

D. Diver 191

Chapter 191

I take a deep breath of fresh air as I look out into the pale green dungeon and open up my link with Ember.

"It's time we head back to the 10th floor."

"Understood."

Ember flaps his wings and glides down to the nearest pillar of smooth white stone below us.

With a careful step, I hop off his back and land on the square 3-meter wide platform high up in the clouds. I open my item storage and Ember flies inside.

I look down at my arms and chest.

My armor is still completely destroyed. My shirt is ripped and the black line from the Greater Demon's Core is exposed on my left arm.

I attempt to heal the armor with my self regeneration skill like I normally would, but things go a bit differently than they did last time.

The dim white glow of mana begins to shine, but I get the odd urge to push further with a new depth of mana control that I haven't quite felt before...

The white glow begins to turn into tinted red. MP seeps out of my body at an alarming rate as the armor is healed, I can audibly hear a buzzing sound coming from the heavy metal gear.

Then, a sharp pain in my head and chest stops me from pushing further.

I grit my teeth and drop to one knee on the hard stone surface below me, letting out a gasp and deactivating all my skills.

I'm still way too worn out to be trying anything fancy...

I take the now completely restored armor set off and throw it into my item storage before standing up straight again.

Looking down, I still see the Demon's Black mark on my arm under my torn shirt. I reach into storage to grab a fresh long-sleeve as well as the new pair of magic lenses that Bri gave me during our last meeting.

I throw the shirt on and activate the new lenses of illusion. I'll only be wearing these in public, they'll always come off during battle or training from now on. Burning through that last pair was such a waste.

Now that my appearance problem is out of the way, I'll need to think of an alibi... I'll head back to the 10th-floor Inn, but telling people that I defeated the 20th-floor boss is a bad idea.

I take a deep breath, then close my eyes.

"Dungeon Walker."

The moment my transport skill is activated, severe pain surges through my head making it hard to visualize where I'm teleporting to.

Everything in my mind is foggy, but I lock onto a familiar point deep in the 10th-floor dungeon and let myself blip through.

I fall to the rocky floor at the base of the mountain I trained at earlier in my labyrinth climb. I spent a few days throwing attacks at this rock wall, I know it well.

It seems like in a tired state, tempting to familiar regions is much easier than places I've only been once.

I catch myself with both hands and fall to my knees, but look to my left and right before hitting the ground.

"No one else is here, that's a good sign."

I let out a sigh as my headache and chest pain slowly fades away and the sharp pain that travels all the way now my spine becomes much less irritating.

I get to my feet and begin slowly walking towards the Inn thinking through how exactly I'll explain my current weakened state and progress to anyone that asks.

It takes me nearly an hour to make it to the backside of the poorly built Inn. I can already hear hunters training and selling goods on the small stone path in front of it.

Even from just the short walk over, my muscles ache, and my skin itches. All I want to do is lie down, but I push forward and make my way to the building's entrance, opening the wooden door.

A few heads turn, but soon after, they go back to eating and drinking. I walk forward until I meet the Innkeeper's gaze.

He gives me a cheerful smile.

"Glad to see you're back Jay! Have a good training session? It sure looks like you're pretty worn out. Need a room?"

He lets out a chuckle as I lean forward to rest against the wooden counter.

I reply in a low, yet relieved tone.

"Yeah, a room would be great."

Without another word, the old man lets out a light whistle while writing something down under the wooden table and fetching me a key.

He hands me the small metal item with R209 labeled on the side of it in thin black writing.

I nod and take the room key.

"Thanks. I'll be back once I'm rested. If Rylan or Fisher come looking for me, tell them to wait. I need time to recover."

He gives me a grin, then turns his head to the stairs beside the counter.

"Sure thing, I'll let ya rest kid."

I push myself up off the counter and slowly walk toward the stairs.

It's already been a long day... My full body and mind are giving out on me after a 1km walk and a simple conversion.

My eyes are almost shut by the time I walk upstairs and find my way into the small yet cozy feeling room.

I collapse onto the bed wooden bed with white sheets and fall asleep almost instantly. Unfortunately, it isn't a peaceful slumber.

The full-body shivering from a few days ago comes back as I drift off into a half-dazed state of tossing and turning. These mana withdrawals are no joke.

I tough it out and get my rest. Eventually, I fall into a deeper sleep.

Time passes until I'm rudely awakened.

KNOCK *KNOCK* *KNOCK*

My eyes open wide as I come back to reality and almost fall off the small bed.

I shake my head and rub my eyes before swinging my legs over the edge to hear the wooden floor creak while walking over to the door mid-yawn.

"Who is it? What's going on... I thought I said not to wake me up-"

The excited voice of a familiar redhead cuts me off.

"Oh come on Jay, Conway said it's been over 16 hours since you got in! You need to eat something! Plus, ya gotta tell me how your climb went!"

I feel my stomach churn as I approach the door handle and lick my dry lips.

Apparently, It's been another 16 hours. I've been out of it for almost another full day again....

My muscles feel a bit more healed, and my head it less foggy enough though I'm dying for a good plate of food and some water.

I guess I've made a little progress, but I'm nowhere near 100%.

I fully open the door to see Rylan grinning ear to ear in the narrow hallway. The moment I do, he throws an arm around my shoulder and starts leading me back to the main Inn's main tavern downstairs.

My room door closes behind me as the C-Class starts talking my ear off like I never left.

"So, what happened? Did you go to Floor 19? Did you make it to the 20th? What's it like up there? It must have been tough!"

I chuckle a bit, realizing what I just accomplished is actually a pretty big deal.

He's asking if I even made it to the 19th floor. In reality... I make it to the 21st.

I beat the monster that separates normal hunters from Elites In my first week of training.

Well, technically I took over 2 months... but no one has to know that...

I let out a sigh, but can't help but let out a little grin.

It's time to begin my facade. I'll take Bri's advice and keep a low profile for now.

"I made it to the 19 Floor, yeah."

I smirk as we make it to the stairs and begin to walk down. Tables come into view and the sound of Association Hunters trading gear and eating food fills my ears.

Rylan responds.

"Oh yeah? How'd you fair against those monsters? I've heard even Fisher struggled with the 19th floor his first couple months of Elite training."

I nod slowly and reply.

"Yeah... They were tough, gave me quite the workout. I'll have to rest up before I try to go any further."

I stretch my arms and make a pain-filled expression to reinforce the fact that I'm in no condition to continue fighting right now.

Rylan smirks.

"So you're really going to try and defeat the 20th-floor Boos?"

I shrug.

"Maybe if Fisher comes back, I don't want to push my luck."

Rylan continues without even registering my response.

"I've heard stories about a cooldown timer on the 20th Floor Boss room. Apparently, once someone faces it, they can't leave the entire floor until they've defeated the boss. No new hunters can enter or leave until the fight is over. It takes a full 7 days for the entrance portal to open up again even if the boss is slain."

I clench my jaw and tighten my gaze at the words that come out of the redhead's mouth... My mind starts racing for a moment as we make it down to the tavern's main floor.

I curse under my breath as I look up to see Conway smiling and setting up a table with a feast fit for kings upon my arrival. The old man waves at both of us and we begin to walk over.

This whole situation just got a lot more complicated.

If Fisher comes back anytime soon, he'll most likely want to face the 20th floor to complete our weekly quotas. It's not going to be an easy task to talk my way out of this one...

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I put on a smile as Rylan continues to hold his arm around my shoulder tightly. We walk over to the nearest wooden table being offered to us by the old cheerful Innkeeper.

"Sit down boys, it's hot off the stove!"

Rylan releases me from his grip and takes a seat, I start to sit down as well and the old man continues talking.

"I know you wanted some time to rest, but I thought you could use a good meal right about now, was I wrong?"

I chuckle and take my seat, hearing my stomach gurgle at the sight of steaming hot food and cold drinks in front of me.

"No, you weren't wrong at all. I appreciate it, Conway."

With a slight bow, the kind innkeeper turns and waves as he walks into the back room behind his check-in counter.

"Welcome back Jay, enjoy."

I let out a sigh with my eyes locked on the meal in front of me, then dig in.

I pay no mind to any of the hunters eating their meals and trading goods on the tables nearby. Even Rylan's presence begins to leave my conscious thoughts as I become fixated on the meal before me.

Every bite rejuvenates me more and more. I'm fully invested, body and mind.

Over 10 minutes pass before the redhead's voice finally hits my ear.

"Hey Jay, want to hear something wild?"

I look up, beginning to feel much more satisfied. I shake myself out of the small trance and sit back while replying.

"Sure...What's up?"

Rylan crosses his arms, looking a bit annoyed.

"Remember those nobles we ran into the other day before you went off o your own? Apparently, they made it up to the 19th floor, just like you. They took out a ton of the base-level monsters. Can ya believe that?"

I raise an eyebrow, then rely in a low tone.

"Hmph. Really?"

He nods, placing both hands back on the wooden table.

"Yeah, they even passed through to our resting camp with a collection of really rare swords. They must have really killed a lot of them!"

I slowly nod, thinking to myself.

Those nobles didn't seem that strong to me. Their levels were nowhere near high enough and I've even fought their leader back when I had no mana control training at all... and I was a near-even match for him.

Something isn't adding up, but it's not my biggest concern at the moment. He's probably just collecting gear for his family to sell or something, it's none of my business.

Although my 10 minutes of bliss while eating were nice, now the real problem at hand has to be figured out.

The fact that the 20th Floor Boss supposedly has a 7-day cooldown timer is rather troubling. I won't take Rylan's word for fact, but it's more than enough for me to worry about the possibility of it being true.

I clench my jaw, then speak up.

"Hey, do you know when Fisher is getting back? I- I wanted to see if I could face the 20th Floor boss..."

I create a small item storage portal beneath the table and pull out the small white transport crystal the blue-haired Elite gave me before he left, then put it up in front of Ryan's eyes.

"Or ya know, I could face it myself if he takes too long. I still haven't used my emergency exit."

I smirk and put the crystal down, but don't get the response I expected. Rylan pauses for a moment, the replies in a softer tone.

"There's... been no word from Fisher or any of the others in his Elite squad that left a few days back. They should have returned by now..."

I nod slowly, catching onto his serious tone. The redhead continues.

"I assume they'll still want your new squad in training to go out and help defend the northern border. It's just..."

"I'm not sure what's taking so long... If they can't finish the job, I don't know how much your squad will help-"

I cut him off.

"Got it. Understood."

I take a deep breath, faking a look of concern.

Rylan looks upset. Fisher was his student, he's probably very worried about his extended absence.

It seems there's some trouble brewing for the Association. First, an urgent mission, and now a full Elite squad is missing...

Sounds fishy, but this all works out perfectly for me. I couldn't have asked for a more perfect turn of events.

I stand up, looking down on the redhead, and speak in a volume just above necessary to get the attention of hunters at the tables surrounding us with my next line.

"Rylan. I'm going to face the 20th Floor Boss. I may not win, but at least I'll know the difficulties ahead. I'll make sure to say hi to Fisher when I see him in the dark continent soon. I'm sure he's fine."

The redhead shows me a thin smile and perks up a bit.

Letting out a sigh, I sit back down and Rylan relaxes as well.

We finish up our meal, share small talk about the association, and I throw the white transfer crystal back into my storage after repeatedly assuring Rylan that I'll use it if I get into any trouble while on the higher floors.

In reality, I plan to use it no matter what.

If that boss room is actually closed off, using the crystal to transport away will be the perfect excuse. I can just say I ran from the fight and that's why the room is closed for any future hunters that try to enter.

It's simple, but I don't see how it won't work.

My soreness and MP withdrawal effects are much less noticeable by the end of our feast. I can fight at 40-50% now if I needed to. It's great progress, but it feels like it'll take a while to regain my full capabilities. This won't be a quick recovery, time will tell.

I let out a satisfied sigh and turn to Rylan.

"Well, now is as good a time as ever for me to get going. Don't ya think?"

With a smirk, I stand up from my chair at the table and put out my hand for the redhead to shake it.

He replies, standing up and shaking my outreached hand.

"Y-You're leaving already?"

I give him a firm nod.

"Might as well. I'm fully rested and have a full stomach, there's no better time to start my journey."

I turn around to see the old Innkeeper come out from his backroom right on cue. I take the small metal key out of my pocket as we make eye contact and throw it at him from a few meters away.

"Appreciate you, old man. I'll be out for a while."

Conway catches the key and gives me a firm nod.

I turn back to Rylan.

He gulps.

"I'm starting to understand why they picked you to become an Elite... You never take a break do you?"

I chuckle, turning to the door.

"I guess not."

The redheaded hunter waves.

"Hey Jay, good luck."

I nod, replying while walking through the tables full of low-level C-Class hunters.

"Thanks for showing me around Rylan. If I'm not back soon, I'm sure we'll still meet again."

The poorly crafted wooden door swings open and I walk out into the open air of the dungeon.

Making a quick right turn, I make my way around the back side of the Inn and begin trekking deep into the 10th floor.

Once out of sight, I Dungeon Walk upwards.

I prepare myself for the sharp pain and exhaustion that follows, but my real reaction isn't as bad as my mental image.

I feel a slight headache for a fraction of a second, and my breathing gets a bit healthier the moment I blip back into reality, but it fades away quickly.

I've healed enough to Dungeon Walk without much trouble, this is good.

Although I'd love to check out the 20th and confirm my suspicions as soon as possible, I still have a mana-collecting quota to fill. I need over 20k MP worth of crystals before I think about going back to the Association.

I teleport up to the High Ogre Dungeon.

These will be low 300 leveled monsters. Easy for me to kill, but strong enough to drop decent loot. It shouldn't take more than a few hours to farm what I need, even in my current state.

I take a deep breath and get to work.

Pulling out my sword and activating my enemy detection skill, I find my first target and teleport over to it.

It's a High Orge, nothing too special. Nearly 4 meters tall, wearing a full suit of lightweight armor, and wielding its own long silver sword.

I channel a few hundred MP into an attack and let it fly, slicing the Ogre in two without a hint of resistance.

It falls to the floor moments later, hardly even registering that an attacker appeared. I slowly walk over to its corpse and wait for the monster to dissolve.

A new window of blue text fills my vision...

I grin creeps across my face as I read what it says.

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-422

[YES][NO]

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I stare down at the defeated High Orge at my feet, and a new blue text window fills my vision.

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-422

[YES][NO]

I whisper under my breath.

"Mana Manipulation...?"

I open my status, checking to confirm that I have two brand new Advanced Combat Magic Skills: Mana Manipulation, and Earth Summoning.

I remember absorbing both abilities, but testing them out has been the last thing on my mind. I've been more focused on healing up and making sure the Association doesn't find out about my accelerated progress too fast.

Testing the full range of my power was going to wait until I could actually use the power without these painful headaches and chest pains.

I blink a few times, then turn back to the glowing blue screen that hovers over the defeated monster.

I smirk, remembering the Knights I fought before the Floor Boss appeared, this must be the same ability.

I select "300" for a level, then choose "YES".

Immediately, my right hand begins to glow red and I feel the sensation of mana leaving my body fast.

Checking my status, I watch my bar go down a few hundred MP.

Thin pink threads leave my red glowing hand and begin floating through the air before connecting to the top of the Dead Ogre's Head.

As they connect, the strands turn white, then go completely invisible to the naked eye.

The thin strings of mana begin stitching the Ogre's sliced body back together and I watch the monster stand back up to its feet.

The beast's eyes are open, but there's no sign of life...

It grips its sword and stares forward without moving a muscle. A new blue screen fills my vision.

[Temporary Minion] Level: 300

Deactivate: [YES][NO]

I look the monster up and down in awe.

I can feel the mana that was sucked out of me during the activation flow from my fingertips and into the body of this lifeless creature.

I close my eyes... Then lift the Ogre's arm carrying its sword with only my mind. I open my eyes and it does exactly what I pictured it would.

I smirk, then picture the monster taking a step forward. It does instantaneously, making the ground crunch under its feet.

I let out a chuckle, making the mana thread connected to its head twist and turn. The 4-meter tall monster effortlessly moves to my every command.

It feels like an extension of myself. Almost as if I'm the one in its body, making every movement with exact precision.

The only downside I feel is the further away it gets, the less precise and clear the connection becomes. The longer I stay in control, extra MP is also being used to maintain the connection. It's a small amount, but enough to set my headache in motion again.

Before I can do much more testing, the corpse of the beast begins to dissolve. As its body disintegrates, it leaves behind a single mana crystal and my bond is severed.

The thin strand of mana connecting me to the creature fades into thin air. I nod with tightened lips, letting out a sigh and collecting the dropped crystal, and throwing it in my item storage.

"Makes sense."

This new temporary minion perk must only work on freshly defeated opponents. That doesn't explain how the 20th-Floor Boss imbued its mana into all those armor sets...

I'll have to do more testing when I'm at full strength. In the meantime, I can still try a few more things.

I activate Advanced Mana Manipulation again along with my All-Seeing Eye. The entire Dungeon lights up in my mind's eye and I'm overwhelmed with the view.

For nearly 10 meters in all directions, I feel the mana following through the ground and air around me, just like it would through my sword. I'm able to control all of it...

I gasp, as a sharp pain runs through my chest and up into the back of my head.

A ringing sound begins to fill my ears and slowly gets stronger and stronger until I'm forced to deactivate all my skills.

Gritting my teeth, I curse under my breath.

These side effects and mana withdrawals are really holding me back. For a moment there, it felt like I was nearly invincible. It felt like I could have warped the mana beneath my feet into anything I wanted...

I swallow hard as my headache fades and I drink an MP potion. My bar fell over 1000MP from just that attempt.

I finish up the pink liquid and throw the empty glass bottle back into my storage.

"I'll try something a bit more simple."

I activate my Advanced Earth Summoning magic next. This one feels much easier to control, it's very similar to my fire summoning actually.

I lift my right hand up in the air and a small ball of stone begins to form in my palm.

It floats effortlessly in a liquid state, just like how the Behemoth turned the castle floor into its personal malleable matter. I grin, then start shifting the small light brown ball of stone into different shapes.

First, a sphere, then a cube. Next, I form the liquid matter into a small stone dagger and a thin brown arrow. Finally, I shape the rock back into a sphere and drop the stone to the ground.

Thud

It hits the floor and I deactivate my skill. The mass stays put, but my MP bar has dropped about a hundred points.

My headache starts to come back, but it fades before it becomes anywhere near as bad as my last attempt. Using a few hundred MP at a time seems to be just fine, I'll keep that in mind.

"Dungeon Walker."

I teleport to the nearest High Ogre and get back to work.

After spending 3 hours farming, I manage to collect the required 20k MP worth of crystals for my quota. Once finished, I find a secluded area up on a high peak to take a break.

There, I contemplate my next moves while enjoying a meal of fruit, meat, and water from my item storage. Another 2 hours pass and my mind is made up.

It's time to see if the cooldown timer is real or not. If it is, now is as good a time as any to use that transport crystal.

I stand up and put away all my food and water, gripping my sword and Dungeon Walking to the small narrow hallway between the 19th and 20th floors.

The stone around me feels cold, and my footsteps echo as I start to walk forward. This hallway is much darker than last time without Ember's flames to guide the way.

Another thing it's lacking is the floating grey boss room portal at the backside.

I whisper under my breath, approaching the back wall of hard stone.

"Rylan was right... No one can find out about this..."

I activate my Dungeon Walker skill again, searching for the Boss room floor that I'd previously fought on just a few days ago.

It's all blank. There's nothing there but a void of mana twisting and turning. It's similar to the inside of a Titan's domain. Teleporting into that is just asking for trouble, there's no guarantee of getting out.

I gulp, then deactivate my teleportation skill. That confirms it. The boss room has been defeated and the cooldown timer is real.

No one from the Association can find out about this. As I planned earlier, I'll need to fake my failure. It needs to seem as though I've really tried to face the boss and was way out of my league.

I need to set the scene...

Remembering back to how I actually looked after the battle was over, I let out a sigh and find an old shirt in my item storage to put on and tear to pieces.

With a smirk, I activate my Earth Summoning skill and begin covering my face, boots, elbows, and knees in a layer of dirt.

Next, I take my sword and ignite it into flames.

I make sure my breathing is heavy before reaching into my storage to take out the small white glistening transport crystal.

With a hesitant look only my face, I summon a glossy sword of stone similar to the one the knight used in battle. Of course, mine is much smaller and doesn't have a hint of mana shelling lining it.

Closing my eyes, I send it flying into my side, making sure to miss any vital spots.

I let out a grunt, as HP falls off my health bar. I whisper to myself as blood drips into the stone floor.

"It has to be more convincing..."

Rolling my eyes and letting out a sigh, I summon another glossy stone sword and give myself two more slashes.

They aren't bad wounds, but they look deep enough to the untrained eye to be legit. I'll just drink an HP potion before anyone gets too close to examine me.

Fisher said to use this crystal if I get into any trouble during my training. I assume the transport point for these items is going to be in a semi-public Association-owned area, so I'll make sure to dress the part.

It's now or never.

My headache is starting to kill me, and the ringing in my ears is getting unbearable.

I take out an HP potion and throw it in my back pocket.

Without another thought, I grip the white crystal hard in my left hand and it shatters to pieces.

I feel a warm energy envelop my entire arm. It travels up to my shoulder, then to my chest, and soon flows through my entire body.

My vision goes white, and the feeling of transportation magic forces itself over my whole body.

Seconds later, I fall to the ground. My sword hits a hard white flooring with a loud clang as I catch myself with two open palms.

My ears are still ringing and my breathing is heavier than ever. My vision is blurry, but I can see my own crimson blood dripping onto a glossy white surface below me.

I let out a gasp, that slowly turns into a chuckle while staring at the ground.

"I made it..."

My blurred vision starts to finally come back to normal and I stand to my feet. Taking the HP potion out of my back pocket, I start looking around to see where exactly I've landed.

An audible gulp comes out of my mouth as my gaze lifts from the pure white flooring to making eye contact with myself...

I'm standing in a square room, about 5 meters wide, with 3 full-walled mirrors and a heavy metal door on the 4th.

Both the floor and ceiling are covered in dense white mana shielding, and there doesn't seem to be an easy way out of here.

I murmur under my breath while my eyes dart back and forth.

"This... Is not what I was expecting..."

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I stare at myself in the mirror, then turn to see my reflection in 3 different angles. The first thing that comes to mind is the thought of someone staring back at me from the other side.

It may be an overly paranoid assumption, but it feels pretty reasonable to me right now.

The only break I get from the nauseating sight of mirrors infinitely reflecting my image back to me is a heavy metal door on the 4th wall of the small room.

It has no handles or keyholes. It's sealed off completely, most likely locked from the outside.

I activate conceal to hide all my skills and odd items except for my fire magic and blade handling skills. I'm back into Association territory, it is best to stay on my best behavior.

Thick red liquid continues to drip from my chest and abdomen. I have a few pretty deep wounds, and my HP bar is slowly ticking down as I lose more blood.

I uncork the HP potion in my left hand and drink it at once, still looking straight at myself in the mirror to my right.

I feel the cool green liquid start to heal my wounds, but it mostly just regenerates my HP. There's still severe visible scarring and it's painful to the touch.

A quick self regeneration would heal me up fine, but I'm still unsure if I'm being watched. It's better if I save using any suspicious skills for another time.

I squint my eyes and step closer to the mirrored wall on my right side. Less than half a meter away from the reflective surface, my gaze darts back and forth, then I activate my All-Seeing Eye.

The moment I turn my ability on, the pain in my head returns and I'm hit with an unsettlingly claustrophobic feeling. All I can sense is the room I'm standing in. The walls around me are shielded off with dense mana thicker than I can perceive in my weakened state.

I cut my skill off before my headache gets any worse, and let out a sigh.

This all makes sense, but it's a bit nerve-wracking...

Fisher did say if I were to transport here while touching a monster, it would come with me. The Association must have safety precautions to keep whatever transports in here contained until dealt with.

I gulp, then bring my hand up to the mirror before me and knock on the glass.

An odd sound rings out.

It's a combination of a muffled buzz being interrupted by each tap and a light echo following.

My gaze tightens even more and I place a finger up against the mirrored wall. It looks like my index finger is touching my reflection exactly, there's no gap at all...

This is much different from my mirror back home.

I bring my hand away from my reflection again, then ignite a small flame in the palm of my hand. It burns dark red, and the area of glass nearby begins to glow slightly, like the light is shining through.

I clench my jaw and look around, then yell out loud.

"Hey... I know you're watching! W-What is this place...?"

My head begins to spin as I piece everything together.

This much be a trap.. right?

I'm in a mana-shielded cell with a 2-way mirror on every side.

I curse under my breath.

"This is the Director's doing isn't it."

Gritting my teeth and ignite my whole arm into dark flames, then reach down to grab my sword.

I charge the remaining few hundred MP into an attack and start to run at the silver door at the back of the room. I'm filled with annoyance and anger, and can only blame myself for dropping my guard and just blindly transporting to wherever this crystal took me.

What was I thinking....

I begin to swing my sword at the silver door, but before I can release an attack, I hear an unfamiliar voice ring out from all directions within my tiny cell.

It's a man's voice, but it's very soft and calming.

"It's nice to meet you, Jay. Please, do calm yourself down. I'll open the door for you momentarily, there's no need to break it down."

"..."

I stop mid-swing, looking up at the ceiling.

"Who are you...? What is this place?"

There's silence for a few seconds. I leave my sword charged and aimed at the heavy silver door.

Click

It swings open towards me.

I take a step back, still keeping my sword locked straight ahead as I hear the same soothing voice that echoed throughout the room come out of the door.

"I wasn't expecting company so soon, it seems you were rash enough to face the 20th-Floor Boss just like the director predicted. He's really never wrong."

A tall pale-skinned man with thin black-framed glasses and short silver hair walks out from behind the door.

He's wearing a long dark purple cloak, with black pants and shiny dark-colored boots. If I had to guess he's not more than 30 years old.

The young man greets me with a genuine smile and looks me up and down before putting out his right hand for me to shake it.

"Nice to meet finally meet you in person, I've been hearing all about you. The names Leo."

I examine him closely, activating my Inspect and Appraisal skills while still pointing my flaming sword straight at his chest.

[Lv. 308]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Cloak] +103% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Artificer [Legendary Grade]

My gaze tightens even more as I concentrate on the interesting individual in front of me.

He's a much lower level than me, but has a legendary skill, Artificer... I've never seen anyone with this ability before.

The man speaks up again, turning his body to let me see down the hallway that stretches out through the open door.

It's long, with dark walls, and is dimly lit...

"Come on, I won't bite. Let me take you up to the surface. I have a few things to fill you in on after all."

I gulp, watching him pull his hand back and shrug as I continue to point my flaming sword upward now pointing straight at his head.

"You still haven't answered me. What is this place...? Where am I...?"

The man tightens his gaze on my sword, then looks down at the floor covered in my blood. He lets out a thin nervous smile, then it evolves into a chuckle before he responds.

"We're in the Association's HQ, right in the center of the capital."

"..."

"I assume you used one of my transport crystals. I've heard stories about the 20th-Floor Boss, but never made it past the 15th floor myself. I'm more of a craftsman, an Artificer actually-"

I cut him off as a few things begin to piece together in my mind. I take a step closer.

"Your transport crystals? What do you mean by that?."

He nods, gulping, and motioning for me to move the sword away from his neck while continuing to eye the floor covered in my blood.

"I really mean you no harm, Jay. As I said, I'm from the Association, same as you. We're on the same team here. It looks like you were bleeding badly, do you need anything else before we make our way to the outside world?"

My eyes continue to dart around as he shows me the open door behind him again with a genuine look of concern for himself and possibility even me as well.

I thrust my sword down to my side and put out the flames. He gives me a friendly smile and starts walking out the door while motioning for me to follow.

"To answer your question, those transport crystals are made in my lab. I'm the only Legendary Grade Artificer in the Vice region, after all, I tend to create a few neat gadgets and custom items for higher-ups and Elites at the Association."

I continue to listen and carefully walk through the heavy metal door of the mirror-lined room as he continues.

"I was going to meet you and your team tomorrow, but it seems we've met earlier than expected. Funny how things work out sometimes isn't it?"

I shrug, resting my sword on my side as the heavy door shuts behind me.

I follow the cloaked man down a narrow black hallway. There are white lights that shine down on us from the ceiling every 10 meters or so, making it dim and shadowy, but not dark enough to the point where I have trouble seeing.

To my left and right we pass many locked silver doors, just like the one I came out of.

None of them are labeled with any numbers or text, and they're all locked from the outside.

Our footsteps let out light echoes through the long narrow hallway, and my breathing begins to slow down the further we walk.

This man wasn't lying about his class, he's definitely not the combat type... There only thing that irks me is his connection to the Association. I've never seen these halls before, this place gives me an eerie feeling.

I continue to follow him in silence until we make it to the end of the corridor and arrive at a large elevator door.

The purple-cloaked Artificer taps his ID against the small sensor next to it and the silver double doors open up immediately. The card has an Association logo and a "C-Class" marking on it.

He steps inside and motions for me to follow.

"Let's head upstairs, we're pretty far down. This may take a while."

Chapter 195

"Let's head upstairs, we're pretty far down. This may take a while."

Leo, the C-Class Legendary Grade Artificer looks at me with a kind smile while standing behind the open doors of the elevator.

I hesitantly look behind my shoulder, then back at him. He seems nice and is definitely from the Association, but this all seems way too convenient.

I reply.

"We're really in the Hunters Association HQ? ... And did the director actually tell you I would be here?"

Leo slides the hood of his cloak down to reveal his glistening silver hair, then leans back in a more casual stance against the small silver rails in the elevator before replying.

"Well, he told me that he hoped I wouldn't have to meet you early, but there's a good chance I would. He's got some scary intuition."

Leo sighs, letting his posture relax even more while motioning for me to come into the elevator.

"Come on, it's getting late at night, you're lucky I was even here in the first place. After a few more tests, I was about to head home after a long day of work."

I let out a light gulp, then take one more look behind me before shrugging and entering the small elevator with the Artificer.

I turn my back to the wall and watch him closely as he presses a few buttons before the sliding doors close. From what I can make out, it looks like he's entering a code using the floor numbers as keys.

[1,1,5,5,3,6,7,10]

After watching and hearing 8 light clicking sounds, I see all the buttons flash blue for a fraction of a second. Once they stop glowing, the elevator begins to move upwards.

I bring my gaze back up to the young man's dark eyes, then ask a question.

"So uh- you said you were heading home after a long day of work? I know you make gadgets and items for the higher-ups and elites... but, what exactly do you even make? And what's this meeting tomorrow about anyways?"

I let out a bit of a frustrated sigh, continuing.

"Give me a straight-up answer, please. I hate how everyone is tip-toeing around me recently. Just tell me like it is...."

The elevator slowly begins to speed up as we make our way upwards. I hold onto the small railing behind me to ensure my balance as Leo responds.

"Well, like I said before. I'm an Artificer. If you give me enough raw dungeon drop items, I can make anything you need. Weapons, traps, custom items, you name it! I even made the B-Class-graded mana shielding in those rooms downstairs. Most of the newer higher-grade shielding in the capital is actually my work."

He shows a satisfied proud smirk.

The magical craftsman is almost glowing. He's... really into his job... Or a great actor...

My eyes tighten.

"So, why'd you join the Association in the first place?"

Without even a hint of a pause, he responds with a glimmer in his eyes.

"They approached me while I was still in school actually. I've always been into gadgets and magical crafting, but couldn't manage to make anything over a high E-Class rated item until I joined up with the Association."

I nod as he goes on and the elevator shakes slightly.

"The Artificer Class is rare, so it gave me an edge while career searching. Bigger magical item manufacturers and trade companies are always looking for new talent. There are usually a few people in every major city that have similar skills to me, like blacksmiths or normal craftsmanship skills."

He looks up at the ceiling as we continue to travel upwards, trying to remember something.

"I believe it was... almost 6 years ago now. The current Director himself approached me and offered a job. I couldn't say no... Soon after our agreement, I was teamed up with a few elites that power-leveled me past 300. Then next thing ya know I'm offered an experimental upgrade crystal and-"

I feel the elevator rattle and shake, then Leo tightens his lips.

"Sorry, I went off on a bit of a tenet there. I- haha maybe I shouldn't have said all that."

He shows me a bright smile and scratches the back of his head.

I reply.

"It's fine... I'm not one to talk. So- what? They just gave you a free skill upgrade? Are you in an exclusive contract? Are you... close with the Director?"

My gaze tightens even more as I start thinking about his position in the Association again, but he replies without any delay and a little chuckle.

"Close with the Director? I wouldn't say so. I hardly see the man once a year if I'm lucky these days. I just get my tasks and enjoy being able to experiment on rare items I would never get to see if I didn't have this gig."

His chuckle turns into a laugh.

"It's not like I'm held hostage down here, I can leave anytime I want."

Ding

The silver doors of the elevator open up and to my surprise, we're in the main lobby of the Vice City Association's HQ, just like he said.

I blink a few times, looking around to see an empty lobby. There's two security guards by the door, both between levels 150 and 200, but no one else.

I can see through the glass windows that it's the middle of the night. The sky is dark and the silence is already calming.

I step out onto the smooth white floor, then hear the silver elevator doors begin shutting behind me.

I turn to see Leo smiling and waving as the doors close.

"It was nice meeting you, Jay. A message should reach you and your team tomorrow. I'll see you again soon."

I stand with my mouth slightly open, not sure what else to say. So I don't say anything at all.

We were in the middle of a conversation, and just getting to the good part too...

Click

The sliding elevator doors shut, and I'm left in the middle of the empty lobby of the Association's HQ.

Leo seems like a nice guy. He overshares a lot... So, I'll make sure to keep that in mind. Apparently, I'll be seeing him again soon. I made it back to the outside world, and have a perfect alibi for "failing to defeat the Behemoth".

This little side mission has been successful in my eyes.

Letting out a sigh, I shrug and walk out the front door, giving the guards a head nod while making my way downtown.

It must be 1 or 2 am.

It's dark out, but the nearly full white moon lights up the sky with a dim glow.

I take a deep breath of the cool night air and start making my way through the empty city streets back toward the Vanguard Heights.

It feels like forever since I've seen this city....

In my mind, it's been over two months, so it makes sense. This is the perfect time for me to come back.

Although I hear some noises from late-night bars and the occasional pass-by, I'm more focused on the starry night sky and the sweet smell of the city's open space around me.

Dungeons may seem like they go on forever, but they're limited to a few dozen kilometers in any given direction.

There's nothing quite like the real world...

It feels so weird to be back. The city itself feels small, much smaller than how I left it the last.

Not physically small, just... smaller in the grand scheme of things.

Every day that passes, makes my life and simple worries seem like they don't matter at all. I'm growing more powerful every day. What really put everything into perspective is defeating that Floor Boss.

It's apparently one of the ultimate challenges for any hunter to become an Elite. People dream of coming near my level of strength, yet, all I feel is the need to get so much stronger.

I feel, isolated...

All these new powers, abilities, and new gateways for accelerated growth recently have made me feel much differently about my position in life.

Maybe I'm just comparing myself to the wrong people. Everyone on that 10th Floor seemed to be a complacent group of hunters that never feel the need to push their limits and put their lives on the line.

Even the Elite I met, Fisher. He took years to complete what I just overcame in less than a week of real-world time.

It feels like I'm the only one in the world that knows a secret, and it's my mission to keep taking full advantage of this power.

I whisper under my breath.

"I need to get stronger."

My boots echo through alleyways as I walk further into town. I peacefully watch the night sky as my luxury apartment building finally comes into view.

My whole body begins to become quite sore and my brain gets foggy as my eyes threaten to close on me.

My fatigue hits me like a brick wall as I walk through the front doors. It's like my mind and body were pushing it off until I had a safe place to rest. These are my natural battle instincts at play, even outside the dungeons.

I make my way through the front entrance and am greeted by two assistants. There's one woman at the front door and a man before the elevator, but don't pay them much mind.

I get up to my room, take a quick hot shower, then crawl into my loft-style bedroom to watch the city lights shine under the night sky until I drift off to sleep.

Chapter 196

I open my eyes and stretch my full body while letting out a satisfying yawn.

Looking out the glass window across my living room down below my bedroom loft, I can see the mid-day sun shining into my glass-walled apartment.

Smiling, I hop down to the main floor and start getting dressed while staring out at the city.

My muscles and joints feel almost as good as new, but there's still a faint sense of tightness in my back and shoulders.

I'm not exactly sure how long I slept, but it hit the spot.

I grab an item box and tie it around my waist before I leave, throwing my excess potions, crystals, sword, and a few miscellaneous items into it.

My plan is to go to the HQ and hand in my mana crystals to complete my quota. I'll try to meet up with the rest of my teammates if I can find them, it's been a while since I've seen Maria and the others.

I smirk.

"But first, breakfast."

I leave my apartment and take the elevator down to the 21st floor to enjoy a nice and peaceful meal at one of the cafes.

It's around noon, and this floor is pretty empty. There are a few workers and even fewer hunters. Everyone that lives in this building is signed with the Association, most Hunters are out in the Dungeons around this time of day.

I enjoy my peace and quiet, filling up on a hot meal in the comfort of my own home.

Letting out a chuckle, I whisper under my breath while leaving a silver coin on the table before I head downstairs.

"I've been doing this wrong all along, wouldn't it be nice to just sit back and relax here all week."

The idea is nice, but I'd go crazy in just a few days. It isn't exactly the path I've chosen or one I'd like to be on for too long.

Still laughing to myself, I take the elevator down to the lobby and start to walk out. I hear the voice of the older man that greeted me by the elevator on my way in last night.

"Good to see you're fully rested, Jay. Your company has been requested at the Association HQ... you have a mandatory meeting. You're to meet... well..."

The guard looks down at a piece of paper.

"...4 hours ago actually."

I stop mid-step and respond as the elevator closes behind me.

"Got it, better late than never right?"

I roll my eyes, remembering back to last light. It's probably just a meeting with Leo, the Artificer. There's nothing to worry about.

The lobby manager responds.

"Yes, it's urgent. I wish you luck."

I nod, then continue making my way through the lobby.

"Thanks."

He waves and gives me a friendly smile.

I walk out the front door and the hot sun overhead surprises me. The warmth feels nice, it puts me in a cheerful mood almost immediately.

With a full stomach and a satisfied grin, I begin my scroll back to the Association's HQ.

No more than 20 minutes later I arrive and walk straight through the front door. Immediately, I'm greeted by a tall blond-haired woman at the door.

She seems familiar, but I've completely forgotten if I've actually met her before or not.

The woman looks down at a small silver card, then back up at me.

"Jay, one of the new Elites in training right?"

I slow my pace down as the door shuts behind me.

"I-uh yeah, that's me."

She smiles and turns to the backside of the Lobby.

"The rest of your team is waiting for you in the lounge, you have an important meeting scheduled today. We've been trying to reach you for days."

I tighten my lips, but just nod and give her a thin smile.

"Thanks, I'll head back there now."

A few heads turn as I walk through the lobby. Some seem to be fresh E-Class recruits, while others are seasoned D and C-Class hunters.

They all have the same wide-eyed look on their faces like a monster is about to attack them, or maybe... like a celebrity is walking through.

The small crowds go silent as I reach into my item box and take out my ID to enter the first hallway to the back rooms.

I let out a sigh and close the door behind me.

Click

"That was weird..."

Scanning my card on the second door, I finally make my way to the mini-market and decide to make a pitstop before heading to the last room.

I see the faint outline of a familiar white-haired woman through all the neon and flashing lights of the small shops all around me. As I walk closer, I can see the grin across her face get wider and wider as she waves and calls out.

"Hey, Jay! Long time no see! I thought you were dead or somehtin-"

I give her a playfully annoyed look, but it evolves into a grin. This is the first time someone's cracked a joke at me all morning, everyone else has just been so serious.

I reply.

"Good to see you too Sophie. Long time no see indeed!"

While reaching into my item storage to grab my handfuls of mana crystals, the white-haired merchant woman replies.

"Congrats by the way, I'm sure you've heard it a million times, but it's pretty exciting to see you and your team become the next Elite squad this year. I saw the article about you all in the paper earlier this week."

I freeze up, placing the pink gems on the counter, then looking her straight in the eyes.

"The... article in the paper? What are you-"

Sophie lets out a laugh.

"You were in the Labyrinth training all this time, right... I forgot. They wrote about how you and your team cleared the C-Class exams in record time and were chosen directly by the Director and higher-ups on the spot to be this year's Elite squad."

I tighten my gaze and nod slowly, then let out a low response.

"Of... course they did..."

Sophie chuckles again while starting to weigh out my mana crystals. The pile fills the entire desk, but eventually reads out: 50,093.88MU.

Sophie nods and smiles at me.

"Well, you did your part, the rest of your teammates all handed in their portions earlier in the week, your tablet should update soon."

The short merchant woman begins tapping away at her own silver tablet, then looks up at me.

"Your team quota has been filled, now how about that horn? Did you manage to defeat the first Floor Boss already?"

She raises an eyebrow, referencing the "Horn of the Behemoth" on my quota tablet under my individual assignment.

I let out a sigh, and immediately see her roll her eyes in response.

"Fell short this time around?"

I nod and she continues.

"Don't worry about it, I'll mark it as unfinished. Some of the Elites from last year haven't even completed that one. I didn't think you'd get it done, but one can dream, right? You're able to request old assignments again whenever you wish, the longer the wait the lower the payout."

I clench my jaw and nod, thinking to myself.

I have the item in my inventory right now.... It would be easy to just hand it over.

There's just something that's telling me not to...

I gulp.

"Sure, leave it as unfinished. I was interrupted during my training and wasn't able to complete it yet, unfortunately."

She smirks and nods, tapping away at her solver tablet again.

"Yeah, yeah. There ya go, it looks like you'll need to attend a meeting before learning any of your new tasks."

I reach into my item box and take out my silver quota tablet to take a look at the updated numbers.

[Jay Soju]

[Available Credits]: 9.4

[C-Class]

[Team Weekly Quota]:

[PENDING TASK][0/0]

[Reward]: [Attend Team Meeting For Instructions]

[Individual Weekly Quota]:

[NONE]

[Reward]: [NONE]

My 5 credits for completing the team task have been added to my total, but the individual talk is gone.

That's fine by me.

It looks like all signs are pointing toward this meeting.... Everyone I talk to keeps telling me to attend.

I let out a sigh and show the white-haired merchant a thin smile.

"Appreciate you, Sophie, I'm off. It's time to go see my team and attend this meeting. I'll see you soon."

"Sure thing, careful out there."

I turn around and wave to her as I walk off through the small crowded neon-colored shops.

With a light click, I open the back door to the lounge and walk through. I haven't seen my team in ages, I wonder how much they've all grown.

Chapter 197

With a light click, the door from the mini market to the lounge area in the back of the Association HQ opens up and the sight before my eyes puts a smile on my face.

Sitting all together on one of the circular couches next to the small cafe, I see my 3 teammates drinking coffee and eating small pastries.

I begin to walk over and raise a hand, but I'm interrupted by a blond-haired blue-eyed hunter running towards me with arms outstretched.

"Jay, you made it back! I knew you'd be fine!"

With the smile across my face widening, Maria jumps up in the air to give me a hug.

I catch her and reply in a lower tone as I watch Abby stand up from her seat and begin to turn my way as well. She has a happy looking smirk across her face.

"Good to see you too, it's been a while."

I let out a chuckle, then let Maria down, looking into her deep blue eyes.

They seem much deeper and brighter than when I last saw her. She's grown a lot...

I use Inspect and Appraisal to quickly check her level and skills, not bothering to look at any of her gear.

[Lv. 391]

Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]

The green-haired healer slowly walks toward us. I let out another quiet comment under my breath to Maria before Abby arrives.

"You've... gotten a lot stronger."

Maria nods, still looking right at me.

"You seem like you've grown a lot too."

I look away as Abby's voice fills my ears.

"Hey, long time no see."

As she approaches, I blink a few times, looking back and forth at my teammates. They both look a lot older... more mature. Almost like years have passed.

It's been a while in my mind, but still, it's only been a week in the real world.

Their hair looks longer, muscles look more defined, skin is much smoother, and If I'm not mistaken it looks like both of them even grew a few centimeters in height.

Maria wears a dark-colored outfit with silver jewelry and magic items on her wrists and around her neck.

As Abby approaches, I notice her hair falls down and is much straighter and glossy looking. Her facial features are more mature looking too. The healer speaks up before I can get another word in.

"Like what ya see? I know we've changed a little, but is it really that noticeable? Oh- and good to see you're back here in one piece."

I tighten my lips and nod as Abby comes to stand upright next to Maria.

The green-haired healer is dressed in all black with green and gold magic items lining her wrists and fingers too.

I use Inspect and Appraisal to get a quick look at her level and skills.

[Lv. 401]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Restore [Legendary Grade]

I nod, meeting her gaze for a moment too.

"It's only been a week... both of you-"

Maria cuts me off, grinning ear to ear and turning to Abby.

"See, I told you he'd notice. Jay pays attention! Hmmpf."

I let out a slightly confused, but also relieved sigh as I see Maria acting like her old self.

It's good to see them again, but there's a lot of questions that need to be answered.

My eyes dart behind my two teammates and I finally see an unchanged familiar face of our team's long-range archer approaching. The cool and calculated olive-skinned hunter has sat up from the couch area and is walking in my direction.

I see him smirk while he yawns, stretches, then crosses his arms.

"Ya made it out of the Labyrinth after all, nice to see ya Jay. You look good."

Arie walks over and stands beside the green-haired healer, then gives me a firm nod while reaching out his right hand.

"Looks like you've grown a lot. We have too."

I put out my hand and shake his.

The archer doesn't look different at all to me. If anything, he just looks tired....

I use Inspect and Appraisal to check his level and skills.

[Lv. 393]

Spirit Archer [Legendary Grade]

He's no different than before, just some level gains.

Abby and Maria are the only ones that used those upgrade crystals, so it seems they're the only ones with significant physical changes.

I reply with a smile, moving my gaze across all 3 of my teammates.

"I'm glad your training paid off this week. Your appearances, Abby and Maria, was it those crystals that changed it?"

Maria nods happily and responds.

"Yeah, they made my Ice magic a lot stronger as well, I can't wait to show you what this week's training has taught me! We are becoming this year's new Elites, after all. I've definitely caught up to you now Jay!"

I smile, and we lock eyes again.

Arie smirks and walks over to me while throwing an arm around my shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah. We may be the new Elites in training, but you still haven't changed one bit. Over 5 hours late to our first meeting. Come on, enough talk, let's head upstairs."

Abby and Maria laugh and follow behind us as the olive-skinned archer leads us over to the door.

I respond as we walk through.

"Hey, nobody told me there was a meeting today. How can I be late to something I was never even invited to?"

The door shuts behind us as the four of us make it into the lobby.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say..."

Ding

I catch up with my team, and we share training stories on the elevator ride upwards.

It seems like both Maria and Abby have been going through tough conditioning and new skill control training.

Each of them was given the same amount of MP potions as me this week and told to use them all.

Maria trained at the Yeti dungeon and farmed charms while honing her advanced magic control work with an Elite. Abby mostly trained her new upgraded Restore and Combat Magic skills.

Apparently, she has a very rare healing variant for a skill, two Elites came to supervise.

Lastly, Arie burned through more than his full supply of MP potions, he was training with a high-level Elite in the Great Plains Dungeon.

I'm not sure exactly what they did, but this confirms my suspicions that it was him I sensed when Dungeon Walking through earlier this week.

I fill the three of them in on some of my battles but leave a few details out. Mostly the time dilation training and defeating the Floor Boss parts... I trust them, and will most likely let them in on this secret too, but inside the Association's elevator doesn't seem like the right place to break the news.

All of our mentors had to leave early for an urgent mission, that's the only thing we had in common this week.

Ding

Laughing, and enjoying each other's full company again, the elevator finally makes it to the top floor.

The Director's Office.

I gulp as the doors slide open.

The last time I talked with the Director, I gave him a rather explosive attitude. In his eyes, I didn't even get very far up the labyrinth, my cockiness was for nothing.

It's a bit embarrassing, but I'll have to swallow my pride and face him without showing all my cards. He can think whatever he wants, I'm just happy to be back with my team.

I let out a calm breath and eagerly look ahead to watch the penthouse office come into view.

A woman's voice hits my ear and I'm thrown off guard at the sight before me.

"Welcome back, the 81st Vice Region Elite squad. Well, soon to be."

The tall fair skinned assistant of the Director greets us at the elevator door.

I see Leo, the legendary Grade Artificer, sitting at one of the comfortable-looking chairs by the Director's desk.

Sure, his familiar face is shocking, but the fact that these two are the only ones in the room is a bit more confusing in my mind.

I reply to the assistant as I walk through the silver sliding doors into the glass-walled penthouse.

"Where's the Director? I thought we were having a meeting with him today?"

She replies while guiding all 4 of us over to white cushioned seats next to the man in the dark purple cloak.

"Brutus is out of town today, I'll be handling the meeting."

I nod slowly as we get closer.

The outfit Leo wears today is different than last night, but he keeps the same theme. It's collared, a bit more formal looking. With matte black boots and a light purple glow to him, the magical craftsman really stands out in this white-walled room.

He sports a few silver rings and bracelets today too.

The assistant speaks up again.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet Leo. He's our specialized Association Artificer, he'll be able to fill any requests necessary for your Elite missions moving forward."

The silver-haired man stands up and bows slightly before speaking.

"It's a pleasure to meet all of you today."

He raises his head and makes eye contact with me for a split second, grinning, then bringing his gaze up to everyone else before continuing.

"The Association has prioritized your abilities in order to protect our Region, so I'm happy to be of service to all of you for as long as you serve the Association along my side."

We all respond, introducing ourselves one by one until he gets to me.

"Nice to see you again so soon Jay."

I shake his hand again and tighten my lips into a thin smile as we all get seated. The Director's assistant walks behind the large empty desk at the back of the room.

She waits for all of us to quiet down, then pulls out 4 silver tablets with small crystals on their corners.

They hit the hard wooden desk with a thud.

"Now, let's talk about your new mission to the Dark Continent."

Chapter 198

"Now, let's talk about your new mission to the Dark Continent."

The Director's blond-haired assistant places 4 silver tablets on the wooden desk in front of us with a loud thud, exclaiming that our mission to the Dark Continent is about to begin.

The corners of my lips begin to curl upwards and I whisper under my breath.

"Finally."

Both Abby and Maria look up at the tall thin woman behind the desk with wide eyes. The sun shines in from behind her showing off the beautiful city and high mountains in the distance a few kilometers away.

If I squint hard enough, I can make out the place where we took out C-Class exams.

Leo smirks, pulls out a small silver gadget from his right cloak pocket, and begins to play with it. He's seemingly uninterested in the conversation, but I know he's listening.

Arie's jaw is clenched and his foot makes a light tapping sound on the hard white marble flooring.

He's nervous, or... maybe excited just like me.

The Director's assistant continues, pointing down at the desk.

"Each of you, take one of these transmission tablets. They've been made especially for your duties this week. Each of the cornerstones connects to one of the other tablets. It doesn't matter the

distance, you'll be able to talk to each other at any time. They can even be used in dungeons if one of the other tablets is outside."

She turns to Leo and he nods, speaking up.

"It takes a lot of raw dungeon materials to make one of those, so be careful with them. They're not easily replaceable. All 4 connect to the Director's main tablet, so he can call at any time. I doubt he will though..."

The silver-haired artificer lets out a chuckle as he watches the 4 of us stand up and begin examining the rectangular objects.

The one I pick up feels identical to the tablet I held in the labyrinth with Fisher not too long ago. It seems like they give these out to all Elite quads and higher-ups.

The woman keeps talking.

"Your new weekly quotas have been updated, please hand in your old tablets and they'll be wiped."

I reach into my item box and throw the old silver item on the table without thinking about it much, the others do the same.

Maria turns to me and grins after her blue eyes lift from the screen on her new quota tablet.

"It looks like you handed in your share of the MP crystals before coming in today, my credits just jumped up 5 points!"

I nod, taking a look at my own new and improved transmission tablet.

[Jay Soju]

[Available Credits]: 9.4

[C-Class]

[Team Weekly Quota]:

[Clear Dungeons: Gate 1: Section 4][0/6]

[Reward]: 10 Credits

[Individual Weekly Quota]:

[NONE]

[Reward]: [NONE]

My eyes dart up and down the odd text for a moment, trying to figure out what exactly this new team task is all about.

The Dungeon clearing part can be inferred pretty easily. Everyone has been mentioning the collapses up north, so clearing a few makes sense, but the specifications are unclear to me.

I look up at the blond-haired assistant with an eyebrow raised.

"What is this all about? We're to clear 6 dungeons... Where? Gate 1? Section 4? What's all this mean?"

She smiles and responds.

"You're quite enthusiastic today, aren't you? I was about to get to it. Let me run through the logistics, please make yourself comfortable."

Her gaze moves across all of us as we get back to our seats and she begins to explain our mission assignment in full detail.

"Listen up, I'm sure you've all heard the news in one way or another this week. There's been a series of large breaks near the northern border of our country and the Dark Continent."

We all listen attentively.

"You've all started your training to become this year's new Elites but were delayed slightly because of a large High B-Class break that needed attending to from as many Elites as possible. It's under better control now, but the aftermath of a Labyrinth break isn't something to take lightly. It created quite the surge and many of the dungeons and the surrounding area began to collapse."

The mention of a labyrinth break piques my interest. I assumed it was possible, but haven't heard of any of them actually breaking.

I clasp my hands together and try to control my widening grin.

She continues.

"Your mission this week is to help clear out some of the dungeon breaks that have resulted from the shock wave following the labyrinth incident."

The blond pauses, looking over at me.

"Your question about the gates and sections earlier, that will all be answered in time. It will be much more clear to see once you actually arrive. To give you a quick explanation, they're just labels to better organize the terrain you'll be headed to."

She looks over to Leo.

"You can handle bringing them to section 4? There's no need for you to go through the gate, just dropping them off should be fine."

He nods, and the woman looks back at us to continue.

"The 6 dungeons that you'll be cleaning up are all C-Class rated. With all 4 of you working as a team, it should be well within your abilities. This is one of the least dense sections within the first gate so this will be a great starter mission for your new lives as Elites."

As she finishes this line, I begin to think to myself.

We'll be facing 6 C-Class breaks...

I've never seen a C-Class break before. I wonder if the monsters will be proficient in mana control, or if this will just be an easy walk in the park.

Either way, these are the less dense portions of the Dark Continent. This means there's more powerful dungeon and breaks in other sections.

Maybe I can get access to a new labyrinth or farming territory if I snoop around a bit. This is becoming more and more interesting every second.

I speak up, starting to stand from my seat.

"So when do we leave? I think that's more than enough of an explanation for me!"

She laughs again, then motions for me to sit down before placing a piece of paper down on the hardwood table with large red Xs on it labeled 1-6.

"Section 4 isn't enormous, but I've had each Dungeon's location mapped out for all of you. The higher the number, the more powerful the potential monsters that hide nearby are predicted to be. We've had these dungeons tested recently, and none of them ever surpassed level 400 monsters. With the unpredictability of breaks, you never know what you're in for. If one is too difficult, stand down and leave the gates to contact us at any time."

My teammates nod, and I do the same while letting out a sigh and sitting back down in my seat.

The woman continues.

"Lastly, there are small villages and towns filled with outsiders and rogues in section 4. They're not very common, but a few breaks are nearby some of the settlement areas. If it's gotten bad enough, monsters may be roaming in nearby towns, you'll have to deal with them too. It's our duty to protect, even if they don't want to be protected. Got it?"

I gulp, giving her a firm nod, recognizing the new serious tone. The rest of my teammates do as well, Arie seems even more nervous than when this meeting started.

I know he has some untold history revolving around these regions, I'll have to ask him about it later in a more private setting. Now doesn't seem like the right time.

Leo stands up, looking down on all of us.

"Well, on that note, there's no reason in wasting any more time. Every minute you 4 waste sitting around here is another minute that the next surge that hits this city gets even worse. Do you remember the one last month? They say this month's may be almost twice as bad..."

I fully stand up from my seat this time and turn to the silver-haired artificer. Our eyes meet.

"Really? It's going to be twice as powerful, why's that? Does it have to do with the labyrinth break? Is there-"

He cuts me off with a grin while turning and waving for us to follow.

"I can answer all your questions on the way. Come on, let's go. It's time to head out. You have some dungeons to clear."

Chapter 199

"I can answer all your questions on the way. Come on, let's go. It's time to head out. You have some dungeons to clear."

Leo, the silver-haired artificer motions for all of us to follow as he begins walking toward the elevator at the back of the penthouse office.

I turn to follow, but Abby speaks up to stop us.

"Hey, that's it? No mission specifications? No intel on the dungeons we're facing? You're just handing us a poorly drawn map and transmission tablets to go?"

She grabs the map off the desk with attitude.

Maria stands up with an innocent look across her face, turning her head back and forth to me, then to Abby, then over to the Director's assistant.

The blond-haired woman slowly nods, then speaks in a low tone.

"I understand this may be different from your past missions Abby, but you've been chosen as the new elites. Like it or not, you 4 are special now. Your team has been gifted the abilities that many other hunters could only dream of handling."

The green-haired healer tightens her stare, but gives a firm nod as the thin blond woman continues.

"We don't have much information on regions like this one. If I had a better map or more intel I'd love for you to have it. The problem is, we're understaffed and overworked. Everyone who's able to help fight is out on the front line for this grouping of breaks. Even the Director himself went to supervise the B and A-Class teams as they handed the core labyrinth break. That's why he wasn't able to see you at our meeting today."

Leo jumps in with a hand raised and a smile.

"Come on, let's head out. We don't want to miss the train. There's one leaving in under half an hour, that's our ride."

Abby lets out a sigh, crossing her arms, then turning to face Leo. Her hair flies up in the air from the quickness of her motions as she begins to follow the silver-haired artificer.

Maria grins and speaks up.

"Alright, it's settled, we're off!"

I smile back as she makes her way across the room to follow the others.

I look down to meet Arie's gaze. The archer makes an audible gulp as he stands to his feet, replying to my firm nod in a low tone.

"Ready for this?"

I throw an arm around his shoulder as we start to walk toward the elevator following the girls and our guide.

"I am, are you? Is there something you want to get off your chest once we get outside?"

He lets out a sigh and whispers under his breath so only I can hear.

"The village I grew up in is near section 4. I wasn't expecting the breaks to happen so soon. I'll be fine. This... was just unexpected. Thanks for asking."

Ding

I reply while watching the elevator door open on the other side of the room.

"Understood. Looks like there's more to this mission than meets the eye."

Arie gives me a nod, looking over his shoulder, then back to the open doors of the elevator.

"Indeed, I'll fill you in on more details later."

The 4 of us crowd into the small elevator behind the silver-haired man. Leo hits the button to take us down to the Lobby. His cheerful attitude lightens the mood.

He turns to me before speaking to everyone.

"Well, I met Jay last night, but it's nice to officially meet all of you. If you have any unique or abundant raw dungeon item drops, feel free to put in a request for my assistance at any time. Just tell the front desk Leo sent ya!

He scratches his chin and pauses for a second before continuing.

"Visitors aren't exactly allowed down in my lab unsupervised, but I'm almost always working, so never hesitate to put in a word. I'm happy to help. "

I smirk and give him a nod. Maybe I'll ask him to have something crafted in the future and compare it to Bri's handy work.

For quick crafts and items I don't mind having made on the books, Leo will be a helpful asset indeed.

Abby and Maria introduce themselves, then Arie speaks up.

"So, we're taking the train up north? That ride will take almost a full day. We'll make it over to Section 4 by tomorrow morning. Right?"

Leo nods as the elevator begins to slow.

"Very astute of you, that's correct. I've already made arraignments for your housing at the Gate 1 entrance, you'll be able to begin your mission bright and early tomorrow morning once we arrive."

Ding

The elevator hits the bottom floor and we walk out into the lobby.

The 5 of us walk through the front door and make our way to the train station without veering much from our path at all.

Arie and Leo talk over details of the Dark Continent while Abby and Maria chat about their training. I enjoy the peaceful walk, listening to the merchants and people go by on either side of us as we stroll through town.

It's mid-day and there's many E, D, and even C-Class hunters going about their daily lives in the central market.

It's a beautiful sight.

The active marketplace in a thriving city like this never gets old. I can smell food from many cultures and hear metal weapons being traded along with various crystals and magical items.

Grinning ear to ear, the 20-minute walk through town goes by in a flash.

Leo's voice breaks me out of my blissful daze as we make it to the station.

"Alright, the train should be here any minute now. Get out your IDs, we'll be riding in a special section. This private cabin is one made for longer distance travel, it's used by the Association higher-ups."

We all nod and do as he says while walking up onto the train platform through the crowd of other hunters and adventurers getting ready to board. Each and every one of them is going to head off on their own missions and various journeys.

No more than 5 minutes later, just like the artificer said, the train comes chugging towards us, screeching to a halt moments later.

A few workmen hop out every few train carts. Hunters and businessmen flood out from the train and get straight to work in town.

The worker closest to us throws two hands in the air as the train's whistle blows.

"All aboard!"

We walk over and Leo talks to the man, showing him his ID. The train worker points higher up the train platform. Leo nods and turns back to us, motioning for us to follow.

We do.

Less than a minute later, we make our way to a new worker standing guard, show our IDs, and board into an exclusive-looking cabin. The worker lets us in and closes the small door behind us, waving goodbye.

"A pleasure for you to be aboard the train today, we'll be arriving at the Gate 1 stop early tomorrow morning, make yourselves comfortable."

Click

The door shuts and we're all left in a rather fancy-looking private room.

There are orange couches that line the walls and large glass windows above them. I can see the busy city on one side, and another set of train tracks on the other.

Abby speaks up as she walks over and lies down on one of the couches with fluffy-looking pillows available for headrests.

"Now this is how ya travel! Who knew the Association actually had perks like this for us? I thought only the higher-ups had luxuries like these."

Arie smirks and walks over to make himself comfortable on the couch nearby. Feeling the soft fabric and kicking his feet up onto a darker-colored coffee table, he speaks up.

"Not bad, I haven't ridden in anything this nice in a while."

Maria walks forward with a happy look on her face, sitting down on a couch on the opposite side of the cabin while letting out a sigh. I follow, sitting next to her and throwing my feet up on a small black coffee table to match Arie.

Leo stands by the train door with his arms crossed, staring at us, then lets out a laugh.

"Ya know, I like you guys. This is how Elites should act, the last few teams have been a real pain... I think you 4 are definitely going to be different."

The train begins to move, and a whistle blows again. I watch the crowds of people and bustling market slowly disappear from view.

I smile and let out a sigh as the peaceful scene leaves my vision.

We're leaving the city. A new adventure awaits.

Chapter 200

I watch the busy marketplace fade away in the distance as the train leaves the station. All my teammates and our silver-haired guide watch the capital disappear from view as we leave as well.

Almost immediately, we enter a more mountainous region with heavy trees and small lakes that line the train tracks.

We've headed almost a full day away from the capital. I've never been this far away from my hometown before. Going to the capital was a big deal the first time I left, so wherever we're headed, this is all new territory for me.

I'm not too worried about getting too far away, if anything goes south, I can just Dungeon Walk back to a number of marked locations. My MP stores have risen significantly, so even at a much further distance away, I should be able to teleport anywhere.

We'll see...

The lush green plants and wildlife fill my vision through the wide open windows as the tall buildings fade away behind me.

It's both exciting and nerve-wracking.

I'm pretty glad the decision was made for us, it felt like we didn't exactly have the option to say no... If given a choice I would have said yes to this mission anyways. I'm looking forward to seeing new things, but most of all, I'm glad I get to go off on an adventure with my team again.

It still hasn't fully hit me yet...

The fact that I've been gone off training for months in isolation. I've had Ember by my side, but it isn't the same as being around real people.

It feels, warm.

Being around smiles and laughter is nice, especially Maria.

I look over to the blond-haired blue-eyed hunter. She's grown a lot, but every time I look at her it reminds me of where I came from.

That tiny apartment building back in our hometown, farming goblins just to make rent. It's only been a few months, but it feels like a lifetime has gone by...

I sit back on the large orange cushioned couch of our private room and gaze out the window.

As time goes by, Leo makes himself comfortable and we begin sharing info back and forth as a team. We talk about past quests and association-hosted upcoming events, but nothing too special comes up.

Everything about today's mission is apparently easier to explain once we get there, so I'm still a bit left in the dark about what these "Gates" and "Sections" really are.

The silver-haired artificer seems alright. He gets along fine with all my teammates, and I don't mind his company at all. He lightens the mood.

My only strife is his unyielding loyalty to the Association. Sure, he gets to work his dream job, but the glossy-eyed trust is a character trait that's hard for me to comprehend...

To each their own I guess.

About 2 hours of small talk, window gazing, and interesting conversation pass before a dinging sound interrupts us coming from the metal door at the front of the private cabin.

Leo replies.

"Come on in!"

The small silver sliding door opens and a light-skinned woman with dark hair tied up in a bun rolls a small trolley covered in a white cloth and plates of food and drinks.

She greets us with a smile, letting her gaze wander over all of us, then back to Leo.

"Here's your order Sir, it's a pleasure to have all of you aboard today."

The thin woman places the dishes and glasses onto the various tables around us, then bows and rolls the empty cart out without saying another word.

Leo points open palms at all of us, then at the feast.

"Well, dig it, they made this for you, don't be shy!"

Our festivities continue as we eat up and watch the sun start to set over the horizon.

The landscape outside has been changing drastically the further from the city we travel.

Every 50km or so, we stop at a new small town and I watch passengers board and leave. The cities we pass are getting smaller and smaller and the abundance of wildlife around us is getting much thinner too.

The mountains far off in the distance are beautiful, but the dry arid land outside is something I've never seen in the real world before.

I've only experienced dungeons with landscapes like this and read about some in books. To see it out here is a whole new experience.

The sun sets behind the large orange rocks and shines through the dry trees and dry yellow plants.

We've made it out into a desert...

Small towns and even single-family shacks pass by as the sun finally sets. As it does, my eyes close too.

I'm not particularly tired, but these couches are very comfortable, and there's something about transportation that makes it especially easy to doze off.

With a full stomach of food, a setting sun, and Maria's head resting on my shoulder, I fade off into a deep sleep with only the light sound of a rumbling train to fill my mind.

Time passes.

I'm awoken by the screeching sound of brakes, the whistle of a train. Leo's voice is the next thing to hit my ears.

"Rise and shine, we made it to the outer wall of Gate 1. Let's go check in and get you guys situated."

In a bit of a doze, I sit up, rubbing my eyes. My other 3 teammates are doing the same. I see the archer and the healer on the other side of the cabin and Maria is waking up by my side.

I turn to look out the window.

There's even less vegetation than before, not a tree in sight, and hardly any mountains or plateaus at all in the distance.

Looking out the other side of the train window, I just see a few small wooden made townhouses and larger buildings. The oddity is the massive grey background that blocks the desert view.

I bite my bottom lip and squint, standing to my feet as a worker opens the train door from the outside.

I hear a man's voice ring out as Leo jumps down and out of the train.

"Welcome to the Gate 1, Section 4 rest stop, we've been expecting you all. Company is scarce around these parts."

Laughter is shared between the two men as I look back at my teammates, then jump down and out of the train myself.

As soon as I hit the small wooden platform below, my gaze rises to look at the massive sight before my eyes.

There's a large stone wall, over 40 meters high that goes off in both directions. To my left and right, I see the solid grey wall curve off into the distance with no end in sight.

Abby, Maria, and Arie all hop out of the train behind me. I whisper under my breath.

"What is this place...?"

Dust fills the air as the others hit the old wooden train platform, and the silver sliding door shuts behind us. The man that greeted Leo hops on the back of the last cart. Before I know it, our ride has left the station and we're all alone.

I gulp.

The morning sun is just rising behind us and the hot air of the desert is already making my mouth dry.

There's a few small wooden structures off in the distance closer to the wall, but behind us, there is nothing at all.

Just sand and sky.

The silence is off-putting.

Arie speaks up in a sarcastic tone and begins to walk forward. He passes my left side.

"Welcome to the Dark Continent.... Home sweet home..."

With a smirk across his face, the dark-haired archer looks up at the towering wall, then begins to make his way toward the wooden buildings that are built at its base.

Abby follows and Maria looks over at me. I shrug, throwing my arms in the air, then turn to gaze up at the high wall myself.

Maria and I follow, not wanting to be left behind out in the open nothingness. Leo lets out a laugh.

"You city folks always crack me up! Come on, enjoy the peace and quiet while ya can!"

He turns to face the largest building, pointing an open palm toward it.

"Let's head over to the official Section 4 rest area. There's a long-time friend, short-time association worker that'll make sure you're taken care of there. I'm sure you'll all get along just fine."

I look at the 3 story building the silver-haired guide is pointing to.

It seems to be made entirely of wood, like an oversized log cabin. Its light brown coloring matches all the other buildings in the area as well as the train station's platform.

There's a small dirt road that leads us over to it. The closer we get, the higher the grey wall it's built up against seems to be.

Although not high in the sky yet, the morning sun is already starting to get unconformably hot. There is not a cloud in the sky either to block the rays.

The 60-meter or so walk over to the cabin structure feels much longer than it should. Waves of heat are making the air ripple in the dirt road.

Leo opens the front door without knocking and yells through it.

"Hey, Charlotte! I got some visitors for ya!"

He walks through, turning his head back and motioning for us to follow him through.

I hear a woman's confident voice reply.

"Leo? Haha! Is that really you? I never would have guessed you were bringing the new combat squad here. Come on in! All of ya!"