buying MP to support my future training, I'm going to need a lot more money...

I take my new room key after signing all the proper documents. It's a small silver card with the number 4207 printed in thin black text on the front. My apartment is on the 42nd floor, room 7.

The 4 of us turn to the elevator waving to the tall man, he nods back with another slight bow.

"Welcome to the Vanguard Heights, I hope you enjoy your stay. There are restaurants and entertainment on the 21st floor, please feel free to indulge yourselves in the services offered."

With that being said, we make our way up to the 21st floor without hesitation. The white-walled elevator glides up over 20 floors in a matter of seconds and we arrive to see a magnificent view.

Neon lights, food and drink, games, and girls. They have it all. I've stumbled upon degenerate heaven.

There's an entire entertainment center on the 21st floor. Half a dozen restaurants, another half a dozen bars, some small casinos and clubs, a spa, hunter's trading stores run by the Association, and even a few training rooms available to rent.

I stare in awe as we walk over to a restaurant that suits our fancy.

"Let's play it cool tonight. We have a long week ahead of us... Once we complete our first mission, I say we give this place a run for its money."

We each order a good meal and a few drinks. Unfortunately, my self-regeneration keeps me from feeling the alcohol, but it's the thought that counts...

After a satisfying meal, the 4 of us break off to check out our new apartments. We all agree to meet each other in the lobby tomorrow around 8:30 am.

I ride the elevator to the 42nd floor and scan the silver card on the small black square above my room's door. With a light click, the door slowly swings open without making a sound.

"Now... this is what I'm talking about.... This is a view!"

The cool white marble floor leads forward about 10 meters opening up into a large living room area with a clear staircase on its right side leading up to a bedroom loft. There are two large white couches on either side of the main room facing each other with a long silver table between them.

The far wall of the apartment is blue-tinted glass that overlooks the city's night lights.

Off to the left is a long white and silver counter with a smooth black stove and cooking equipment. Further down the hall on the apartment's left side is a guest room, an extra bathroom, and an empty office.

I sprawl out onto one of the couches and let out a satisfied sigh.

Staring out into the night sky with thousands of building lights flashing below, I remember my last task of the night, Ember.

While out hunting today, I thought this issue over many times in my head. I have to figure out a way to have him by my side at all times without anyone noticing.

There's a possibility he'll be able to fit in my pocket dimension that I use to store items. Unfortunately, I was just way too exhausted to even try that before I left last night.

"I could give it a try right now..."

With that, I hop off my comfy couch and make my way downstairs. As I walk through the lobby with a smile plastered across my face I hear a familiar low voice.

"Where are you going in such a hurry? Mind if I join?"

I turn to see Arie sitting on one of the guest couches in the lobby. He gets up and makes his way over to me while continuing to speak.

"I was going to go late-night hunting as well. I knew you wanted to see one of those Titans for yourself too, you were just keeping your cool in front of Tripp weren't ya!"

He lets out a laugh as we both walk toward the lobby's front door. I reply.

"Hey- I'm by no means trying to fight a Titan tonight. If Tripp says they're dan-"

"Oh don't give me that!"

Arie smirks at me as the sliding doors open and we step out into the cool night air.

"I don't believe for a second you take anything that guy says to be true at face value."

I give Arie a side-eye, then let out a light exhale through my nose.

He's right, and he knows he's right... but, he has no idea what he's getting himself into.

The hooded bow wielder puts his hand around my shoulder and continues talking.

"I was going to face those things on my own anyways. So either you come and make it easier on me, or I get to hit up all the fun for myself."

Arie is really trying to get himself killed, isn't he? Is this what I seem like every time I jump into something crazy? Is this why everyone around me says I'm a lunatic? It's starting to make sense...

If I go with him, at least I'll be able to guide him away from those monsters. Plus, If I lead him away from the Titans all night we can farm some mutants and see if their drop rate of 1% is actually true...

That last remark that Tripp made is really eating away at the back of my mind. Is it really impossible to get a Strengthening Fragment out of a mutant?

I let out a sigh, then give Arie exactly what he wants.

"Fine. I'll help you find a Titan."

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Arie and I walk through the Capital with the cool night's breeze at our backs.

We're really going back to The Great Plains Dungeon.

It's only been a day or so in the real-world's time since I even discovered this place even existed. I'm already thoroughly sick of it...

The 2 of us make it to the C-Class gate, down the escalator to the platform, and off to the dungeon in a matter of minutes. We enter the vast open air of The Great Plains and begin our trek.

Walking all the way back to the mutants spawn range doesn't seem like a proper use of time... Arie has seen me use my Dungeon Walker skill, he even covered for me to hide it from Tripp earlier. I turn to him with a serious look on my face but crack a grin before letting out any words

"Hey, let's make this a little faster."

I watch Arie start to nod. Before he can respond, I place my hand on his shoulder and activate Dungeon Walker.

Less than a second later, we're 10km into the dungeon with a Mutant charging at us at full speed.

Arie stretches his bow back and releases a single shot. A thin white arrow silently flies through the air. It pierces the monster's forehead and it falls to the ground, defeated in a single blow.

We walk over to the dissolving corpse. I speak up as we wait for it to completely disappear.

"So, want to try and farm a couple of hundred Mutants tonight? Maybe we can stack enough Fragments to complete this week's quota."

Arie looks me up and down curiously, then replies.

"Do you really believe that?"

I squint my eyes, looking back at him.

"What do you mean by that...?"

"I saw the way Tripp reacted to us finding that Fragment too. I just hide my emotions a lot better than a toddler."

I respond, a bit embarrassed of my ignorance.

"W-Well... Hey! I'd like to farm at least 100 of them tonight, just to test if that drop is accurate. I can teleport us to the nearest ones pretty quickly, it wouldn't hurt to test it out..."

Arie nods slowly.

"Fine, but this is pointless. I'll farm 100 with you, then you bring me to a Titan. Deal?"

I gulp.

"Arie I-"

"Deal?"

I roll my eyes.

"I'll bring you to one. If for any reason you can't handle it, I'm teleporting you out."

Arie smirks.

“Good enough for me.”

“Great.”

Over the next 3 hours or so, we zip around the dungeon taking out mutant after mutant.

Multiple times during my enemy detection scanning, I sense a level 404 moving slowly off in the distance. It's most definitely Ember patiently drifting through the skies waiting for my return.

After 100 mutants, not a single one dropped a Fragment. They did drop a ton of mana crystals though, which Arie let me keep in exchange for my transportation services. After taking into account my sword's mana output and Dungeon Walker usage, I've netted nearly 20,000MP worth of crystals.

After the last Mutant, Arie speaks the words I've been dreading to hear.

“It's time to find that Titan. Come on Jay, let's check one out. I know you're inching to fight it too!”

I close my eyes and scan the dungeon with enemy detection to find the closest section on my radar that shows up completely blank. These Void Creepers hog up all the mana around them, making a spot so dense it's impossible to detect anything within 500m or so of them.

About 20km further in, there's a section of the dungeon that fits the mana reading perfectly. I haven't ventured that deep in yet but got pretty close my last time around. I reply to Arie.

“The closest I can Dungeon Walk within range is about 3km away. We'll have to make the trek on foot from there.”

“That'll do the trick.”

“Alright, hold on.”

I unwillingly grab Arie by the shoulder and teleport us much deeper into The Great Plains.

It would be the smart thing to just tell Arie what happened to me the last time I faced off against a Titan, but something is holding me back. I don't want anyone to know about Ember, especially the fact that I have a magically contracted Alliance with a monster...

Maybe I'm being overly paranoid again, but this secret seems like one I should actually keep. My loud mouth attitude about my skills hasn't completely backfired on me just yet. I should learn from that and really try to keep quiet about this one.

Once we blip into existence on the far side of the dungeon, our long trek forward begins. My heart beats and my breathing gets faster and faster. I'm actually pretty scared. Last time I had a lucky break, and I mean a really lucky break... This time, If we're caught in an endless void of mana I'm not so sure we can make it out alive. I don't even have any food or water to survive the endless abyss.

As I keep my enemy detection radar open, I continue to sense the level 404 Dragon soaring nearby, less than 5km nearby in fact. I decide to open a telepathy link from long range.

“... Hello? ... Ember, can you hear me?”

“Back so soon Master?”

“It’s Jay. Not Master.”

“I apologize, old habits die hard. It’s good to know you’re doing well, Jay. What are your orders? Shall I collapse this dungeon?”

“Hey, hey! Just hold on a minute. I still have a few things to do here. I’ll... just be approaching another Titan shortly, if you could watch nearby that would be great. I’m with another human, so don’t let yourself be seen. Got it?”

“Understood. I can sense your presence already, I’m on my way. I will watch from a distance and only intervene if your life is in danger.”

“Thank you.”

I disable the link and continue walking onward with Arie by my side. It only takes another 20 minutes before I can feel and hear the horrible humming sound of my 30-day nightmare return.

Just over one of the tall hills in front of us, I can sense that awful power. The link to a space between realms. A creature that infects Dungeons, slowly absorbing everything in sight, then creeping away to find another dimension with mana-rich prey.

I clench my jaw, then reach into my item storage to grab my dagger. Arie notices and speaks up.

“Oh, would you look at that. A new dagger? Isn’t that-”

“Hey! Get serious. It’s right over this hill. At any point, if we’re on the losing side here, I’m teleporting us out, got it?”

Arie straightens his shoulders and readies his bow.

“You’re really spooked by these things, aren’t you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

He grins as we walk up the hill, I grip my weapons tight and let out a low-toned response.

“Just get ready, and keep your guard up... no matter what.”

I’m completely terrified. My knuckles are turning white from squeezing my blades and sweat is starting to roll down my forehead on both sides. Shivers are starting to creep through my spine as the hum gets louder. I feel the familiar mana seep into my body.

I grit my teeth hard as we make it to the top of the hill. Both of us stand atop a valley between high points.

I gasp, looking down at the sight below us...

It’s another one. A 30m tall Titan, roughly 400m in front of it. The slow-moving mass of black energy mindlessly makes its way toward us, destroying dirt and rock in its path like it’s kicking up sand.

Arie's eyes open wide as he creates a thin white glowing arrow.

I raise my sword and dagger watching the behemoth move across the wide open plains. It looks identical to the last one I faced... I mumble under my breath.

"How... are we going to defeat this thing....?"

Arie lets out a chuckle while pulling the white arrow back in his bowstring. It begins to glow brighter than I've ever seen it glow before. He holds it in place for a full 5 seconds.

The tan-skinned archer smirks, then releases the arrow soar and lets out a loud grunt while doing so.

"Let's see if it can handle that."

The moment his arrow leaves the bow, it condenses into a thin compact line of white light. Without a sound, I watch it fly toward the Titan in a straight line all the way down from over 300m away.

The mindless blob of human-shaped black mass continues charging forward in no specific direction as the glimmering white arrow shoots toward it at full speed.

Moments later, the attack makes contact with the monster's featureless face.

I already have a premature sigh ready, as I know the inevitable outcome of the attack will just be it slipping through the endless void.

I begin activating my Dungeon Walker skill to get us out of here, but pause mid-way through as I watch in disbelief.

The white glowing arrow from Arie's bow flies through the Titan's head, but it leaves a wide hole in its place, followed by the eerie metallic screech of a Titan being injured and flailing its arms...

I do a double-take. Looking back and forth at Arie grinning and the 3m wide hole he just blasted through the Titan's head with a single bow attack.

Eyes wide and jaw dropped, I take in the situation in front of me for a few seconds. Then, slowly grin.

"Maybe... We can defeat a Titan..."

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Arie really did it. He managed to land an attack on a Titan.

There is actual physical damage on one of these massive sentient endless voids of mana. I'm not sure exactly how his attack is able to do it, but that doesn't matter right now...

Arie smirks looking over to me.

"See, they're not that bad. You were scared for nothing."

I still stare wide-eyed at the beast but crack a small smile.

"I guess you were right, they-"

Stopping halfway through my reply, the grin plastered across my face slowly fades away. The 3m wide hole on the front of the Titan's featureless face begins to shrink and the humming sound of dense mana in the air begins to grow louder and louder.

It's still well over 200m away, but approaching at a steady rate. Arie tightens his bowstring again and readies another arrow.

The smart thing to do would be to grab him and Dungeon Walk out of here before that Titan releases its shockwave, like before, casting us off into the endless void within it. My curiosity takes over though, I want to see what kind of attack his new bow shot really is.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye, watching the mana flow through Arie's body as he charges up another arrow.

That's right... he charges up his arrow. Highly refined mana flows through his body to form a dense arrow in his quiver. It's similar to my own refined mana...

The archer lets the arrow soar again.

It flies through the air leaving a light white glow in its wake. I recognize this arrow from the exam, but I didn't have the same understanding of mana control back then. I'm sure Arie's [Legendary Grade] skill adds to its power, but the actual strength behind his attack is due to the density and purity of the mana within it.

I gave him a lot less credit than he deserved... Arie has been a much more skilled Hunter than I first imagined.

As his arrow soars, more connections come together in my head. I remember watching my own refined mana attacks splitting through the void like butter, soon to heal up just like Arie's first unsuccessful strike.

Maybe my own attack will be strong enough to pierce the void of a Titan from the outside now too...

I grin as his arrow slices another clean 3m wide hole in the monster's featureless head. Gripping both of my blades, I begin to charge up an attack of my own. Just one... Then I'll portal us out of here.

I carefully open the spacial magic portal of my item storage against my back. I've been meaning to try a move like this for a while. Letting the mana crystals fall out, the moment they make contact with my body I activate plunderer and take in their MP.

My attack charges up slowly as the Void Creeper's wound heals.

I've rested and regained a lot of my strength since the last time I tried one of these attacks. The mana coursing through my veins feels denser and more stable than ever before, the only problem is the speed of absorption.

For this is a trial run, I don't need to go all out, but I want to release something very powerful. After about 30 seconds, I channel over 10,000MP into my blades and let the crescents of energy soar.

Not having an abundance of pure mana around me makes it much harder to plunder and imbue my blades. The efficiency rate has dropped by nearly 1/3 outside The Titan's Domain.

Even in my slightly weakened state, I still let out a devastating attack. The transparent blade of wind and the deep black blade of fire cut through the air aiming straight toward the monster's midsection.

My perception of time slows down as I watch this attack slowly near its target. The nagging sensation of a voice at the back of my mind becomes louder and louder until I give in and open my telepathy link. Ember's voice rings out.

"Run."

I swallow hard, shifting my gaze toward Arie as he cheers me on. I'm holding both of my blades, so the only thing I can think of doing is to jump straight at him to make physical contact. My shoulder hits him in the chest and I mutter the only two logical words in the moment.

"Dungeon Walker."

We blip away using the last remaining stores of MP in my body after releasing that attack. Both of us fall to the group about 3km away. Arie yells out.

"Hey, I was just about-"

An earth-shattering crack interrupts him, followed by the loud metallic hum of a Titan's domain being activated from a distance. A huge dust cloud forms on the horizon as I see a black void erupt outwards in a spherical shape easily 500m in diameter.

Then... it shirks and disappears completely in an instant. Leaving the two of us in a silent dungeon. I activate my telepathy link with Ember, and he replies almost Immediately.

"You cannot defeat a Void Creeper with brute strength. The only way I know of to defeat it is to plunder its entire pocket dimension neatly dry of MP until the link to our realm collapses. I could easily take it out for you. This won't take more than a few hours."

"You're not going back into its Domain are you....?"

"That would be the quickest way, but it's far too risky for you to come along. I'll be able to handle myself in a fight with a mindless low-rank Void Creeper. Plus, it'll have plenty of mana for me to plunder into exp. The level-up threshold has reached a rather high limit, but we may be able to gain a level or two from this one."

"..."

"What is it?"

An idea pops into my head that should have come far sooner. I must have been scared out of my mind of these creatures, that I forgot Ember was the one that defeated with ease... As a level 1...

"Could you farm the Titans in the back of the Dungeon while I train with my team this week?"

"Certainly, it would be my pleasure."

I smirk, looking over to Arie as he still stares wide-eyed off into the distance watching the massive dust cloud settle.

"Interesting... Take out as many as you can, I'll meet with you as soon as I can."

"As you wish."

I sever the telepathy connection and stand to my feet. Arie speaks up in a quiet tone.

"Did... we get it...?"

I let out a chuckle.

"No. Far from it. That thing is still perfectly fine..."

Arie gulps, then grins, then lets out a laugh of his own.

"Well, I guess you were right. They- uh- were a bit too strong for us."

I scratch the back of my head while plundering the MP of a fresh mana crystal taken out of my mana storage.

"Lets head back I-"

Arie cuts me off.

"Wait. Before we do... That attack you let out. You've trained your mana control too? I've never seen you let out an attack like that. Were you just hiding it before?"

I look Arie up and down with curiosity then respond.

"I trained for a while to build up my control. I don't like to use it often, just like a lot of my skills and techniques."

He nods.

"Alright, alright. I won't pry. It's just another thing we have in common. I know how long and hard the training can be, I went through hell when I was a kid back in my village."

I give him a firm nod and a light smile while putting out my hand.

"Let's head back. I think we've gotten out fill of Titans for the night. Maybe we'll come back and take one out when we get a bit stronger, how about that?"

Arie grabs my hand and nods as I teleport us back to the dungeon's start point. We make our way out of the Hub and back to our new residence quickly. Overall, I think that was a pretty good night run.

I managed to touch base with Ember to get our future plans in order, strengthen my theory about the mutant's non-existent drop rate, and even bonded with Arie over his mysterious ability to also wield condensed mana...

We make it back to the Vanguard Heights and call it a night. I take a long hot shower, then walk up the clear staircase at the far side of my living room up to the bedroom loft.

After staring out the blue glass window for a few minutes, I drift off to sleep.

The next morning, I wake up to the sound of a ringing notification as the sun begins to rise

[Level Up]

I check my status and see that I've grown to level 405 overnight. Thanks to my exp share, I've gained a level in my sleep. He said the new leveling threshold was low, but this low....?

Hopping out of bed, I get dressed and make my way down to the lobby. My 3 teammates are already waiting for me. We grab a bite to eat on the way to the Association's HQ, and the 4 of us arrive with a few minutes to spare.

As we walk through the sliding doors, Maria insists that we hand in the Strengthening Fragment from yesterday's hunt. Abby agrees, and they are already halfway down the first narrow hallways at the back of the lobby before it's too late. Arie and I don't get much input on the situation, so we both follow with a shrug, interested to see where this goes next.

A short walk later through the neon shop signs, and we're face to face with the white-haired Association merchant named Sophie. She greets us with a smile as Maria hands her the little black gem.

"Here you go! We got our first Strengthening Fragment yesterday, only 9 more to go!"

The short woman blinks at us a few times with her mouth wide open as the coin-sized Fragment falls into her hands. There's an awkward silent pause for a few seconds, then she speaks.

"V-Very well..."

The merchant woman puts the small stone into a concealment case under the counter, then taps on a small silver tablet a few times before looking up at us.

"Your progress has been updated, 9 more to go."

She lets out a thin smile, but I'm not buying it....

I chime in.

"Hey Sophie, I'd like to ask you a few things about these Strengthening Fragments if you don't mind. Is that alright with you?"

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The Short white-haired woman looks at me with a troubled look on her face.

"What... exactly are you trying to learn about Strengthening Fragments?"

As I prepare to speak, I position my right hand on the counter's edge.

"Well, first of all, tell me why these Fragments are so valuable. What are they even used for?"

A sigh of relief escapes the merchant's lips as she stands up straight again exuding a newfound sense of confidence.

"Well, if that's all... Please let me explain. Strengthening Fragments are what some in the Association call the War Drug."

I scrunch my eyebrows, looking at her with a confused expression across my face.

"A War Drug? ... Why is it called that? Or- I don't really care why it's called that, just explain it to me in simple terms. What do they do?"

"Sure, sure. They got the War Drug nickname from Hunters that got addicted to these things back in the Great War. They're consumables, boosting your MP output for a few seconds, maybe even close to a minute."

I raise an eyebrow.

The merchant woman shakes her head and raises both hands in the air.

"Hey, hey don't get any funny ideas! If you took one of these right now you'd end up in the hospital, no doubt! Their usage is highly restricted and only approved for certain high-ranking hunters for vital missions these days. Elites aren't even allowed unless given special permission. They're also used for certain crafting recipes, their dormant mana output is a good catalyst for all kinds of item creation spells."

She whispers under her breath in a mumbled tone.

"I don't know why the Director put the 4 of you in charge of collecting Fragments... Sure is a crazy week 1 assignment if you ask me."

I nod, crossing my arms and thinking about what a Fragment would feel like... Or how exactly they work... They must feel really good...

A familiar voice snaps me out of my daydream as I turn to see Tripp walking toward us while a wide grin across his face.

"I had a feeling I'd find you guys here. Looks like you're all on time today!"

He looks at me with a smirk while I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. I made it."

Tripp glances toward Sophie, and their eyes meet briefly, exchanging a shared look of concern. Tripp turns his gaze back to the 4 of us and puts both of his hands up in the air.

"Ready to get the day of hunting started?"

With a collective nod of agreement, we all proceed to follow Tripp, leaving the backrooms and out onto the busy street. Before we know it, we're in The Great Plains getting ready to fight.

The first few kilometers in are the worst. Everyone here but Tripp knows about my teleportation skill. It's a bit of a drag to keep it hidden, but I'd rather not have him know about it.

He's a nice guy and all, it's just that the Association has its claws deep in him. I can tell if it were a choice between my livelihood and making the Director happy, he'd choose him without hesitating for a second.

[Level Up]

During our walk, I level up again. I curiously check my status to see the blue text show level 406 without a doubt. I can't help but smile, reassured by the thought of Ember diligently chipping away at the mindless Titans at the back of the dungeon.

The mobs are easy pickings over the next 2 hours or so until we finally make it into a range of potential mutants. Arie is the first to speak up.

"Hey Tripp, we should split up and track down the mutants individually. Don't you think that'd be a better use of our time? Each of us can definitely handle these monsters by ourselves."

The blond-haired dagger wielder shrugs while scratching his chin.

"Sure, I don't see why not. None of you are going to get lost in here will you?"

Wearing a smirk, he looks over all of my teammates before pausing his gaze on me.

I respond with a bored expression, noticing his growing fondness for singling me out lately. I can't say I'm a huge fan of being Tripp's verbal punching bag.

"I'm the least of your worries...."

"We'll see about that! How about we all meet back here in 3 hours, if everything goes well we can do one more breakout and call it a day."

The four of us nod in agreement. Arie already knows I'm teleporting out of here the moment our guide loses sight of me, and the others assume as much too.

Our teleporting mutant killing spree begins the second we cross over the nearest hill. I explain the game plan and they all grab onto my arm.

I blip to the nearest mutant and drop Aire off.

"I'll be back shortly."

Seconds later I leave Abby with a mutant 2km away. Then, in the blink of an eye, I drop off Maria another 1km into the dungeon.

I zip back and forth letting the 3 of them collect mana crystals and kill mutants along with their underlings. It's a very efficient battle plan, I even kill a few while I wait in between their fights.

In this short period of time, we manage to defeat close to 200 mutants. Oddly enough, not a single one drops a Strengthening Fragment.

I teleport the 3 of them back near the meeting point assigned by Tripp once we've finished this farming session. I turn around to look deep into the dungeon.

"I'll... be back in 10 minutes, 20 tops. I just need to check on something."

They all give me exhausted waves and don't seem too worried about me going off alone for a bit. With a shrug, I Dungeon Walk away before any of them can change their minds.

In the blink of an eye, I teleport over 15km and activate my telepathy skill. I watch the crimson underside of my Dragon's wings flap above me. The glossy black-scaled beast glides down to greet me.

"Good to see you Jay, welcome back. I have some good and bad news for you."

I smile but raise an eyebrow at the same time.

"It's good to see you too Ember. Go ahead, lay the bad news on me first."

The majestic creature bows its head.

"It seems as though our leveling progression has slowed. As I said before, the threshold to higher levels gains will not be easily met with these low-ranked Void Creepers. Even the one we were trapped in hardly gave us levels during our last few hours inside. "

I nod, tapping a foot on the hard dungeon ground as he continues.

"Our best options to ensure my next rank up in the future would be finding a large labyrinth to run, or defeating many higher level beings."

I let out a chuckle.

"Yes, yes. That much I assumed. I'm working on getting us set up with one of those options soon. Now... what's the good news?"

The 7m long creature opens its mouth wide, to reveal a small pile of black gemstones inside. With a tilt of his head, they glimmer slightly in the sunlight while falling to the dungeon floor.

They all hit the dusty soil with small thuds one by one.

Frozen in awe for a moment, I count the mini gemstones scattered across the ground. Once they're all mentally accounted for in my head, my body finally moves to respond.

"You managed to defeat 12 of them... You killed 12 Titans overnight...?"

I grin while picking up the stones, then letting them make light clicking sounds as I roll them around together in my open palm.

"I did. I'll be able to defeat more if you please. After another dozen or so we will gain another level, but I don't think it's worth the time to stay here much longer. I can collapse this dungeon at your-"

I laugh out loud, rudely cutting Ember off.

"Sorry, but we won't be collapsing this gold mine any time soon!"

The Dragon turns its head to the side curiously as I hold up one of the black stones up high in the air between us.

"See these? Humans pay a lot of money for gems like this. I'll be training with my team for another 5 days after today. I want you to collect as many of these little black stones as you can. Get your fill on these Titans, once we leave this dungeon, it'll be near impossible to find mana that dense... Trust me."

"Very well. I will gladly plunder the MP from these pests."

"Great, glad you enjoy the work. I'll see you soon Ember."

I shut off the telepathic link and watch my black-scaled companion flap his wings and fly up into the sky.

I walk through the open-aired dungeon for a moment, continuing to roll the dozen black gems around in my hands. I decide to place 11 of them in my item storage and leave 1 out. I toss it up and down while looking off into the distance.

Letting out a sigh, I bring my gaze back to the tiny dark glistening crystal resting in the palm of my hand.

"I wonder what it'd feel like to try one of these...Strengthening Fragments...?"

Chapter 145

I bring the small black crystal in my hand up to my lips. The words of the white-haired merchant repeat over and over in my mind.

"It's a mana output boosting drug that's used for wars and important missions... This Fragment must be pretty powerful..."

I gulp, looking down at the glistening stone. After learning what these gems can do, my body is aching to try it. On the other hand, my mind is telling me no. Ever since I left my mana-rich cell

within the Titans Domain, the lack of MP in the air comes nowhere close to the richness of energy I felt before.

These stones must be some kind of residual link between our realm and the deteriorated pocket world of the fallen Void Creepers. The latent power stored up in one of these must be near limitless.

It probably feels incredible. Plus, this could be extra training for my mana control... right?

I open my telepathic link between myself and the Dragon flying away from me.

"Ember, I have one last task for you before I'm off."

"Of course, what will it be?"

"Watch me closely for a minute, I'm going to try something... stupid... If anything goes wrong, well, try and help me I guess."

"... Understood, Master."

The glossy black-scaled Dragon changes direction and drifts down toward me as I bring the shiny gem closer and closer to my mouth. It leaves my fingertips and rolls down my tongue, then I swallow it whole without a second thought.

My eyes dart back and forth as I look down at my empty palms. The dungeon falls deathly silent as I try to sense any changes taking place... I can hear myself swallow extra saliva to help the smooth crystal go down easier...

Nothing happens...

I hear Ember's voice echo in my mind as he comes within sight.

"I'm here. What is it that you'd like me to observe."

"Just... a moment..."

I can feel something tightening up in my chest. It's an odd warm sensation. Pins and needles start to prickle in my arms and legs, accompanied by a sudden head rush that feels both cool and hot at the same time. My eyes roll back into my head and my body goes almost comely limp.

I let out a distorted yell of pleasure mixed with pain as I struggle to stay conscious and stay on my feet.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye, the sensations taking over my body begin to make a lot more sense. The tiny stone I ingested moments ago is beginning to dissolve. It seems my theory wasn't too far off...

A miniature reverse black hole is forming in the center of my chest. As it grows, dense waves of mana are seeping out faster and faster. My body is attempting to absorb it even without my plundering ability. It's mana in its rawest form, similar to the liquid in an MP potion, just hundreds of times stronger.

I clench my jaw and take out both my blades, responding to my newest revelations while fighting the feeling of pure bliss taking over my mind. The tingling sensation in my limbs is growing worse and the sharp pressure in my chest is becoming harder to stand.

My vision is blurry, but I've been in worse situations before... I can handle this....

Letting out another yell, this one more full of agony than pleasure. I begin transferring the excess mana surging through my veins into my blades. They glow red and white, to surpassingly charge 15000MP in less than 10 seconds.

These levels of mana and charging speed are close to my peak within the Titan's domain, I haven't gotten near this in the outside world since...

With a powerful step forward I release 2 crescents of energy, high into the sky. They rip through the air and fly deep into the dungeon. Before I can even admire my increase in speed and mana capacity, I've already instinctively begun charging another attack.

It feels invisible knives are stabbing into my arms and legs now, along with the sensation of a heavy weight resting on my chest. My skin is lightly vibrating and my ability to channel mana is losing its precision every second that goes by.

Way too much mana is entering my body, and nowhere near enough is leaving it.

I charge up another near full-force attack without having to plunder a single point of MP. My vision begins to blur more and more as I release the second wave of wind and fire into the air.

I burst into a ball of fire, letting out a murderous yell while charging up my third attack. The skin on my arms, legs, and even face feels like they're getting torn apart at a microscopic level. White hot streams of mana enter my body through the slowly growing black abyss in my chest.

Another dual shot of dense mana leaves my blades after 10 seconds of charging.

My eyes lose their sight, as my body threatens to tear itself in half. I burst into an even bigger ball of fire and attempt to charge up my blades for a fourth time.

Unfortunately, I black out completely before releasing another drop of mana...

All of my joints freeze up and my muscles contract uncontrollably. The hot sensation of energy rushing through my body and mind takes over as my consciousness escapes from reality.

I fall to the dungeon floor with a thud as the uncontrollable amount of mana continues to expand.

Everything after that is up to chance...

Luckily, there's a mana-plundering Dragon on standby.

After a few minutes pass, I slowly open my eyes, accompanied by a long groan. The sensation of sore muscles and frail bones leaves me regretting my decision to try out this flashy Strengthening Fragment. As I observe Ember's red veil of mana-absorbing light receding from my body, a few words escape my lips.

"Thanks... I.. Had a feeling it might end up like this..."

Coughing, I turn to my side and use both fists to push myself back up to my feet. I guess those Fragments really are no joke.

I use self regeneration to repair my damaged skin and do the best I can to elevate the soreness, but it won't completely go away.

Ember responds.

"Of course. Your mana control is nowhere near fine-tuned enough to safely use that much MP in such a short amount of time. I recommend not doing that again, Master."

I let out a chuckle and scratch the back of my head

"It's... still just Jay. I agree. It's not a good idea to try that again any time soon..."

"So, would you like me to pause farming the Titans?"

I grin.

"No, continue. I'm sure I'll have a use for them in the future."

"Understood. See you soon."

The Dragon flies off and I pick up my two fallen blades, placing them into my item storage. I use Dungeon Walker to transport myself within a kilometer of my team and begin walking back to the meeting point.

My body and mind feel pretty drained, even though I plundered my MP back up to full. It's an odd empty feeling, I've felt a similar way after leaving the Titans Domain, but this feels worse. It hasn't been long at all, but I'm itching to feel power like that again.

Pushing these thoughts to the back of my mind as best I can, I continue walking forward over the rising and falling hills before me.

"Hey, hey! Look who made it!"

Tripp greets me, and I see the other 3 waiting patiently nearby. We exchange idle chatter for a little while, then set out to hunt again.

Everyone is pretty tired this second round, including me after my MP overdose. We take it pretty slow this time around only defeating 90 or so mutants altogether in the full 3-hour session.

I decide to plant another Strengthening Fragment into a mutant near the end of our session. Nearing the 3-hour mark, I round everyone up to make sure they witness what happens next as Abby waits for the loot from her last kill.

A small black crystal falls to the ground and the green-haired girl picks it up with a grin across her face.

"It was a long day guy, but it looks like everything paid off in the end. Look, we got another one!"

I smirk as the rest of the team crowd around her to goggle at the little black gem.

Soon after, we make our way back to Tripp and out of the labyrinth. He reacts a bit off at the mention of the fragment, but the response is much less extreme than last time.

The next few days of training go by in the blink of an eye.

Over the next 5 hunting sessions, I strategically plant Strengthening Fragments into mutant corpses every 100-200 kills just to make it seem realistic. Even after the one I consumed, there are still have 2 spare stones leftover in my storage.

I have a feeling Arie knows something is up, but he isn't the type to pry. Plus, it seems he's a bit shaken by our Titan run-in earlier this week. Ever since then he's itching to get stronger, he hunts

solo in the C-Class dungeons after every one of our team training sessions. I am itching to get stronger too, but for a much different reason.

Every day that goes by, my urges for a good supply of high-purity mana and a good fight become stronger and stronger.

Every night, I've been leaving the Vanguard Heights to go dungeon diving for a few hours too. Instead of using the C-Class gate, I start entering through the D-Class platform and teleporting myself back to The Great Plains. My contract states that I'm allowed to farm as many D-Class resources for myself as I'd like, but C-Class dungeon loot is the property of the Association.

They haven't strictly enforced this rule at all yet, but it's better if I don't take any chances. It will look much better on my record if it looks like I've been solo-farming D-Class dungeons.

In reality, I farm mana crystals for hours every night and continue collecting the Strengthening Fragments that Ember accumulates.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I've grown 2 more levels bringing me to 408, this is thanks to the 47 Void Creepers my partner has managed to defeat. That also means I've received 47 more Fragments, bringing my total stash to 49. Hesitantly, I've been keeping them in my item storage, trying my best not to think about my incident with one of them just a few days ago...

Over 150k MP worth of crystals has been farmed, but I use most of it up on a few double-blade attacks to get a rush at the end of each farming session.

It may sound like a waste, but it's keeping my mana control sharp and my progression steady. I haven't been able to get anywhere near the speed and output that I reached while high on that Fragment, and my proficiency has dropped a little since I left the Titan's Domain as well.

I can manage a 10k MP attacks, charged in just under 20 seconds. I'm able to release one of these a day, while still profiting some MP. It's nothing to laugh at, and it satisfies my urges for the time being. I'll need a change of pace soon.

I need to get stronger...

Today is day 7 of training at the Association, we just finished up our hunt and we'll handing in our last Strengthening Fragment to finally receive our reward. Once we get our next week of tasks, I'll go and visit Ember. I think it's about time he leaves that Dungeon with me.

I wonder what the Director has in store for us next. The fact that we completed a near-impossible task with ease keeps nagging at the back of my mind. I wonder if he'll catch on to the fact that something out of the ordinary is going on here...

Chapter 146

We walk into the Association's HQ after a long week of hunting. Maria happily carries our last Strengthening Fragments tight in her palm.

After Arie scans his ID on the door at the back of the lobby, all 4 of us make our way to the mini-market run by the Association.

Our guide Tripp left us by ourselves about 2 days ago. Apparently, breaking us in was a bit easier than predicted. Bringing the blond-haired Association lap dog around with us on our daily hunting was just keeping him from doing other tasks.

I'm glad he's not on our expeditions anymore, it makes teleporting into the mutant range much easier. Less walking and more training for all of us.

Everyone on the squad has grown past level 365. We're considered a pretty tough C-Class squad, at least for the new recruits.

As we walk closer to our drop-off point, I see the white-haired merchant lady waving to us with a smile.

Sophie was pretty outgoing to begin with, but she's gotten even friendly with the 4 of us as the week progresses. I hear her high-pitched voice ring out as we approach.

"Look who's back, does this mean what I think it does? The last one?"

Her eyes open wide as she bites her bottom lip in anticipation. Maria smiles and runs over in a half-skipping manner.

"It sure does, we got all 10!"

The cheerful blond and the excited merchant laugh together about something I decide to purposefully block out from my hearing.

I take the glimmering silver tablet out of my item storage to watch the number on it shift in front of my eyes.

[Jay Soju]

[Available Credits]: 0

[C-Class]

[Team Weekly Quota]:

[Strengthening Fragments][9/10]

[Reward]: 5 Credits

[Individual Weekly Quota]:

[NONE][0/0]

[Reward]: 0 Credits

Turns into:

[Jay Soju]

[Available Credits]: 5

[C-Class]

[Team Weekly Quota]:

[PENDING TASK][0/0]

[Reward]: [See Regional Director For Instructions]

[Individual Weekly Quota]:

[PENDING TASK][0/0]

[Reward]: [See Regional Director For Instructions]

I let out a long sigh.

"Well, this can't be good..."

I shift my gaze up from the tablet to see my other 3 team members staring at their shimmering silver plates with puzzled looks on their faces as well. At least we all got the same message, that's a good sign.

Maria flips her quota tablet around to show Sophie.

"Hey, what's all this about? Why do we have to go see the Director?"

The short white-haired woman scrunches her eyebrows and mutters something under her breath in a low tone.

"I had a feeling something like this would happen..."

I jump in after hearing this statement.

"Hey what do you mean by that? What'd we do wrong?"

I know exactly what we did "wrong" but I won't be the one to admit it. The Association gave us this quest, how could they possibly punish us if we actually carried it out...

Sophie shrugs.

"Hey, I don't know what you did wrong. It's just pretty uncommon for a group of new recruits to fulfill their first quest... Well, it's actually near impossible."

She gulps, then continues.

"The advancement teams that create quest quotas directly under the Director often give new recruits a hard time their first couple weeks. It's pretty normal for not even a single quota to be met. Yet somehow, you 4 have completed yours with ease."

She shivers slightly.

"One of the hardest ones too..."

The 4 of us stand in silence for a moment thinking over the words Sophie just uttered. Aside from my hypothesis that mutants have a 0% drop rate, there could be some truth to her statement even if these monster's rate was closer to 1%.

Without my teleportation skill and quick farming strategies, there's no way we could have killed enough mutants to even come close to meeting our quota.

This is enough to convince my other team members... Abby crosses her arms and stares at the merchant with a smug look on her face.

"Well, we're just a whole lot faster than all those other teams."

Maria jumps in.

"Yeah, no way they could keep up with us. The Director probably wants to give us an extra reward or something!"

Arie grins and nods.

"We'll just have to wait and see. I'm sure this will be an interesting meeting."

I swallow hard before adding to the discussion.

"I agree..."

The topic of conversation changes between my teammates and the white-haired merchant. I zone out staring down at my quota tablet.

On the bright side, we did complete our first mission together. Each of us has earned 5 credits, whatever that means. I'm going to have to check out a few of these shops. Credits are worth 1 gold if exchanged, or double if used to purchase any items here.

It wouldn't hurt to take a look around the place. I'm sure there's some pretty decent gear. An upgrade or two never hurt anybody. On the off chance nothing strikes my fancy, I can just exchange my credits for gold.

I twist my head around, then look back at my teammates.

"Hey uh- I'll be back in a minute, I want to check out the shops."

Arie smirks.

"Sure, meet us back here when you're done. We'll be heading up to the top floor right after. Luckily, the Director isn't away on business, we can talk to him right now."

I gulp, then turn with a wave.

"Sounds... good... I won't be long."

Arie turns back to the merchant's stand with Maria and Abby. I'm not sure what they're looking at over on the short woman's counter, but it seems to be something that's keeping them entertained...

I shrug and begin walking leisurely through the neon flashing signs. The primarily pink and blue lights reflect off the glossy black floor.

It makes focusing on one shop pretty hard, maybe this is some form of advanced marketing tactic?

Or... maybe I just have a hard time focusing and think everything around me is designed to mess with my mind, when in fact I'm the one doing all the mental manipulation myself.

Either way, there's some pretty unique-looking gear in this market. I use Appraisal on a few interesting-looking pieces.

There are long silver swords, heavy metal armor and shield sets, huge axes, shiny black daggers, and even a few high-percentage stat-boosting accessories.

[Enchanted Silver Long Sword] +400 Strength

[Shield of Solitude] +600 Defense

[Armor Set of Solitude] +800 Defense

[High Ogre's Axe Set] +600 Strength

[Enchanted Dagger Set] +400 Speed +400 Agility +200 Strength

[Ring of Protection] +35% Defense

[Enchanted Silver Ring] +40% Mental Strength

[Amulet of Quickness] +45% Speed

[Yeti's Charm] +50% Defense +50% Ice Magic Resistance

All the shopkeepers seem nice, and their items are definitely high-grade, but nothing here gets anywhere close to my blades or some of my own stat-boosting items. I decide haggling isn't even worth my time.

I remember the Director mentioning the Association regulating the buying, selling, and use of element stones. A wielder has to have the stone bonded with their weapon. So, they wouldn't just have them out on display here... If this is all the gear they have on display then I'm not in the market for anything new.

I begin to walk back to my group, but a bundle of green and pink potions catches my attention.

20x [C-Class HP Potion] +2500 HP

20x [C-Class MP Potion] +2500 MP

I raise an eyebrow while walking over to a grey-haired older-looking man sitting behind a small counter with potions from E to C class lined up very neatly.

"Good evening, are you in the market for any potions today?"

I nod while examining them closely. This is the first time I've seen a C-Class potion. They're much more compact than the E or D-Class bottles I've purchased before. There's no need for me to buy MP potions, plundering mana from crystals is much more efficient.

During the exams, every time I wanted to get back up to full health I had to drink 2 potions. Having some higher-grade HP items may be very beneficial. Being able to heal 2500HP in a single compact potion will allow me to act quicker in the heat of a battle.

"How much for the C-Class HP potions? All 20 of them."

The man begins tapping a small tablet under his counter, then turns it toward me. It reads out: [0.6C] in black text.

"That will be 0.6 credits. Just scan your tablet here and the transfer will happen in an instant."

I nod slowly, then reach for my small silver square. Thrown off by this new technology, I don't even try to throw him a counteroffer. I'm sure I could have gotten them for under 0.5 credits if I tried...

"Uhh- Sure, here you go-"

The two tablets flash with a dim white light, then the merchant smiles and hands me a bag full of potions.

"Appreciate your business today, see you again soon!"

He waves me off before I even think of a reply. I just mutter out a quick "thank you" while continuing my walk back to my team. I place both the tablet with 4.4 credits left on it, and the 20 new HP potions into my item storage.

Arie, Maria, and Abby all stand by the merchant's counter patiently waiting for my return. Arie is the first to greet me, as the others begin walking back toward the lobby.

"Let's go, Sophie just made special arrangements for us. Our meeting with the Director is about to begin."

Chapter 147

The 4 of us walk out of the Association market and into the narrow hallway before making it to the elevator in the lobby.

With a press of a button, the sliding doors close and we're gliding upward to see the Director. This is a spur-of-the-moment meeting, but I can't say I wasn't expecting something like this to happen.

I'm certain that the only way to farm Strengthening Fragments is to defeat Titans. The older members in the Association must be pulling some kind of newbie C-Class hazing tradition. The only other option frightens me a bit to think about... Maybe the Director himself set us up to fail...

He is the most powerful person in the entire Vice Region. I'd have to be pretty stupid to think I could pull a fast one on him.

I gulp while activating my conceal skill and watching the numbers on the elevator display screen increase quickly.

Ding

We make it to the top floor, and the penthouse office suite comes into view as the doors slide open.

Brutus, the tall old man, sits at his desk sifting through a pile of neatly stacked papers. His deep voice echoes as we step forward into his open room overlooking the entire city.

"Welcome back. This is the first time I'm seeing you 4 all together. Please, sit down, make yourselves comfortable."

We approach.

Maria is grinning while hopping light on her feet, Abby is keeping a straight back and a professional smile, and Arie walks over with an emotionless gaze.

I manage a combination of all 3. With quick steps, I smirk but keep my emotions in check. I'm both excited to see what new tasks we have next week, but also anxious to hear what the old man has to say about us completing this impossible quota.

There are 4 comfortable-looking chairs in front of his desk in a perfect half circle. They match the white theme of the room with black accents on their arms and undersides to go along with the darker shade of his desk.

We sit down and the Director begins.

"First of all, I'd like to congratulate all of you for making it this far. You've completed your first week as C-Class Hunters contracted with the association. I'd like to celebrate. It's not every day a team of newcomers passes my entrance test."

He grins, then looks over to one of the empty white walls while pressing a small button underneath his desk.

To my surprise, a large section of the wall slides forward in the shape of a door. The tall pale-skinned, blond-haired assistant comes out from a secret room. She's holding a circular metal tray.

I take a peek in before the wall slides closed. It looks pretty similar to this study. White walls, a wide open glass window view of the city, a large desk sitting in the center, and even a long couch near the corner with all kinds of artwork hanging on the walls over it. It looks like she's added a little flair to her office.

The Director's voice rings through the room again.

"Some of you haven't met Samantha yet, this is my lovely assistant."

Both of them lock eyes and smile as she brings over the mysterious platter.

The woman places it on the desk before us, and my anticipation crumbles. I realize it's just 6 tall glasses with fizzling sour liquid.

Letting oh an exhale I mutter under my breath.

"More alcohol..."

I didn't realize how much people really drank until I couldn't drink myself. It seems like everyone just finds any excuse to get drunk.

The old man smiles and Samantha passes out glasses. He brings his forward and we all do the same.

"To growth, adaptability, creativity, and collaboration. I have full confidence that all of your partnerships with the Association will pave the way for remarkable achievements in the future to come. Cheers."

Clink

Our glasses come together, then I bring the drink to my lips. My mana stores begin to slowly drop as I finish the drink due to my poison resistance burning away the alcohol before I can feel a drop. It's not much, just a little over 100MP, but it's still annoying...

The Director speaks up again.

"Now, let's get down to business. There are a few things I'd like to talk to all of you about privately, it'd be best to split up into one on one meetings. You'll be receiving two tasks this week. One that you will complete as a team, and another that is specialized for each of your training."

I raise an eyebrow and glance at the others as the old grey-haired man continues.

"I'll start with Abby, then Maria, followed by Arie, and finally Jay. If the 3 of you could wait in the other room while I conduct a private meeting with each one of you that would be wonderful. Please, follow Samantha, she will keep you company."

Arie, Maria, and I stand up as the rectangular-shaped door comes sliding out of the wall seamlessly. We wave Abby goodbye and follow the pale-skinned assistant into her study. I hear the director's words trail off in the distance as the sliding door shuts.

"Well, Abby. How's the city life treating you? Big move from where you were located with the Association prior, how's the-"

Click

The white door shuts.

We all enter the secret side study and walk over to the long couch in the corner. The tall woman speaks up.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable. The Director likes to ramble, this may take a while."

She grins.

Maria chuckles and Arie jumps onto the couch in a dolphin dive manner to lightly shake the brightly colored paintings that contrast the white walls above. The professional mood of the evening has definitely shifted.

The 3 of them are a bit tipsy, that usually doesn't fail to lighten the atmosphere.

After about 10 minutes of cheerful conversation and watching the sunset from the top floor, the wall slides open and Maria steps out for her meeting as Abby comes in.

The green-haired girl is grinning ear to ear holding a small white diamond-shaped crystal. It glistens with rainbow accents and isn't more than 2cm long. She places it into her item box as she comes to sit down on the couch next to Arie.

Another 10 minutes go by and Maria comes back with the same little white stone in her hands. Arie gets up to leave, and Maria takes his place on the couch.

Finally, Arie returns. He doesn't come back holding anything in particular, but a wide smirk is plastered across his face.

It's my turn.

I walk through the open wall and make my way over to the large desk in the middle of the empty room and sit down on the chair that one of my previous teammates pulled forward to sit in front of the other 3.

The old man smiles while placing both of his hands in the center of his wide-open desk.

"Good to see you again, Jay."

I sit down and respond.

"Good to see you again too, Director."

He leans forward

"Let's address the elephant in the room... It seems you have been keeping an important detail from your teammates. Am I correct?"

The old grey-haired man lifts a small black crystal from under his desk.

"I design the first week of tests for new recruits to be nearly impossible, yet the 4 of you cleared it with ease. All of your teammates seem to be in the dark on the true nature of these Fragments."

I gulp as he continues.

"Based on your expression, I'm going to guess you're not so clueless when it comes to these item drops. There's no harm in telling me, it's not like you did anything wrong. I'm just a curious old man."

The Director leisurely spins the small obsidian-colored stone on his desk. Mesmerized by its rotations, I become lost in my own thoughts, observing it for a few seconds.

I reply in a low unwavering tone.

"I'm unsure what you're talking about-"

"Don't give me that."

He slams his hand down on the table to stop the spinning gem. It breaks me from my concentration. I shake my head, blink a few times, then sit up straight as the old man brings the shiny crystal closer to my face from across the desk.

"You and I both know these Fragments only drop from Titans. I don't care how you did it, but I know you defeated at least 10 of those anomalies. Your teammates were clueless to the fact, and Arie was scared straight at the mention of a Titan. So, my guess is you went in alone."

Feeling a lump in my throat, I swallow nervously and nod as he continues speaking.

"Good, good. As I said, there's no need to be on edge today. You were just following orders, how could I punish you for doing exactly what I asked?"

He pauses and the two of us are left in a room full of silence for a moment. I take a deep breath before replying with a blank, yet serious expression across my face.

"You're right. I farmed the Titans to fill this week's quota."

Director, I am grateful for your kindness, but I don't appreciate being lied to on my very first day of work in the Association."

He nods slowly and replies.

"I like to think of it as an entrance test, not a lie... Please hand me your assignment tablet. I'd like to update the data, the tasks will be much more straightforward this week. I hope that this is more to your liking."

I hand him my shimmering silver tablet and he begins to tinker with it. I reply as my quotas are being updated.

"What do you mean by an entrance test? Entrance to what?"

He grins.

"Now you're asking the right questions. Let me explain..."

".... Alright."

"Your extraction team passed my first test. I'd like to send all of you off on a very important mission next week... To the Dark Continent. You'll need special training to prepare yourselves."

The old man hands me back my tablet and I stare down at the updated tasks.

[Jay Soju]

[Available Credits]: 4.4

[C-Class]

[Team Weekly Quota]:

[Mana Crystals][0/200,000MU]

[Reward]: 5 Credits

[Individual Weekly Quota]:

[Horn of The Behemoth][0/1]

[Reward]: 5 Credits

"Your team's weekly task has been set to a reasonable mana crystal farming goal and I've assigned each of you a special Individual task. Yours is to obtain the Horn of The Behemoth. Defeating this monster will be an important step in furthering your training to become an Elite of the Association."

My eyes dart across the silver tablet taking in all this new information. Looking up, I start to reply, but the Director continues.

"The Behemoth is found on the 20th floor of the Vice City Labyrinth. I hope you're ready for a new challenge."

Chapter 148

A grin starts to creep across my face as the words "Vice City Labyrinth" come out of the Director's mouth.

Every time this Labyrinth is brought up, everyone always makes it sound so exclusive and impossible to enter. All I need to do is get in one time, then I'll have unlimited access... Forever. Finally, there's a way in.

I reply, failing to hide the goofy grin on my face.

"Oh yeah? The labyrinth...?"

Brutus nods, then sits back in his chair eyeing me up and down curiously.

"This week, there has been a rise in minor dungeon breaks near our county's northern border. They've begun to drift downward nearing the Vice Region. This exact same pattern occurs every single surge. Unfortunately, there has been less and less time between each surge. As I said earlier, we'll be sending a few teams out to the Dark Continent within 10 days to alleviate the excess mana build-up. I'd like for the 4 of you to be part of this expedition."

Silence fills the room once again as I think over all of this proposal the Director has thrown at me, then reply with another question.

"So... let me get all of this straight. You gave all the new recruits near-impossible tasks just to see who would be the best fit to join the other Elite squads on a Dark Continent raid mission? "

He nods confirming the answer as I continue.

"We passed your test, so this week, the 4 of us have been assigned to special individual training to prepare us for this raid?"

He nods again.

I smirk.

"Maybe you're not so bad, Mr. Director.... Is there anything I need to know about this Behemoth before taking it out?"

I pause, then jump back in for one last question.

"Oh... also... where is the Vice City Labyrinth...?"

The old man lets out a laugh.

"I hope I continue to grow on you. Your clearance for the Labyrinth has been updated. Ask any of the guards at the Dungeon Hub to scan your ID and they will show you the way in. The only reason I'm letting a new C-Class in unsupervised is because of your ability to handle Titans. The Behemoth may be at a similar or even greater difficulty level, so you must be entirely prepared before facing it."

I nod firmly as the Director continues.

"The Behemoth is the 20th-floor boss that separates regular hunters from the Elite. Less than 5% of hunters ever make it to a C-Class rank. Of that 5%, only 1% ever move on to the next stage. How many B-Class or higher-rated hunters have you seen? Not including me, or Rodrigo..."

I think to myself for a moment, then reply.

"None. I haven't thought about it much until now.... Everyone does seem to slow down after level 250 or so. Is it really that difficult to level up past C-Class?"

The old man nods slowly and clicks a small button on the side of his desk.

"Once you begin to climb the labyrinth, I believe you'll understand."

The wall slides open, and my teammates walk out followed by Samantha. The Director stands up and puts out his hand, I put out mind to shake it.

Ding

The elevator door opens and our meeting abruptly comes to an end as a few men in suits come walking in. Brutus gives me a smile as I turn to go.

"I'm a busy man, it's unfortunate we couldn't talk longer today. I'll see you soon Jay, good luck on your mission this week."

With a smile in return, I make my way to the elevator following the archer, ice wielder, and green-haired healer. The sliding door shuts and we glide down to the lobby on the bottom floor.

Leaving the Association HQ, Maria shows us all her quota card.

"Look at this! My solo mission is to farm Yetis. It's one of the Low-Grade C-Class dungeons. Apparently, they're Ice Magic Resistant so I'll have to figure out some new combats methods. I was assigned a C-Class Elite training partner, she's an Ice magic user too! What kind of assignments did you guys get?"

Abby interjects.

"I'm in a Low-Grade C-Class Dungeon too. The Director put me on a team with a C-Class Elite swordsman and Healer to train in the Mutant High Ogre dungeon. They're earth magic resistant, so I'll have to improve my combat. Plus, I'll learn how to properly utilize my restoration magic. "

Arie nods slowly, crossing his arms.

"I'm back in The Great Plains this week. A B-Class archer is coming into town to teach me how to improve my shots. My only task this week is to defeat a Titan."

He grins and turns to me, continuing to speak.

"Apparently, there's a trick to taking them out. I just need more training."

My eyes open wide as I watch the tan-skinned bow wielder fill up with excitement.

I reply with a smirk.

"You'll have to fill me in once you figure it out, I'll be in the Vice City Labyrinth this week. My mission is to clear floor 20."

The 4 of us make our way back to the Vanguard Heights. We've all received our assignments and agreed to hand in 50k MU worth of mana crystals each while we're off on our individual missions. This will be enough to satisfy the 200k MU quota.

The 3 of them have assigned training partners, I do not. Maybe it'd be nice to learn a thing or two from an Elite Hunter, but at the same time, I'm more excited that I get to dive into the Labyrinth alone...

We make it back to our residence and take the elevator up to floor 21 without a second of hesitation. We made it through our first week of work and all got paid, it's time to celebrate.

The 4 of us dine with good food, and strong drinks for a few hours. We check out the casino, blow through a few silver each, take a leisurely stroll through the shopping center, then go back in for more food and drinks.

This cycle continues...

As the night continues, the smiles on my teammates' faces grow, but I'm getting progressively more bored. Every sip I take gets nullified and the average IQ of my peers drops as the hours go on.

I have a good time, but before tomorrow, I have some business I need to take care of with a certain Dragon waiting for me at the back of a dungeon.

The sun completely sets and we all go back to our apartments.

Well, everyone but me.

I take the elevator down and head off to the Dungeon Hub, jump into a random D-Class portal, then teleport deep into The Great Plains. I activate my telepathy link as I near the Dragon in the sky.

"Ember, you'll be leaving this dungeon today. Ready for some action?"

With a powerful flap of the wings, my newest hunting partner lands on the ground next to me with a light thud.

"Most definitely, shall I collapse this dungeon?"

I let out a much-needed laugh after a long day, but reply quickly as Ember begins to glow light red.

"Hey! No... No collapsing of any dungeons right now."

The red glow of his [Mystic Grade] Plunderer skill dies down.

"Understood."

I let out a light sigh of relief, then grin.

"Tomorrow, I'll be heading into a Labyrinth. You'll be coming with me. We have some training to do."

Ember perks up, then gives me a toothy grin.

Over the last week, I've been thinking of a few ways to transport the 7-meter-long dragon. Letting him roam free in unoccupied dungeons is an option, but keeping him by my side would be much more beneficial to both of us.

I could use Dungeon Walker to bring him to the Labyrinth the moment I step foot in it, but there's been another potential option eating away at the back of my mind.

"Spacial Magic."

I activate my item storage ability, stretching out the white portal as far out as it can go. Within a matter of seconds, I stretch the entrance to the pocket dimension to around 4m in diameter. The perfect size to fit the mid-sized Dragon.

"I'd like to test something out. This is my very own pocket dimension, I believe it functions similarly to a Titan's Domain. Please, step inside. Let me know what you see in there."

Without hesitation the majestic creature moves forward, disappearing into the swirling white mass. I close my storage and wait in silence.

Letting the artificial dungeon sun beat down on the back of my neck, I wait around for 10 minutes or so.

Next, I open my item storage portal. The white mass of energy expands up to about 4m again and Ember falls out, gracefully landing on his feet. I could sense his presence in my storage, but there were no movements or signs of life until the moment he popped out in front of me.

The Dragon speaks through our link.

"Shall we begin?"

"..."

I smile.

"We're already done. It seems like my item storage really does bend reality similarly to my past experiences with a pocket dimension, just in the opposite way... Whatever I put in, isn't affected by the time moving forward in the outside world."

We stand in silence for a few seconds yet again, the Ember responds.

"Well, that's convenient."

I let out a chuckle.

"Yeah... I guess it is."

Opening up my item storage again, Ember steps in and we leave The Great Plains moments later.

With a smirk plastered across my face and the cool night air blowing through my hair, I walk back to the Vanguard Heights to get a good night of sleep.

My first day diving into the Vice City Labyrinth will begin bright and early tomorrow morning.

Chapter 149

After a long night of rest, I wake up ready to begin a new week of training.

Today, I'll be entering the Vice City Labyrinth.

I hop out of bed to take in the wide-open view of the city below me. I'm 42 stories up, no matter the weather, the view is always incredible. It's early in the morning, so the sun rises up over the horizon casting orange light through the low clouds.

Taking the elevator downstairs, and walking through the empty lobby, I begin my walk to the Dungeon Hub before the morning crowd of hunters gets a chance to crowd the square.

I walk over to the C-Class gate, show the blond-haired guard my ID, then ask him for directions.

"Hey, how do I get to the Vice City Labyrinth? I just got clearance today."

He looks at me with a smug, yet impressed nod, then points behind him to the moving staircase about 15m away. It's guarded by 2 more men from the association. I've seen parties go back there before, but they always wore Association uniforms and seemed to be in a whole different league than me.

It seems it's my turn to ride that escalator upwards.

"Thanks. Appreciate it."

I give the guard a firm nod and head over with my ID in hand. As I approach, I get a better look at the two men on duty. They're wearing full armor and have shields ready by their sides. Both of them seem to be tanks. One is middle-aged with tan skin, a black beard, and a bald head while the other is younger with fair skin and a full head of glossy black hair.

I use inspect on both of them.

[Lv. 289]

[Lv. 314]

The older guard, level 314, looks me up and down as I approach.

"Hey kid, I think you're headed the wrong way. The dungeons are behind ya!"

I flip my Hunter's License toward him to show my name and rank. With an eye roll and a look of disgust on the older guard's face, he takes my ID and places it on the small metal scanner.

"A new C-Class recruit going solo in the Labyrinth? Yeah right, there-"

He's cut off by the small green glowing light shown by the sensor. The bearded guard looks at his younger counterpart with his mouth wide open. Both of them shrug, then he hands my ID back to me.

"I- Sorry I jumped to conclusions. You must be one of the newer recruits. I wasn't aware there were any Elites in the batch of hunters that just came in."

I take my card and give him a professional smile and nod as I get onto the moving stairs upwards.

"Thanks, have a good day!"

This is a pretty odd feeling, going up instead of down. I've gotten pretty used to going underground in order to dungeon dive. I wonder what's up here? Also... did he just call me an Elite?

As I slowly move up the mana-powered stairway, I see another set of guards eyeing me up and down near the top.

It's another pair of tanks in full shining armor... The Association really keeps this place guarded well. I use inspect as I get closer and closer.

[Lv. 348]

[Lv. 366]

Both of these guards seem to be much older, if I look close enough I'd definitely spot a few grey hairs. They must be hunters working for the Association full-time, leveling up slowly and collecting their pay. It's an honest living, I'm just focused on another path.

The level 366 wearing thin-framed glasses and a bright smile greets me.

"A newcomer? You must be from the class that came in last week. Am I right?"

I hand my ID over to his outreached hand. He takes it politely and scans it again as I reply.

"Yep. Just joined the Association. A pleasure to meet you, I'll be seeing you a lot in the future."

As the green light on the scanner flashes again he hands my card back to me. I walk past with a wave goodbye.

In front of me, there's a narrow hallway that leads to a silver door no more than 10m away. The walls are black, similar to the lining of the train station down below in the Dungeon Hub.

The small black scanner on the front of the silver door catches my eye. I mumble under my breath as I approach.

"They sure don't mess around with security measures here..."

Placing my card against the scanner, it flashes green and the final door opens with a light click. I walk through and it closes behind me immediately.

I'm left in a black box 10m tall and wide, with a silver door to my back. The only other thing in this room is a large bright green swirling mass of energy. The Vice City Labyrinth portal.

I blink a few times with a sense of awe and confusion.

The Labyrinth portal was right here all along... Right above the Dungeon Hub, there are dozens and dozens of floors filled with monsters more powerful than anyone in this city could ever dream to handle. This is one of the oldest standing Labyrinths in existence.

It's just sitting here at the center of the city, for decades... No one has managed to make it to the top floor.

After staring at the portal for a few seconds, I nod firmly and I step through, entering my new training grounds.

I'm teleported into a goblin dungeon on the first floor. The tall grass sways in the light breeze and the artificial dungeon sun shines bright.

Taking the first floor slow and steady, I enjoy my morning stroll, sending level 5-10 goblins flying with single kicks to the side as they mindlessly charge at me.

By the time I get about 1km into the first dungeon, I activate my enemy detection skill to make sure no one else is around as I release Ember from my pocket dimension.

The Dragon rises from the ground after falling from the spacial magic portal, flexing his wings and emitting a soft red glow as he senses the shifts of mana density in the surrounding air.

"So this is the Labyrinth."

I grin, looking up at the monster.

"It is. Our goal this week is to defeat the boss on the 20th floor."

Ember flaps his long glossy black-scaled wings, hovering 10m or so up in the air before replying. His head is held high and the crimson glow around him stays activated.

"The structure we're in has many floors... The 20th is the least of our worries..."

With a confident and eager smile, I channel my wind magic, propelling myself upward with a few air-steps. I gracefully ascend to meet the Dragon in the sky. Landing on his sturdy back, I reply through our link.

"We'll face those enemies when we get there, let's climb one floor at a time."

Holding on tight with both my legs, Ember flies high up into the sky, and our adventure begins. As the wind whisks through my hair, a refreshing coolness fills my mind, invigorating my senses.

It's a short ride, but a sweet one. We make it to the first-floor boss in mere minutes. Dragon transportation is the way to travel! We'll make it through these floors in no time, I'll be able to use Dungeon Walker to any floor I fancy by the end of the day!

The only caveat, is I can't sense what's on the floors above me just yet. I make sure to put Ember safely in my pocket dimension and scout out the floor with enemy detection to make sure no other hunters are present before letting him roam free.

We continue this process over and over. The first 5 floors are all familiar spawns like goblins, wolves, slimes, rats, and other E and low-grade D-Class monsters.

The next few are a breeze as well. The mobs get a bit tougher, like trolls, ogres, and hobgoblins, but we soar through each floor unscathed.

On average, we're clearing entire levels in less than 30 minutes. It's not until 5 hours later, that we run into an unexpected development on floor 10.

As I defeat the level 244 Minotaur boss on floor 9, I open my spacial magic portal for Ember to hop in. He does so and I wait for the white transfer light to appear.

It does, and I activate my enemy detection. As I find myself materializing on the 10th floor, I go on high alert. Over a dozen alarms go off in my mind's eye as I detect threats over level 300 scattered nearby, one is even well over 400...

I clench my jaw and take out both of my blades while activating my stat-boosting skills, igniting my body into a ball of flames.

Whatever base-level monsters have come to greet me on this 10th floor, they're much more skilled than I was expecting.

As the white light fades away from my vision I continue gritting my teeth in anticipation. Determined to face whatever monsters lie ahead, I strain my senses, squinting to make out what exactly the danger that looms before me looks like.

A surprised voice with a hint of amusement rings out in my ears.

"Hey, hey! Chill out, man! We're hunters, we're on the same team here!"

My vision clears, and I can't believe my eyes...

A small stone pathway has formed beneath my feet, and I'm greeted by a smiling hunter with red hair and green eyes. He raises both his hand defensively, laughing, trying to calm me down.

My eyes dart around, taking in the view, and tracking all of the enemies I previously spotted on my radar.

They're all hunters.

I let out a whisper under my breath while deactivating my skills.

"What... is this place?"

The soil is rocky in all directions with thin patches of grass. Small stone formations scatter across the landscape, and larger mountains jut up in the distance. The sky is blue with a few small clouds and the air is cool and crisp.

The red-haired man shows me a bright white smile and turns to point down the small pathway.

To my surprise, there's a village center on the 10th floor of the Vice City Labyrinth. With half a dozen small shacks and merchant stands lining the little road beneath my feet, I watch hunters trade loot and food. I gaze off in the distance to see a large Inn-like structure about 200m away with smoke coming out of a tall chimney.

I place my weapons into my item storage while staring at the view wide-eyed and speechless. The tall fiery haired man speaks up again.

"Welcome to the 10th-floor Labyrinth checkpoint. Take advantage of the Association-run vendors to buy and sell any loot you've acquired or need during your journey. Should you require rest or relaxation, the Inn is available to you before continuing to any other floors. Come on, let me give you a quick tour!"

Chapter 150

Gradually, my muscles loosen. All my skills deactivate, and I shift my focus to the peculiar surroundings. Meanwhile, the red-haired man maintains his pleasant smile, seemingly unaffected by my flashy arrival.

"My name is Rylan by the way. If you're making an entrance like that, this must be your first time on the 10th floor."

"I'm Jay. It is my first time..."

After I reply, the ginger-haired man begins to walk down the light grey stone pathway toward the small cluster of shops and merchant stands.

Curiously, I follow. He continues talking as we pass by the first vendor, an older gentleman offering to buy mana crystals from the floors below.

"Usually it takes Hunters at least 24 hours to make it up to floor 10. It doesn't matter your level or abilities, the distance is just way too far!"

I nod while eyeing the inventory of the next merchant stand we walk by. There's food, water, potions, clothing, and even basic non-magical medicines.

Rylan continues.

"Floor 10 is the checkpoint where most logical hunters stop before traveling up or down any further. It's the perfect place to rest."

We pass a few more stands buying and selling various goods, then my temporary dungeon guide grins while pointing to our left. There's 2 men and a woman training with swords, daggers, and shields in a field about 50m off the path.

"Those are my teammates over there. We're headed to floor 16 to farm High Ogres tomorrow morning. The 4 of us have been training pretty hard these last few months, we might even face the boss soon and take a crack at floor 17."

I use inspect on the man in front of me.

[Lv. 329]

Then turn to his teammates.

[Lv. 331]

[Lv. 327]

[Lv. 326]

I reply.

"Hey- uh- why exactly are you giving me a tour...?"

Rylan laughs.

"I was a newbie once too! I'm just paying it forward, it's nice to have someone show you around the place, isn't it? Old habit, I used to be a teacher."

I smirk and roll my eyes, letting out a sarcastic response.

"You've got nothing better to do, huh?"

He throws his arm around my shoulder, ignoring my remark.

"Come on, this way!"

As we approach the Inn at the end of the long stone pathway I quickly turn my head to Appraise Rylan and his teammate to realize a few simple facts...

First, they have pretty decent weapons and armor. Some 30-50% stat-boosting items along with 300+ stat-boosting gear aren't anything to laugh at. The unfortunate discovery lies in their set of skills.

Among them, two possess the ability of Body Hardening, enhancing their physical defenses. The red-haired leader of the group has Swordsmanship. Then finally, the short-haired woman in their party possesses Dagger Mastery.

They're useful skills, but pretty basic. It makes a lot more sense now how training for months only allows them to jump one floor in the Labyrinth. There is nothing special about their squad...

I turn my head all the way around to get a full Appraisal of nearly a dozen hunters in the shopping area.

A frown begins to form across my face as I realize everyone here is just mindlessly farming for the Association. Taking into account their physical appearances, my guess is I'm the youngest one on this floor by at least a decade...

Sometimes I forget my squad is the cream of the crop. I should keep my head down and stay as low-key as I can. Being the young show-off is never a good first impression.

I gulp, swinging my head back around to examine the 2 story-tall Inn we're slowly approaching. It's made of the same grey-colored brick the path beneath my feet is constructed of.

The building before us spans a considerable width, measuring 30 meters from left to right. Its height reaches about 10 meters, while its length stretches back around 20 meters.

There's about a dozen small windows on the front side, and its sole chimney still puffs out smoke. Rylan creaks open the poorly crafted wooden door at the entrance and we walk into the small tavern-like lobby.

There's a staircase at the back corner of the room next to a long desk being manned by a shorter black-haired gentleman in a suit and silver glasses.

There are drinks lined up behind him, but also papers and room keys. It looks like a half-bar half-hotel lobby receptionist desk.

The 10 meters of room in front of him are filled with circular tables and chairs. Another dozen or so hunters fill the Inn holding drinks, eating food, and sifting through their loot.

Darting my eyes back and forth I scan most of them as we make our way to the long wooden check-in desk at the back. They're all level 270-330 middle-aged hunters, carrying average gear, and wielding common skills.

Our footsteps creek the tavern floor as we make our way through the small crowd. A couple of heads turn to nod or smile at the redhead leading the way, he must be a regular around here. We make it to the front desk and the short man slightly bows his head before looking up.

"Good to see you again Rylan, who's your guest? Shall I make arrangements for your party to book another room?"

He shakes his head and motions for me to step forward.

"Mr. Conway, please, meet Jay. Jay, meet the 10th-floor Inn keeper, Mr. Conway."

I step forward with a hand outstretched to meet his for a shake before replying.

"Nice to meet you. I guess I'd like to book a room."

The short man bows awkwardly again, then sifts through the underside of his counter to pull out a key labeled "R202" in small black print.

"Let me see your hunter's license, I'll put it on your account."

I raise an eyebrow while reaching for my ID, but decide not to question it. I hand the man my card and he inputs a few details onto a small silver tablet before handing it back and sliding me the key.

"There you go, Jay. You're all set. Looks like this really is your first day in the labyrinth. It says here you got your initial clearance less than 24 hours ago. You must have been really eager to make it up this far in such a short amount of time."

I gulp, then reply with a smile and a nod.

"I- guess that's true, I've been looking forward to hunting in here ever since I joined the Association."

The older man starts to speak, but his words are cut off by a sudden rhythmic stomping sound that catches our attention. We instinctively turn our heads in unison as the echoing footsteps grow louder, coming down the stairway next to us.

I turn my head back to meet Rylan's gaze, he just shrugs, crossing his arms and watching the stairs in eager amusement.

The footsteps grow louder until I see a pair of jet-black boots hitting the hardwood stairs with unnecessary dramatic effect.

The figure's black jeans appear next as he slowly makes his way down the wooden steps. Golden rings with blue and black gems show on his fingers next, revealing the pale white skin of the mystery man before us.

With a final step and a long exhale a young man appears at the bottom of the stairs. His eyes are dark and sharp, while his hair is colored dark blue to match the theme of his rings.

He's my height, 180cm, possibly even a little taller, and seems to be under 25 years old. This is the first hunter I've seen all day near my age range, the only problem is his attitude.

With a scowl on his face, the young blue-haired man shifts his eyes around the room.

Many of the men and women sitting around the tables in the tavern avert their gaze, talk in a lower tone, and begin to slow their movements as he walks by.

Rylan still stands tall, while Mr. Conway smirks and shifts back, not to get involved.

Curiosity piqued, I activate my inspect and appraisal skills to scan the young man who has caused such a stir in the room.

[Lv. 461]

Active Items:

[Ring of Protection] +50% Defense

[Enchanted Ring of Quickness] +65% Speed

[Enchanted Ring of Agility] +65% Agility

[Enchanted Platinum Ring] +70% Strength

[Enchanted Platinum Necklace] +70% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Dark Elf Boots] +70% Speed

[Amulet of The Hydra] +75% Mental Strength +75% Water Summoning Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Water Summoning]

Swordsmanship [Legendary Grade]

A grin of my own finally creeps across my face. This is the first unique hunter I've seen all day.

He strides towards us, his gaze briefly meeting Rylan's before he rolls his eyes directing his attention to the innkeeper.

"Hey Conway, get me a drink, then I'm going back to sleep. Wake me up if a kid named Jay comes in anytime soon, I'm supposed to meet one of the new Association recruits and help him on his suicide mission to the 20th floor."

The Innkeeper lets out a sigh, then pours the rude hunter a glass of hard alcohol with a smile.

I clench my jaw and stay quiet, trying to figure out what exactly is going on here...

Why does this guy know my name, and why has he been here waiting for me...?

Mr. Conway hands over the freshly made drink and replies.

"Good morning to you too Fisher, there's actually a-"

The arrogant hunter snatches the drink from the Inn Keeper's hand, cutting him off mid-sentence to gulp down the full shot of golden brown liquid, then letting out a refreshing gasp.

"Thanks, old man."

He flips a silver coin in his direction while placing the empty glass back on the counter and starts walking away. Before stepping back up the wooden stairs, he turns to look at me.

"What are you staring at? You new here or something?"

"Yeah, I just got-"

He cuts me off while turning around and walking over with a sly grin.

"The name's Fisher. It must have been your loud mouth that woke me up! What's your name anyways?"

The blue-haired man raises an eyebrow with an angered expression as I respond.

"I'm Jay... Nice to meet you."