

D. Diver 521

Chapter 521

"Each meeting today is scheduled out to allow a 30-60 minute window, so you can take your time with each client. Even though these were trial orders, most are still a large amount. I assume the leaders of each of the three settlements we visit will be present. For the morning shift, we can visit Sector 3 or 4. Which would you like to go to first?"

I reply, and the stealth armor I'm wearing changes my voice to a non-recognizable static tone. It's identical to the Dark Guards, and even the old Sector 2 craftsman himself.

"Let's go to Sector 4 first. I'd like to see how Chester is doing anyway."

Lith nods.

"Good choice, this should be quick. Although, Sector 4 is the only trade route we have on the list that doesn't have a direct teleportation platform to their residence. Chester is the leader of the Sector 4 black market. It isn't as well connected and established as the rest of Solara. I'm still working on getting a trade deal in motion for their main government, but they haven't sent back any formal response yet."

He puts four of the five crystals into a new item box, then tosses the one labeled Sector 4 over to me.

"I assume you'd like to do the honors."

I place a hand on both his and Ember's shoulders, then crush the crystal and the room flashes white with teleportation magic.

We're all transported to a public building in Solara.

The morning sun is still coming through the large glass windows, and the white floor is so glossy I can almost see my reflection in it.

There are about a dozen random businessmen and hunters near the sides of the room, but no one looks disturbed by our sudden arrival.

There are only two men in suits that walk up to us, recognizing Lith, and motion for us to follow.

Without exchanging any words, we follow them through the streets of Solara and down underground into the black market area that brings back many memories of the first time we were kidnapped by the Sector 4 leader.

There are multiple long, narrow circular hallways underground, and it looks almost identical to the time I visited here last. Many people trade E and D grade gear and items with each other, and we approach a section of the market that is sectioned off and guarded by multiple level 300-400 security guards.

Beyond this point, there are no black market vendors or random buyers. There are just empty hallways and more guards.

We're escorted through and approach a mana-shielded door, right in the place where the Old Sector 4 Leader's office was previously.

I vividly remember destroying it with Demonic Energy and acquiring the [Hush] skill from the woman that was guarding it.

However, as the door opens this time around, the smiling familiar face of the old man who gave us a place to stay after we rescued him from being kidnapped greets me.

Thanks to Arie, a while back, he's been power-leveled from below 100 to over level 400, and now wears a full set of high C-Grade and some B-Grade gear. He still has a basic grade appraisal skill.

I'm still in a suit of armor, so he doesn't recognize me, but I sure recognize him as he welcomes us inside his office.

The short man motions for his hired guards to leave us be, and the door shuts to leave us alone in the room.

Chester sits behind his desk and lets us take a seat on the chairs and couches in the room.

The walls are already starting to fill with unique gear and even some old items I recognize from his home back when I stayed in it while we were recovering and plotting to save Lydia months ago.

I speak through the static suit of armor's voice changer and pull out the item boxes full of items and place them on the table.

"Everything is here."

At the same time, I take off the jet-black helmet and show Chester my face as he accepts the orders.

His eyes widen once they meet mine, and to my surprise, I feel a new link of loyalty form through my Rising Emperor's domain instantaneously.

He jumps up from his desk.

"You came back. I never had the chance to thank you, and it seems all your ambitions in the Dark Continent have come to fruition. Well, I wouldn't be talking to you here if they didn't."

He laughs to himself as I respond.

"It looks that way. Everything is definitely on an upward trend, it's good to see you're doing well too."

We shake hands over the item boxes full of loot, and he doesn't even bother to look through the fulfilled orders.

The two of us catch up, updating each other on the progression both of us have made.

Chester tells me he thought he would be retired forever, but this new opportunity has gotten him back into the auction hunting and rare artifact trading business.

Most of his old contacts have gotten back in touch with him, and he's excited to get back in the game. He pays me out the remaining 75% of the amount owed, then gives a new list of order crafts he'd like. Before he pays, I give him a special offer for items that aren't possible for a mere legendary grade craftsman to create.

I plan on having my double make special request orders and limit them to three units per buyer, per order.

These are orders that consist of items with five total buff stats over 100% each, or special skills and attributes imbued that can't be normally imbued into items like elements. To make things clearer, I outline a simple list of attributes I'm able to imbue, like stealth, conceal, mythic grade body hardening, hush, and other rare magic skills that don't naturally spawn in loot drops.

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These are all extremely rare and useful skills that, if imbued into the right item, could create priceless pieces.

I pull out a few high B-Grade items from my item box that I've done tests on, showing what's possible and replicable from items I've farmed from the top floors of the Vice City Labyrinth.

For these special items, Bri won't be involved. It will be one-on-one with the clients. I plan on having my body doubles personally fulfill these orders and offer them as premium offers to each buyer, but severely limit the quantity they can buy no matter how much extra money they offer.

Each custom item will cost 333 gold no matter what the craft is, and it must be paid upfront. So, 999 gold is the max a person can spend on these custom orders.

The plan is not to have these special items created to make money, but to increase my reputation with rumors that the new Sector 2 craftsman is capable of great things. I'm sure powerful people will spread rumors once they get their hands on items that shouldn't exist.

I use telepathy to message Lith during this meeting as I can tell he's visually interested, and tell him to submit an order like this one too if he'd like. There will be no discounts on custom items like these, and he accepts in an instant, brainstorming what kind of special gear he wants based on my explanations to Chester.

After another 20 minutes of discussion, Chester decides on what his three custom orders will be. He wants a maxed-out amulet of protection with +100% or higher buffs on every stat, a blood-bonded chest plate with an unbreakable body hardening attribute, and for the third item he decides to leave it up to me to decide, he says: "Surprise me, I know you will."

I smile and accept his gold for the custom items, along with a new basic order that is just over double the size of his last and the 25% down payment.

Lith and Chester have a brief conversation too, but Ember stays quiet throughout most of the talk, just relaxing and enjoying his time in the outside world after a full year of recovering in isolation.

As we finish up and stand to leave, Chester speaks.

"Very good to see you again Jay, I hope to see you next month, come by anytime, and be careful out there in the other Cities. They may not have fared as well as Solara did after that surge. There were a record number of breaks here in the city last night. Luckily there were enough hunters present to handle them.

I nod, activating my Rising Emperor's domain and sharing my all-seeing eye with him for a moment.

"Thanks for the warning. I hope you accept my parting gift, take a look at your skill in your status, it's in need of an upgrade, don't you think?"

Chester's eyes widen and he smiles as he presses [Upgrade] two times and it changes from basic grade to legendary grade.

"I- guess it did."

He's visibly amazed, confused, and excited at this new development.

Then, Lith pulls out the next transport crystal and tosses it to me, labeled Sector 3.

I place the black helmet back on my head and put a hand on Lith's shoulder while Ember places one on mine and I nod Chester goodbye.

"We're off to the next stop, see you soon."

There's a flash of white light, and the next thing I see around me is the bright blue sky overhead.

I take a breath of air and it feels thick and full of pollen.

A cool breeze moves by and the rows of cornfields and other various crops all around us go on for further than I can see.

There are dozens of kilometers of farmland and crops all around us.

We're standing on a small white circle in the middle of a dirt road with a large red building less than 100 meters to our left, and a small town of fewer than 100 people to our right down in a shallow valley next to a river.

Out in the fields, there are about 100 people hard at work too.

There are only two people that greet us, walking toward us slowly down the dirt road from the red barn.

One is a very old man, and the other is a middle-aged man with the same dark features. He carries two suitcases, and when I appraise both of the men, there isn't a single status notification that comes back.

They're both completely unawakened.

Now that I see this, I even scan the town nearby and find that over 80% of them are unawakened. The ones that are, hardly breach level 10.

However, almost all of the 100 men hard at work in the fields picking and tending to the crops are awakened, and they're all between level 50-150, stacked with strength and speed enhancing gear. They have many HP and MP potions on their waists too.

This place reminds me of the people I met at the Unity Supply company in the outskirts of the Vice Region. This farm is also a business older than dungeons themselves, still profiting despite their goods not being magical in nature, however, they've also adapted to the newer times nicely.

Most of the gear they ordered is very similar to the kinds that I'm sensing on the workers in these fields.

The fact that I can't even sense the end of these crop fields means they probably go on much further, and create work for hundreds if not thousands of other people. That would explain the large order I received from them, but it's none of my business how they use the gear I sell to them.

We wait patiently as the two men approach, and once we do the younger-looking man puts one of the suitcases down on the ground.

"There is the remaining 75%, let us see the gear we've been promised and it is all yours."

I nod and step forward, summoning the item boxes full of their orders out from thin air in a neater pile next to the suitcase in front of them.

The older man just nods and grunts, not saying a word, and the taller younger one places two fingers in his mouth to whistle.

"Count 'em!"

An even younger kid, not older than 15, comes running out from the barn with a happy look on his face and follows the wishes of who I can only assume is his father and scoops up all the item boxes.

The boy holds a paper in one hand and goes sifting through each of the item boxes and moving his eyes down the list quickly.

He isn't awakened either, so he's only going off of sight, feel, and quantity of items.

About two minutes pass before he nods and replies.

"Everything's here, pops!"

The middle-aged man smiles.

"Very good, bring 'em all back inside."

The kid grabs up all the item boxes, and at the same time, the oldest man grunts again and turns to leave.

They both make their way back to the barn and the only one left is the middle-aged figure that's done all the talking so far.

My assumption is these aren't the types to spend an extravagant amount on extra items, so I'm hesitant to even give them an offer about the special items like I did Chester.

None of them even bothered to introduce themselves or even asked for any of our names. It looks like they really just want to be left alone here and keep to a routine.

Even Lith said the order they made was the exact same one that they would make from the old Sector 2 craftsman.

The middle-aged man speaks up again while putting the other suitcase on the ground and looking at the small slit in my black suit of armor's helmet.

"There is the 25% down payment for next month's order. We want the same potions and basic gear. Nothing more, nothing less. The name's Carson by the way, it's nice to see some new faces around here."

His gaze turns to Ember and back to me as I nod and use telekinesis to bring both of the suitcases toward me, opening them up in front of my vision and counting the coins just to be sure. This is someone I've never met before, it would be naive of me not to make sure it's all there.

Once I confirm the amount is correct, I let both fall into item storage portals.

The moment they disappear, the middle-aged man looks behind him, and looks relieved when he doesn't see the old man and kid within earshot when he opens his mouth next.

"This may not be polite to ask, but I'm not quite sure who else to turn to... Is it possible I could hire you for a job? We don't have enough extra capital to hire hunters from Solara, and I'm afraid it will be too late if we wait for the Association's workers to come by. There's been a terrible dungeon break on our property, and no one in the surrounding villages is capable of handling it. I'd be happy to pay you in crops once this season's harvest is over, but I have nothing else to offer."

There's a moment of silence between us, and I smile beneath my black helmet before I reply in a static voice.

"This is a surprise... but I accept. I'd be happy to handle any break you have. Free of any monetary charge of course, there is just one favor I want in return."

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"I'll take care of any breaks you have, and in return, you give me a better deal on bulk ordering fresh produce than any of your current clients. I'll collapse any break you have in the future too, and in return, I want to make a trade route connecting my settlement in Sector 2 to your land here in Sector 3."

The middle aged man named Carson thinks for a moment but makes a decision rather quickly and nods, pointing to another shed on the property behind the large red barn that the kid and old man went into earlier in our meeting.

"Deal. I'll sell you crops at our break-even price for a lifetime if you can provide quick and stable protection to our land. We've wanted to cut ties with the Association for decades, but no one else is capable of making it this far out into the Dark Continent because of the control over their transportation crystals."

He begins to walk over to the shed behind the barn and motions for us to follow.

"The trade route you speak of would raise some political issues with many of the villages and towns in this area. We live a simple life here, and we do not want to get mixed up in world politics. We would rather live off the land and never have had the dungeons form here in the first place. However, if these breaks aren't taken care of soon, there won't be much farm left for us to negotiate over."

I listen to his words as the entrance to the shed comes into view.

A small blue and white plane with a tarp over the back half of it and a dirty propeller on the front comes into my vision as he speaks again.

"If we fly now, it will only take 3 or 4 hours to make it down the river and to the breaks. All nearby villages have evacuated already."

I turn to Lith, and he shakes his head.

"We don't have time for this. Maybe 30 minutes at most considering the time we spent in Sector 4 and here already. The Bedrock Region is our next stop, and they're not a party you want to upset. Being punctual in their territory is necessary. Right under the Vice and Apex region, they have the potential to be one of your biggest clients. First impressions are important. Trust me."

I can see Carson's expression drop to one of sadness, as I'm sure he knows exactly where this is going. Based on what he's already told us about the Association and Solara, money has always gotten in the way of helping others in his line of work.

I let out a sigh and turn to him with my arms crossed.

"Where's the break? Point to it and give me an approximate distance."

He lifts his head with a confused look but still points off into the rolling cornfields and long winding river and speaks.

"About 200 kilometers that way. If we follow the river and maybe catch some air currents, we could get there in under 3 hours."

I turn to Ember and nod.

"Watch these two for me real quick. I'll be back in 30."

He grins and doesn't respond because I've already started flying through the air toward the direction the man pointed.

I close my eyes and fly high enough in the air that I can use my full extreme speed, wind magic, telekinesis on myself, and even soul energy to power my footsteps through the air and not affect the landscape below me.

I use enemy detection and my All-Seeing Eye the whole time, flying over small towns and hundreds of fields with kilometers of farmland and thousands of workers in the fields.

There are small E and D-Grade dungeons scattered throughout the landscape, but I don't stop to check them out. I just keep following the river faster than the speed of sound.

Loud cracks echo through the sky down on the workers below, but the speck that disappears from their view is gone before they can examine what it might be.

Soon enough, I sense something in the edges of my vision that is quite a bit stronger than an E-Grade dungeon.

I feel a high C-Grade break happening in the center of a field that has decimated crops for nearly 10km in every direction.

I sense a nearby town with some magical goods in it nearby, but the entire population has been evacuated and no one is working in nearby fields.

A bright red dungeon portal hovers in the middle of the field and over 3 dozen massive 5 meter long caterpillar creatures are digging up the earth and destroying the crops.

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They all have advanced-grade earth magic and sit between level 450 and 475.

These are some serious monsters; no normal amateur hunter could ever handle one of these. It may even be difficult for hired help from Solara to take these monsters out. High-level association elites would need to be deployed to take out a threat like this. Even then, it would be quite the struggle.

This reminds me of the breaks I was sent out to take care of in Sector 4 by my team on my first Dark Continent mission for the Association. If they're sending more squads like this out, Carson is

right. It may take days, or possibly even over a week to get men out here if they're already dealing with other regions.

"Well, time to handle this myself."

I dive down, activating most of my skills and buffs so I don't harm the farmland while touching down onto the soft soil in front of the red break, then jump through.

Once inside, the dungeon itself is just massive dirt mounds with occasional trees every couple of hundred meters with trunks larger than any tree I've ever seen. The trees are covered in the same green caterpillars, and the soil is infested with them too.

High in the sky, there are 3 mutants clearly higher level than the rest, each of them over level 500, with an additional skill, buff, and new ranked up forms with colorful wings and slimmer bodies.

Two of them have wind magic, and another has a skill I recognize very well from a gang leader I killed back in Sector 2.

Poison Mist [Special Grade]

My version of this skill is already legendary grade, but it's worth wasting a few seconds and taking a detour to kill this mutant.

So, I change my flight path to arc upward and slice the colorful ranked-up butterfly creature in half on my way to the boss room, upgrading this skill to mythic grade on the spot.

My flight path arcs downward again, and I ignore all of the other mobs in here until I see even more mutants near the boss room.

They're over level 500 too, but still in the form of caterpillars.

There are 4 of them guarding the dark black boss room portal.

Three of them have legendary body hardening along with advanced earth magic, but one of them has another skill.

I slice it to pieces on my way through the boss room and acquire a brand new skill, instantly upgrading it to mythic grade due to my absorption perks.

Cocoon [Mythic Grade]

While killing another ranked-up butterfly mutant in the boss room, I look at the details of this skill, and it looks like it's an advanced form of body hardening.

While I assume with these monsters, activating it works to morph them into a different form during their rank-up or something, the skill has adapted to my biology and created an ultimate defensive skill.

It may create a greater shell than body hardening does, but the downside is that the caster cannot move their body out of this cocoon while activating it. A neat addition to my status, but not one I'll likely be using much in the future.

I stand over the final boss's corpse and watch it dissolve away with the dungeon, and I'm transported back to the open field.

The dungeon disappears, and I activate my All-Seeing Eye to attempt catching any luminite fragments or special drops that might occur after clearing a dungeon like this, but nothing happens.

I was expecting for something to happen, and am slightly confused when nothing does. I can't figure out where the luminite that was powering this dungeon's transport magic has even gone, but decide not to dwell on the idea for too long.

The excess mana just evaporates into the air, and the 5-meter-long insects that were terrorizing the land fade away with the dungeon, ceasing to exist.

I jump into the sky and begin my return trip, but given that I have a few minutes to spare on the way back, I stop by a few E and D-grade dungeons near villages and set dungeon walker points just in case I want to return back here in the future without having to fly across an entire continent.

Once the red barn comes within range, I drift down with a smile on my face beneath the black helmet. Then, once my feet hit the ground, I speak to the surprised man with my static disguised voice.

"The break is cleared. You have nothing to worry about anymore. I assure you, I will have men sent here to survey the area whenever there are any more surges and have breaks cleared before you even know they've happened. I look forward to doing business with you in the future."

I turn to Lith next.

"Now, we have business to attend to in the Bedrock Region, don't we?"

He chuckles to himself and pulls the labeled transport crystal from his item box.

"Indeed we do."

As I crush the crystal, Carson waves goodbye with a puzzled but very relieved and happy look on his face.

"T-Thanks. See you next month! Mr. Sector 2 Leader, Sir."

Once the bright flash of transport magic fades, the three of us are left in a dark dome-shaped room.

The center of the floor is a white transport platform, but outside it, it's all made of grey stone.

A light turns on at the back of the room, and a large man in +100-200% defensive armor stacked head to toe filling all 12 item slots on his status walks forward with 3 guards on both sides of him also wearing the same caliber of gear and they're all between level 400 and 600.

The man in the center of them is level 902, standing over 2 meters tall, with enough muscle mass to double or possibly even triple my own. Despite his large stature, my eyes stay locked on his five skills that appear when I use appraisal.

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Extreme Speed [Special Grade]

Swordsmanship [Special Grade]

Appraisal [Special Grade]

I've seen a status like this before. Brutus, the leader of the Vice Region, had very common skills artificially stacked on his status, and the gear matches his too."

His mana control is pretty strong as well, nearly matching a level 700-800 monster in the labyrinth, so this man is not power-leveled. This power was earned. He is just very reliant on his gear and skills while most likely being a very smart and tactical fighter.

I would even assume that this is just one of the top elites in this region coming to pick up the ordered goods, but the glowing golden ring on his finger that slowly leaks Soul Energy that matches the Sun God's makes me positive that this is the Regional Director I'm looking at right now.

His strong and demanding voice echoes through the dimly-lit dome-shaped room.

"It is wonderful to see some new faces in the bulk item trade industry. Let me see the quality of goods you've promised, then I'll decide if they're worth the prices I'm about to pay. I, Regional Director Maylack, welcome you three to the Bedrock Region."

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The large man stops moving forward once he is less than five meters away from the teleport platform in the center of the room.

His six guards halt as well, and all of them cross their arms and stare forward as the three of us walk off the platform.

I don't waste any time and pull out a single item box from beneath my armor, then pull out the multiple item boxes from within it that have the Bedrock region's orders sorted and labeled.

Two of the guards step forward and pull long wooden tables out from their item boxes and motion for me to set the goods down on them.

Once I do, they begin pulling out the gear, potions, and various crafted items while the Regional Director looks over everything with his appraisal skill activated.

Over ten minutes go by as the clinking of metal and miscellaneous magic items fills the room before all of the gear is put back into the item boxes they came from.

Another guard moves forward and places a single item box onto the table, and the Director speaks up as he steps back into line.

"These goods are of presentable quality. I accept. Here are your remaining funds."

I stare forward, and I feel his appraisal skill attempting to permeate my black armor, but the waves of mana don't even make it past the outer layer.

I use telekinesis to bring the item box toward me and look inside.

The amount I count far surpasses what is owed, and there are long lists of items inside as well.

His appraisal skill stops probing once he sees my telekinesis activate, and he speaks up again.

"Inside I've included the down payment for next month's order as well."

His gaze shifts to Lith, then back to me.

"In my previous communications with Lith, he told me there is no limit on the amount of items I can buy, so I've upped my order by about five times. If this is the quality you continue to produce at this price, our operations out here will be greatly improved."

I smile beneath my helmet and place the money and new order back into my item storage behind my back while pulling out a few high B-Grade items, like the ones I showed Chester when I made him his special offer.

I place them on the table before us and explain what I can offer.

The large man's eyes widen once his appraisal skill reads the rare imbuements and +100-200% stat boosting on five total stats.

Every item on the counter outclasses anything that he currently wears.

He takes over five minutes examining the items, then sends one of his guards off to bring more funds.

There is a small rectangular door at the back of the dark-colored dome, and once it opens I see that we're on top of a mountain made of dark grey stone as well.

I see other mountains in the distance, and not much greenery at all.

There are many houses and patches of city within the mountain range, and I sense dozens, if not hundreds, of dungeons that stretch through the lands.

However, the most prominent thing that I perceive are the winding tunnels through the mountains that lead deep underground.

There are workers in them even now as we speak, and they're busy mining and pulling ore from the mountain ranges. Far off in the distance, I even see clouds of smog coming from factories that must be processing plants of some kind.

I conclude that this is a mining and factory-filled region, but the door closes before I can see much of anything else.

The walls are mana shielded, but they're easy to sense through. I can sense that there are thousands of people living in the cities around us with a similar population and hunter strength level of those in Solara, or possibly a bit larger, around $\frac{1}{3}$ the population of Vice City.

There are some strong independent hunters, but the strongest fighters within my entire perception are definitely standing right here in the room with us.

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I don't mention it, and let the Regional Leader think to himself for a while before the guard comes back with another item box.

He asks a few questions about what the limits of this item creation can be, and I give him a solid idea of what's possible with High B-Grade items and my craftsman team's capabilities.

In reality, I'm just telling him what I'm willing to make him with high-grade labyrinth material. I'm looking to sell him unique goods, but nothing above A-Grade that rivals my own personal gear. That material is for myself and my teammates only.

After another ten minutes of discussion, he hands over an item box with the requested 999 gold, and gives me very specific instructions for strength and defense-boosting gear. I plan to imbue extreme strength and body hardening into the armor set, sword, and amulet he requests, along with over 100% stat boosts on everything.

I promise that they will far surpass any of his current gear, or a full refund will be processed without question. We shake on it with his guards as witnesses.

He's very happy with this and speaks in a loud and demanding voice just like when we arrived.

"Very well. I think I like you, new craftsman from the Dark Continent. Continue to impress me, I believe we'll do far more business together soon."

He nods and stares forward with his arms crossed.

I want to ask him if I can look around his city in the mountains, but it's clear he wants us to leave, and this is quite the happy note to end on here.

It would have been nice to make a dungeon walker point here to have access back to this city, but I'll be back here in two days for the pickup point of the B-Class exams, so I still have another chance to do it then instead.

Lith pulls another white crystal from his item storage with "Talton Region" labeled on its front and I see the Bedrock Region's leader smile once he eyes it.

As I place a hand on Lith's shoulder and Ember puts a hand on mine, Director Maylack lets out a final word while we disappear in a flash of white light.

"I wouldn't expect that stubborn woman to do business with outsiders, especially men. It looks like she's turned a new leaf. Good luck in the Talton Region, you'll need it."

He laughs as we're teleported across the eight regions into a lush jungle.

Beneath our feet, there's another white platform, but it's overgrown with vines and tree roots.

Five women in lightweight silver and leather armor greet us.

Two orange-haired women use bows and they appear to be identical twins. Another is far darker skinned with knives, daggers, and magic items strapped all over her waist and chest. All the way to their right is a tan-skinned woman with striated muscles almost a head taller than all the others and she grips a long spear. These four women all sit between level 500 and 600 while their leader walks out from in between them at level 772.

She has a single skill, extreme earth summoning, and holds a massive silver hammer on her shoulder imbued with a strong earth element stone.

There are daggers on her waist as well, and her blond hair is tied back in tight braids.

She stares forward at me with bright green eyes and lets off a strong aura.

I can feel her mana control is much higher than the leader of the Bedrock Region, it's close to that of a natural level 900 monster, but her gear isn't up to par. She only has eight of her twelve item slots filled, and some of the equipped items aren't even over 100% stat boosters.

However, one item does stand out to me. It is the same golden ring with the Sun God's Soul energy seeping out from it.

I do a wide sweeping scan of our surroundings with my All-Seeing Eye and enemy detection to find that there is dense forest in every direction for as far as I can sense.

There are settlements of a few hundred people very close together, and just within a 20km radius, I already sense over ten C-Grade Dungeons.

There aren't many awakened people that catch my gaze that aren't over level 250. The average resident in this region is extremely strong.

The green-eyed woman speaks up with a strong voice and deadly serious gaze.

"Welcome to The Jungle of Talton. We haven't had visitors outside of the Association in quite a while."

Ember, Lith, and I walk forward off of the old transport platform and I reply while pulling the item boxes full of their order from my item storage.

"Well, then I'm honored that we're your guests."

The instant I pull the item boxes out, the green-eyed woman swings her hammer off of her shoulder and lets it strike the ground.

On impact, a long stone table erupts from the earth and she motions for me to place the item boxes down onto it.

I do so, then step back not saying a word while the spear and dagger wielders begin sifting through the gear.

The Director steps back and leans against her hammer while the two archer women stand at the ready behind her with wind-imbued arrows and bows drawn.

I don't move from my place, and Ember watches with amusement.

Lith on the other hand, I can tell he's slightly nervous at the events that are unfolding, and open up a telepathy link to ask why.

His reply is interesting, and matches up similarly to the word of warning the Bedrock Director gave me.

"It shouldn't be an issue. I've never personally been here myself, but the Talton Region is the black sheep of the eight regions. They don't usually participate in country-wide events. I'd be surprised if anyone here even had hunter's licenses. The only reason they're a part of the mainland is because of their geographical location and dungeon resources. The Association still wants control over this land, so it appears they've brokered some secret deal."

He pauses, but keeps speaking through the link a moment later.

"I was surprised I even got a response from them when I was querying for potential buyers. I never thought they would respond, but it seems they're interested and willing to pay."

He shrugs, and I thank him for the explanation through the link just as the two women finish sifting through the gear.

Their leader pulls out an item box of her own from her waist and tosses it to me from over ten meters away once her guards give her confirmation that everything is accounted for.

She speaks up.

"That is the remainder of what I owe you. Take off your helmet and show me what you really look like. This alone will dictate whether or not I want to place another order for next month."

Chapter 524

I think about her proposal for a few seconds, remembering all of the unique remarks I've heard from Lith, the Bedrock director's warning, and the tone of her words.

Even when doing an enemy detection scan of the surrounding settlements, the special perk of my mythic-grade enemy detection gives me a very clear video-like view of everyone within my mana control range.

There isn't a single man in this jungle, I only sense women. Showing her my real face, or even an altered version doesn't seem like the correct thing to do If I want to further this trade relationship. There needs to be a hint of truth in what I show her, but I can't just flat out lie to her face.

I come up with an idea, activating concealment and changing my appearance while taking off my black helmet.

Ember smirks, and Lith's eyes widen with surprise as the replicated face of Bri is revealed beneath my helmet. I change a few structural features to make sure it's not an exact match, however, she's the last woman I met face to face with and have her appearance fresh in my mind.

If one were to compare myself right now side by side with Bri, there are clear differences, but one could mistake us for being related.

I do this to give a reasonable alibi in case Bri doesn't want to show her face to any partnered Regions in the future, it's like she was never here and it's all a coincidence. However, if she does, it would be easy to pretend it was her all along. Human memory is very malleable, anyone can be tricked into believing anything as long as the conditions are set up to align with their preconceived notions.

My darker-toned skin contrasts with the jungle and long black silky hair wavers in the air. I make eye contact with their leader for a full three seconds before turning the corner of my lip up and placing the helmet back on my head, deactivating the concealment perk.

The tall warrior with the spear lets out a laugh, and the two women with bows drawn power down their wind magic arrows while the serious expression on their leader's face turns to a relieved smirk. She pulls another item box off of her waist and sets it on the table.

"I had a feeling I'd like you. No wonder I accepted this trade; my instincts were right."

She motions for me to look through the pouch while explaining the difference in the order she wants for next month.

It's over twice the size of the last, and all details and down payments are inside.

While I sift through the spatial magic item to make sure everything she says is present, I get a telepathy message from Ember.

"Quick thinking. I believe that's exactly what she wanted to see, but do you really think that was a good idea in the long run?"

I reply through our link.

"Technically her team did craft all of this gear. It's not like I'm lying about that... I'll fill Bri in when we get back to make sure she is okay with this. However, I doubt she will pass on making a new connection in a far off region and would be happy to handle further business here if I make the offer. It's up to her."

Ember nods but asks another question.

"How about the Association? This is a regional director we're dealing with. They surely have Bri's picture on file somewhere. Even if you made her appearance look slightly different, high level craftsmanship skills aren't easy to come by. It's not out of the realm of possibilities they connect the link"

Trading under a secret identity isn't against Association Policy. They themselves are the largest customers buying from someone they don't even know. I doubt Bri would even be in trouble if anyone found out, but Ember has a point.

I think about what he said, but given Lith's information that this is a region that doesn't always play well with the Association, I feel that they will keep my secret safe If I prove myself trustworthy.

Just to make sure, once I accept the item box, I follow up with another reply to consolidate our deal.

"I haven't showed my face to many people, so I want to make it clear that this is between only us. In return, let me upgrade all of your main weapons for you. It will be a token of my appreciation and an agreement of peace between us."

At first, they're confused by my offer, but the green-eyed leader is the first to accept it.

"Very well. This will be a pact for secrecy and goodwill between all of us. We don't do business with many outsiders, so I hope you do not disappoint us like the Association has over the years. Even if I'm technically a Regional Director, I don't morally align with their main organization's practices and would like to start making non-associated connections. Let's see what you can do."

She places her earth stone-imbued hammer on the stone table in front of me, and I get to work.

I ask for a large amount of her blood, over twice as much as normally needed in a craft. She's confused as the weapon is already blood bonded, but when I pull three high B-Grade earth stones farmed from the worm monsters on the 38th floor of the labyrinth, her eyes widen at the power radiating off of them.

I give her a mythic-grade potion of regeneration to restore her lost blood and imbue all of the stones along with about 100k MP worth of mana crystals to use as a boost to the reaction.

To top it off, I imbue my own extreme grade earth magic into the hammer and add over +200% stat buffs on all five of the stat bars, making the weapon many times stronger than it was minutes ago.

When I let go, and the flashes of white light stop, the result left behind hums with power.

The regional leader can't believe what she's holding in her hands as the energy from it courses through her veins.

I do exactly the same thing with the two bow users, using high B-Grade wind element stones to imbue into their bows and large amounts of their blood to make sure the bond is strong enough and they don't lose control. Over +150% buffs are added to all five stat bars, plus I imbue my mythic-

grade enemy detection to the bows to give them a special attribute that expands to reach their mana control aura and allows the caster to locate enemies' exact location as long as they're still holding the bow.

I give the spear user a mythic-grade extreme strength imbue that brings her weapon over +300% strength while every other stat is close to +150%. In addition to this, I imbue her chestplate with mythic-grade body hardening and raise its defense stat to +275% while the other four rest around +150%.

Both become blood bonded and will grow in strength as she levels up. She's become an unstoppable tank.

The last imbue I do is for the woman with knives all over her body. I imbue half of the knives with mythic-grade stealth and the other half with mythic-grade dagger arts, raising them all to +175% on every stat but giving her a versatile range of weapons to choose from.

Once I'm done, I step back, and the five women are blown away by the items I've managed to create before their eyes.

It is all one-of-a-kind gear. Priceless, not even available at top regional auctions.

I explain that this is a one-time deal, and if they want unique pieces like this again in the future, the three per buyer offer stands for them at the same price as everyone else. 333 gold per item, and 999 max per month to spend on monthly special order buys.

They keep staring at their new gear and even do some test swings, but the conversation turns quickly to what they want crafted next time I come by.

I think to myself while opening a telepathy link with Lith and Ember.

"Well, I think that was a success. Peace has been brokered in the Talton Region."

Then, I turn to their leader and speak aloud a final request.

"There is one last thing I'd like before we move on to our next stop on our trade route."

She lifts her gaze to meet my helmet.

"What's that?"

I turn to my right side.

"I make it customary to enter at least one dungeon in every region I visit. Do you think I could take a step inside? There's one less than half a kilometer that way, isn't there?"

Lith looks into his item box to check the time and pull out the white gem that's our ride, confirming that we need to head off soon, and the green-eyed woman swings her hammer over her shoulder and nods.

"Sure, I don't see why not. I assume you're all planning on using that transport crystal to get to your next location so we might as well see you off from there."

I smile underneath my helmet as we trek all the way through the jungle and hop through a slow spinning C-Grade dungeon, completely unguarded in the middle of the jungle.

We hop through, and I now have a dungeon walker point set in the Talton Region.

The four guards venture off into the dungeon to start testing out their new gear as I shake their leader's hand and we both say our thank-yous and goodbyes.

I look her in the eyes while crushing the last crystal that leads to the Vice Region.

"See you next month, pleasure doing business."

There's a flash of light and the three of us land in a small mana-shielded room.

The instant the transport magic clears and I let my perception skills seep out to find where I am, I recognize the layout of this underground fortress very clearly.

We're all stood inside the humming mana shielding for a few minutes before the rhythmic footsteps of three men approach.

Two of them are over level 500, both with a water element awakened, while the man in between them is level 308 with a very recognizable unique skill on his status.

Artificer [Legendary Grade]

The doors at the back of the shielded room open, and a silver-haired man in a purple cloak with all kinds of metal gadgets and magic items strapped to his arms and legs steps out with a smile on his face.

"Welcome to the Vice Region, visitors from the Dark Continent. My name is Leo, I will be brokering the trade deal today and inspecting the delivered goods."

He steps aside to show the opening in the door that leads to long dim underground hallways.

"We are right beneath the main association's headquarters in the capital. Please, right this way, let me show you to the trade room. To my understanding, this is your last stop on your route, so I hope you don't mind if I take up a bit more time than your other clients. I'll make it worth your while."

Chapter 525

I nod, and Leo leads us down the hall past over half a dozen identical doors until he turns into another mana-shielded room just like the one we left.

Instead of being wide open like the last one, this room is split into two halves with the same high B-Grade mana shielding dividing it in the center.

There's a long bench and table on both sides of the wall and a clear section so both sides can see each other, with two silver metal cubes built into the wall on both sides of the glass-like material. They look like they have mechanisms to open and close on both sides of the wall.

Leo and his two water-wielding guards go on one side, and Ember, Lith, and I go on the other.

Leo is the first to speak up, pointing to the silver cubes.

"Press the control panel when you are ready to begin."

There is a small silver tablet built into the table in front of us that we sit on, and I press it at the same time Leo does.

I hear a click on his end and mine.

The cube to my right opens up next to me, and the cube to my left opens up on his side of the table.

At the same time, the door we walked through to get in here shuts abruptly and the center of the room seals itself to make the room split evenly in half.

I watch him place an item box in his cube and press the tablet. It clicks closed, so I do the same, taking the item boxes full of gear and potions out from my storage and placing them into the cube open in front of me. Then, press the tablet to initiate the trade.

It clicks shut, and immediately two more clicks echo through the room and the left cube opens.

I pull it out and look inside to start counting out the money inside and confirm it's the exact amount.

Leo begins sifting through the item boxes I sent him and takes about ten full minutes to go through his papers and tally everything he has.

Then, he nods and presses the tablet again to have the cube on his end close.

I do the same, seeing that I've got everything I need from this deal.

The moment I do, the silver box shuts and the door sealing the room opens up. The open hallway is visible to both of us.

It's a very cool mechanism, and now I want to build one myself back in the Crimson City to conduct similar deals.

If either party isn't happy with their trade, they can withhold both parties from leaving the sealed rooms until the proper deal is done.

Leo looks through the clear section in the center of the shielding and speaks up again.

"These are good items. Who makes them? And where do you source the raw materials from? Is there truly no limit to how much we can order per month?"

He turns to Lith.

"Your middleman here told me you could handle ten times this order if needed, is that really true?"

He turns his head back to me curiously, and the room falls silent for a few seconds.

Then, I respond in a static voice through the appraisal-blocking armor.

"I have some dungeons I farm from in the Dark Continent, and a small team of skilled craftsmen that is capable of fulfilling orders no matter the size."

He thinks to himself before responding.

"What about that armor? Who makes it? And can we purchase items of that quality in a future order?"

I nod slowly.

"Armor like this is not for sale, but I can provide some high B-grade gear at a premium. The only catch is I need to limit the quantity."

Leo smiles and leans in.

"Of course, the high price of goods would be meaningless if there was no longer any scarcity or demand for it. What do you have to offer?"

I run him through the usual spiel that I have all of the other regions and sectors about my offer for special items, and his eyes widen more and more the longer I talk.

I know his skill is similar to that of a craftsmanship one, so it's clear he realizes that this is either a unique version of the skill like his, or above just legendary grade; however, he doesn't say it straight to my face.

He just looks at both of the guards behind him, then to me.

"I'll pay the full 999 gold right now, but I want two orders done here in front of me to see it work with my own eyes."

I pause, looking at him for unusually long beneath my armor, because I never said I was the one with the craftsmanship skill.

However, I'm confident in my concealment. Even if he used some unique appraisal gadget to make it through my black armor, I'm sure it's impossible to read my actual status in the state I'm currently in. Thanks to the divine item Ember applied to my status this morning, not even I know how to break through it if I wanted to.

Even so, I reply.

"Fine, what is it you'd like?"

We discuss what's possible for a few more minutes, then land on the fact that the two guards standing behind him need upgrades to their gear because they're going to be attending the B-Class exams in a few days.

Having high-powered water-imbued gear will surely give them an edge.

The next round of trades using the cubes consists of the guards handing over a longsword and a chestplate along with large containers full of their blood for me to activate the bond. On my end, I give them both mythic-grade regeneration potions to restore their lost blood.

Leo's eyes widen with surprise again once he touches one of the potions, and I tell him just one of those would be considered a special item too. I'm only giving it to them because I know they'll drink it on the spot.

Leo's curiosity grows more and more as I pull out two extreme-grade water stones to begin the crafts.

I increase the longsword's basic stats all up over +175% on all five slots, imbue swordsmanship into the item to give the wielder better instincts and accuracy while holding it, and add three additional water stones to increase the intensity of elemental magic.

The chestplate is imbued with body-hardening and three water stones as well, bringing its defense stat up to +250% and the others all above +150%. The hardening attribute mixed with the water stones creates a natural dark blue layer of shielding that expands over the entire body of the hunter using it. It can be controlled in density just like mana shielding, basically, it's created a stronger layer of full-body defense that seeps out of the dark blue chestplate.

Once I trade the completed items back, the water wielders and the artificer are in shock at the one-of-a-kind priceless items they're holding in their hands.

"These... these are basically A-Grade items. I've never even seen something like this in a public auction. What- how?"

I count off the 999 gold he's sent over with a smile on my face beneath my helmet and place it into my item storage before replying.

"The how isn't for you to worry about. I'm glad to do business with you for many months, or even years to come."

There's another pause as they equip the gear and still stand in awe at its power.

"So, how about that final item? What would you like me to make for you? And is there another basic order of E to C-Grade goods you would like to have crafted for next month?"

Leo turns back to me while pulling another pouch out from beneath the table and nods.

"Yes, I believe I would like to make another order—well, two orders actually."

He places the bag into the silver cube, and we repeat the trade process, but I don't give him anything in return this time.

As I look through the pile of gold and platinum inside the item box he just handed me, he speaks up.

"That's a new order for the Vice Region. You said you could handle ten times the output, so I'm giving it to you. There's another small order of items from the Apex region that we'll accept for them. The regional leader up there isn't too friendly with outsiders, I hope this is acceptable."

I nod and place the item box into my storage.

"Of course, I'll get it done. No problem. How about that final special item, any preferences? Or would you like to think on it?"

Leo smiles.

"I'm going to have to ask the Director once he's back from the B-Class exams candidate selection in the dungeons. I believe the trials and extended training sessions will be going on for another full day. I hope there's no rush."

"No rush at all, take your time. As you can see, it doesn't take me long to complete a high quality craft."

I turn to Lith.

"Just contact him through the usual channels. I can create anything the Regional Director desires, within reason."

Leo responds.

"Very well."

Then, both of us start to come to the conclusion that the meeting is over.

Lith even pulls out a transport crystal that would bring us back to Sector 1, but I speak up out of curiosity on a point Leo just made.

"If you don't mind answering, what do you mean by the Director picking candidates for the B-Class exams? Is there more than just being above level 500 to attend that event?"

Leo looks at me curiously.

"Well, each region allows up to twelve top applicants to apply. It's the yearly test to see how strong each region has become. This is about showing the progress of the regional directors, not just for the hunters themselves."

I nod slowly, and turn to eye the white gem in Lith's hand, but Leo keeps speaking.

"We lost a good amount of this year's candidates in a labyrinth collapse out in Sector 4, so the Director is personally making sure we fill in those slots and training them up in one of the B-Grade dungeons. Half the city knew this; we held an event for level 400 and above hunters to apply all month."

I reply.

"That makes sense. I don't exactly spend time in the Vice Region; I was just curious."

I pause a moment longer, then ask another question.

"Why don't they just use the labyrinth to train up recruits? Wouldn't that be faster and more efficient than B-Grade dungeons?"

Leo's eyes tighten.

"Sometimes curiosity is best left as just a question. I wouldn't go asking things you don't want to know the answers to."

I let out a sigh and take the transport crystal from Lith and hold it up in front of me while Ember and Lith put their hands on my shoulder.

"I didn't mean to pry, I'm just a new businessman from the Dark Continent trying to get to know the mainland."

Leo smirks.

"Right. Well, I'll just leave it at this. The Vice Region doesn't exactly own the labyrinth. It just happens to be here. We only do what is within our authorization."

I nod and crush the crystal in my hand.

"Understood. Nothing more for me to know. I look forward to crafting that item for the Director. See you next month with the goods you've ordered."

He gives me a nod back before the room fills with transport magic and we find ourselves back in the Galeheart Tower.

I pull off my helmet and let the rest of the armor fall into my item storage to leave a wide smile across my face, turning to both of them.

"Jackpot! From all the regions so far, that's 310 Platinum in revenue today. 30 of it is from special orders—"

Lith interjects.

"Well—soon 40, I'll get you your 10 platinum today with a list of items I want."

I nod, doing some math in my head.

"That means 280 platinum is this month's 25% worth of down payments. After splitting that up between payouts for the guildhall and paying Bri's craftsman team, the payout of pure profit from the remaining 75% will be 840 platinum... Plus the 40 from special orders, 880... I'll probably make a few platinum overall from sales in the guildhall too, but that'll be burned through when I give weekly aid packages at the rate new citizens are entering the town. Still, nearly a 1k platinum month. This is good..."

Lith hops on the elevator to go to his vault and grab money to pay me while Ember and I are standing in the middle of the lobby.

Ember speaks up.

"That was a very interesting trip; you're making some fascinating allies and even playing nice with your enemies without them even knowing. Humans are very tricky creatures to figure out sometimes."

I reply.

"I plan to build this trade route far larger than it is now and expand my city much further, but I need to know exactly who I'm dealing with without anyone getting too suspicious. Let's go to the dungeons back in the Crimson City. I need to learn how to control this concealment item as soon as possible. There isn't much time left until the B-Class exams."

Chapter 526

I crush a teleport crystal to bring Ember and myself back to the Crimson City.

It's good to see the double that was working general surveillance is now farming the labyrinth for more fire containment stones and high B-Grade items now that the Soul Energy barrier is up.

The second double watches over the dungeons inside the barrier and keeps an eye on the population trading in the outer city housing some non-citizens outside the barrier too.

I delegate the third body double, the one in charge of the guildhall, to use half of the platinum earned from the 25% down payment on new postings for quotas that need to be farmed this month.

After these are posted and the word is spread throughout the hunters that farm in the dungeons, I delegate this double to see Bri with the other half of orders and the list of goods that need to be made this month.

I plan on seeing her in my main body before the B-Class exams. She is my ride to the bedrock region, after all, but my time right now needs to be focused on a single task.

"Ember, we have less than 48 hours to get this done. Let's go train."

Ember nods as we fly over to the canyon of dungeons, but once we go inside, he asks to go and train far out in the desert with no one else around. So, I dungeon walk us over to a high D-Grade dungeon in the desert over 100km away from any settlements or the trade route.

We jump out and get a few kilometers away from the glowing blue portal in the open sand and I get into a fighting stance.

I speak up as I feel Ember's perceived mana control drop down to levels that are hardly noticeable.

"So, how do we start? How do I tap into this divine energy... what's the trick?"

Ember smirks and gets into a fighting stance as well.

"Oh, there's no trick, we just have to practice. Come at me, try to only use enough mana in your attacks to match the control that you feel coming off of mine."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What do you mean there's no tricks?"

He motions for me to step closer.

"You can't just master divine energy overnight. Most likely, not even in a full year. I doubt you'd even be able to smell a scent of it even if we trained in the Titan's domain for 10 years straight at your current perception of the world around you."

Ember steps forward and continues, egging me on to spar with him more.

"The divine limiter you have equipped is temporary, and the only way you're going to be able to manipulate it without the knowledge I have is through pure instinct."

I ponder his words and step forward while nodding.

"Fine. I'll follow what you say exactly if you think it's possible."

Ember grins.

"I know it is. I was the one that created this item after all, I know how it works. I can already sense the barrier bonding with you over the last few hours. You should be a natural once you get a feel for things."

I run forward and try to use the minimum amount of magic physically possible, matching the mana control he's producing that barely reaches the heights of a level 100 hunter.

The first punch Ember blocks sends ripples of mana through the desert, and I see his head shaking.

"Still need to tone that down by about ten times to match me."

I try again, using even less mana, and a smaller ripple comes out.

"Better, but let's go even lower."

Over and over, I try to naturally suppress my mana control with lighter and lighter hits until I finally reach the mana control level he wants me at.

To me, it feels as if I'm back inside Monk's monastery for the first time without any Qi. The amount of mana I'm using is so minuscule, the speed my punches are moving at, and the power behind each blow feels like I'm playing and acting out a fighting scene in slow motion.

Ember makes me hold this incredibly slow and grueling pace for over an hour before he speaks up again.

"Alright. Let's move it up to the average level 200 hunter next."

The mana control that radiates from him increases drastically, and his speed and power do too, but there's hardly any change when I match him.

It always feels exactly the same to me as the level 100 comparison was, but I catch on quick.

"Now, 300."

"400!"

"First rank up, let's do 500!"

I begin to feel the increments between the levels increase, and the first large change is when Ember replicates the mana control, speed, and power of a normal ranked-up hunter. Now it's starting to feel like we're actually moving a little and not just standing in place.

"600..." "700..." "800..." "900..." "1000!"

Finally, we even reach the second rank-up stage, and Ember replicates the average strength of a monster this strong. We're getting somewhere, but it still just feels like we're walking in place, hardly even jogging around the battlefield compared to the intense fights I've been in lately.

This tale has been pilfered from Royal Road. If found on Amazon, kindly file a report.

"1500... 1600..."

"2000... 2100..."

"2500... 2600..."

"3000!"

It isn't until we reach the average mana control of a level 3000 monster that I have to begin going all out.

We conclude that this is about the limit of our natural power. Ember could go a bit higher, and I could use my greater form to push myself too, but we come to the reasonable conclusion that if I have to practice any concealment up to this level of power at any point, I might as well be blowing my cover and showing my full unconcealed mana control anyway.

After the first 8 hours of training, we've established the levels I need to instinctually practice in 100 level increments between level 100 and 3000.

However, most importantly, mastering the level 500-1000 range. But, in order to master that, I need to have a feel for the entire spectrum.

Over the next 8 hours until the sun rises, we spar in the open desert.

Ember calls out a random level, and I have to adjust my output of firepower to combat this exact level of threat.

My perceived mana control is still non-existent, but for now, this is practice to make sure the energy coming off me correlates with the average output of the hunter I'm trying to emulate.

At first, even with the tutorial running through all the levels with Ember, it's still rather tough to get the exact power and speed right.

When Ember switches from fighting at level 2000 mana control straight back to level 300, for example, sometimes it's hard to gauge my actual strength.

Level 700-800 feels like it's 200-300 when I'm used to sending off attacks that blow 1km large craters into the ground seconds prior.

Despite this, after thousands of attempts and trials, by the time the sun comes up, I'm capable of matching Ember's exact strength within a 100-200 level mana control range of speed and pure power within a quarter of a second.

We stop for a break to watch the sunrise, and Ember compliments my progress.

"Pretty good start to this session. You've basically mastered your real output control, so if you have to fight any of your fellow B-Class hunters in this exam, now you won't accidentally kill them with a handshake."

I roll my eyes.

"Hey, it's not like I was that out of control before."

Ember chuckles.

"Yeah, you had two settings before, off and on. Now, you can fly under anyone's radar and fit in."

He nods a few times.

"Also, I don't know if you can sense it or not, but your barrier has been adapting to the changes in power all this time during training. You're almost ready for the next phase. I say we take an hour-long break here, then get back to training. By tomorrow, you can definitely start changing your perceived mana control as well."

"Good."

As the sun rises more, and I rest from the long night of sparring, I think about the trade deals that we attended yesterday. The high-level special crafts I produced for the regional directors are fresh in my mind. Many of the items I made for them have over 150-200% stat buffs on them. Almost half of the current gear I'm wearing isn't even that strong. So, while I have some time to think, I begin sifting through my item storage to pull out leftover loot drops and magic items to bring my old lagging gear up to par.

The first item I look at is the gifted ring Bri crafted for me a while back. I add a few stat buffs, imbue my all-seeing eye skill to create a new perception buff, and blood bond it to create a link that will make the item stronger the longer I wear it.

Platinum Ring of Visual Manipulation [+151% Mental Strength][+111% Speed][+100% Agility]
[+99% Strength][+74% Defense][Illusion Attribute]

->

Platinum Ring of Visual Manipulation [Blood Bonded] [+222% Mental Strength][+170% Speed]
[+161% Agility][+159% Strength][+144% Defense][+75% Perception][Illusion Attribute]

Next, I imbue body hardening into an amulet, while blood bonding it and adding all its lacking stats as well, focusing on boosting its defensive traits.

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [+141% Defense][+125% Strength][+125% Mental Strength]

->

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [Blood Bonded] [+231% Defense][+204% Strength][+199% Mental Strength][+170% Agility][+158% Speed][Hardening Attribute]

After this, I focus on my boots with a speed buff and combine them with the enchanted boots I received from the 42nd floor of the labyrinth, adding 4 extreme-grade wind stones to the craft inspired by Bri's boots that allowed her to fly without wind magic. On top of everything, I blood bond these boots to create another growth-type item.

Enchanted Boots of Extreme Speed [+152% Speed]

+

Enchanted Silver Boots [+348% Speed][+340% Agility]

->

Enchanted Boots of Extreme Speed [Blood Bonded] [+402% Speed][+377% Agility][+242% Strength][+220% Mental Strength][+181% Defense][Wind Attribute]

Next, I imbue four extreme-grade ice stones into a pendant. I blood bond this item and add all of the necessary additional stats to bring it up to its current full potential.

Enchanted Ice Serpent's Pendant [+110% Agility] [+75% Magic Resistance] [+95% Ice Magic Resistance]

->

Enchanted Ice Serpent's Pendant [Blood Bonded] [+228% Agility] [+227% Speed][+224% Strength][+203% Mental Strength][+195% Magic Resistance][+165% Ice Magic Resistance] [+160% Defense][Ice Attribute]

I use a large amount of blood and mana crystals as the catalyst to upgrade the platinum ring I received from defeating the blue ogre king. It's a symbol of the first dungeon that gave me a major boost in mana control when I was first starting out in the Dark Continent.

I blood bond it as well to make sure it continues to grow.

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+131% Mental Strength] [+125% Speed][+125% Agility]
[+110% Defense]

->

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [Blood Bonded] [+241% Mental Strength] [+226% Speed]
[+220% Agility][+180% Defense][+174% Strength]

Next, I combine the blood-bonded armor I have on with the chestplate that fell as an item drop next to the enchanted boots on the 42nd floor. To make this an even more special craft, I imbue 4 extreme-grade earth stones from the 38th floor as well as a mythic grade body hardening skill to create the same living armor effect that the waterstone craft created back in Vice City for one of Leo's guards.

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+312% Defense]

+

Enchanted Silver Chestplate [+391% Defense][+322% Strength]

->

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+469% Defense][+398% Strength][+301% Mental Strength][+258% Agility][+255% Speed][Hardening Attribute][Earth Attribute]

Lastly, I finished my crafting session off with the silver lightweight gauntlets. I use an immense amount of blood and mana to complete this craft. I even sacrifice 2 of the near A-Grade firestones from the 39th floor and 2 of the earth stones from the 38th to create a dual-element craft.

Considering I wield both of these items already, it's possible to do without much risk. My [Storm King's Dagger Set] is a double-element craft with both lightning and wind imbued into one, so I know it can be done. It's just that normally, not many people would ever attempt it because of the volatile nature of element stones and the potential of them going out of control if the user is not strong enough to handle the item.

Once the craft is complete, and the silver gauntlets rest on my hands, I can feel them humming with power.

Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets [+165% Defense][+120% Strength][Hardening Attribute]

->

Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets [Blood Bonded][+279% Defense][+270% Strength][+256% Mental Strength][+239% Agility][+233% Speed][Hardening Attribute][Earth Attribute][Fire Attribute]

I put everything back on, then use my conceal skill to modify it all to look like +50-150% stat boosting gear with only 1-2 stats buffed max on each item.

My mana control isn't the only thing I want to hide, my gear should look like high C-Grade or average B-Grade gear at best.

I stand up and turn to Ember once the sun fully reaches above the desert horizon and speak up.

"Alright, I'm ready, let's finish up this last stage of training. We now have less than 24 hours left before we're off to the B-Class Exams."

Ember grins and turns back to me.

"Good, your barrier settled faster than I thought it would while you were working those crafts. At this rate, I think you'll be able to manipulate your perceived mana control with ease before the sun sets tonight. Let's continue."

Chapter 527

We continue sparring following the same routine.

Ember calls out a level of mana control I need to hit, and I instantly change my strength output to match it.

During this whole process, I continuously have my All-Seeing Eye and natural perception released abnormally high.

Even if my perceived output is at level 100 mana control, I'm still scanning my surroundings and taking in as much data as I can from these matches at levels near my maximum output.

Over the next few hours as the sun rises overhead, I begin to see and feel a change in the invisible and unseeable barrier that resides around my body.

Each time I drastically switch levels of control, there is a minuscule ripple in the barrier. Every time I feel this ripple, the barrier gets closer and closer to my skin and I can feel it happen with far more intensity like it's connected to my central nervous system.

Almost like the instinctual senses I receive when I activate my swordsmanship skill, it's getting more and more intense the more I focus on it.

I can't consciously create the ripples that are occurring, but I can focus on them more and adapt the way I switch between mana control levels to make the rippling effect more intense and noticeable.

It feels almost like a bell is ringing in my ear when the ripples get intense enough, but there's no actual noise.

Ember doesn't tell me specifically to do this, but once he realizes I am, the jumps between mana controls get faster and further apart in power to help me stimulate this change and get into a flow-like state.

More hours pass, and we spar well into the afternoon.

The sensation of bells ringing throughout my body, and the invisible barrier rippling over and over, gets so intense to the point where it crosses a threshold and feels like one long continuous ringing vibration.

I don't even sense my own breathing; the only thing I can feel is the power level in my body rise and fall, until I see the barrier between my inner being and the world around me fade away in my mind's eye.

My true mana control seeps out, and flows strong like a river as the continuous feeling of infinitely fast vibrations ring through my ears and mind.

The full extent of my mana control pours out into the desert and a wave of natural intimidation and pure crimson aura expands to become kilometers wide.

The moment it does, my concentration completely breaks, and the bells stop ringing.

Reality floods back into my conscious mind and the vibration of this divine limiter ceases completely, my mana control is concealed and hidden from the outside world again, but for a moment, it was there.

I fall backward into the sand covered in sweat and hear Ember slowly clapping his hands.

"That was it. You managed to break through. The feeling is now ingrained in your mind, you'll be able to do it again."

Breathing heavily, I nod to myself and respond.

"You're right... about everything... This power isn't something I can directly control, but it is something that I can align myself with in moments of extreme focus. It's very possible."

We both grin as I get back up to my feet and place my hands back into the fighting position.

"Let's do it again."

While the sensation is fresh in my mind, we get back to sparring.

I don't even want to talk about it, I just want to focus on the ripples and bells while I can still feel them.

Another hour passes before the sensation builds up to the point where I release my entire mana control again just like I did before.

This time, we don't stop after my concentration breaks and I jump right back into it.

It takes less than 20 minutes for me to feel the rhythm of the barrier this time.

Then 10 minutes, and after the fifth attempt, I'm able to concentrate and release my mana control in less than 3 minutes.

We continue to spar.

Eventually, as the sun starts to set, every few seconds, spurts of my full unconcealed mana control are pouring out into the open air.

The desert turns dark again, and we don't stop sparring.

After another few hours pass, I'm able to keep my full unconcealed mana control aura pouring out from the barrier around me without breaking my concentration for what feels like indefinitely.

The ripples feel natural, and I can concentrate and align my output with them in fractions of a second.

At first, the only thing I can do is release my full power, but as the night goes on, and we continue sparring while changing the speed and power of the output of attacks, the perceived mana control becomes easier and easier to control.

Once I've synced myself with the barrier, it takes just a few more hours to master how to manipulate the actual energy that comes out and the amount that is perceived.

I've passed the point of mystery, and entered the stage of fine-tuning.

I'm able to show the speed and power of a level 600 hunter, and give off the mana control that matches it, while slipping in full-powered level 3000+ mana control rated attacks whenever I please without my perceived mana control rising at all.

The rate at which my perceived base switches between level 100, to 500, to 1000, to releasing everything I have has become almost instantaneous.

The barrier around me has melded with my mind, and the process has become almost second nature.

I have no idea how I'm doing it, or what true powers are at work here, but at the end of the day, Ember created an item to do a purpose, and it is a success.

After a full hour of flawless switching and sparring, Ember finally speaks up and calls it.

"Perfect. There's no more training to be done. Anything more is just a waste of energy. Your Soul Energy is not visible at all unless you activate it, and your mana control suppression is flawless. With just a few hours to spare until morning, our training is complete."

I look over the desolate desert, and I slowly fly in the air toward Ember with a teleport crystal in hand.

"Good. Now we rest up before the B-Class Exams."

I place a hand on his shoulder and crush the gem to bring us back to the bunker in the Crimson City, then pull out our Hunter's IDs that Bri made a few weeks back.

"These are who we're going as. I'm Ray Anderson, lightning mage, and you're Emrie Carter, Fire Wielder."

He takes the card and nods, and I continue.

"Want me to make you a fire sword with the Minotaur stones or some kind of armor to play the part?"

Ember shakes his head.

"No, I'd rather not use a weapon. I'll just fight with my fists and pure fire magic. That's enough."

I nod while taking out the lightning and wind imbued dagger set from my item storage and holding the blades that crackle with static electricity in my hands.

"I'll get to try these out."

I spin the blades around my fingers, then place them on my waist while sharing my conceal skill with Ember.

We both shapeshift and edit our status to become level 600 hunters, but I think of a potential problem.

"What if for some reason you're out of range? My Domain stretches about 5km. There's a chance my concealment skill could deactivate."

We both think about this issue for a moment, and throw ideas at each other while I try to imbue my conceal skill into random B-Grade items. Most of them do a great job at creating illusions and allowing the user to change their form, but none of these items I'm creating can directly affect the user's status. I come to the conclusion that I need to upgrade this skill.

I use 250 PP to bring my special grade conceal up to legendary grade and turn to Ember.

"It's worth it. I've never seen another human with this skill, so it's about time I just give in and upgrade it. 250 PP isn't much of a setback considering my next Absorption skill upgrade that I'm saving up for is going to take 10,000 PP."

My eyes track over the new skill's info and I'm happy to see the new perks available. Now, anytime I see a person eye to eye and they come within the range of my mana control aura, this skill creates a perfect copy of them to replicate if need be.

Secondly, their voice and even status information converts over to the concealment replication. The actual skills and buffs themselves aren't converted to me if I don't own them, but if I watch the monster or person use this buff or skill, I can now recreate an illusion of it if I wish.

I'm able to pick and choose any voice, face, body, feature, or combination of any that I save to create any form I wish with far more accuracy than before. Figments of my imagination can become reality with far fewer limitations.

The strength of the concealment is dependent on the user's mana control base, so I'm confident no one can see through it, especially with an extra layer of protection now with a divine limiter on top of it.

I now imbue this legendary skill into one of the leftover cloaks and Wraith cores from the war that Fisher and Lydia defeated, then blood bond the item with a large amount of Ember's blood and over a quarter million MP as a catalyst to the craft.

It creates a magic cloak with over 200% stat buffs on every stat and a conceal attribute that allows the user to change their form, voice, and status at will just like the skill itself.

Ember accepts it, and puts it on as a backup measure.

We both adjust our perceived mana control to the average level 600 hunter, and switch our appearances to perfect replicas of the men in the pictures on our ID cards.

Over the next few hours, we relax and wait for the sun to rise.

I make sure to check on all of my body doubles one last time to make sure they're set up to take care of the city while I'm gone.

They're in charge of going to Vice City to pick up new materials to continue expansion, taking care of aid packages for new and current citizens, making sure local business runs smoothly, restocking the grocery stores, handing in raw materials to continue the production of orders, and watching over the elemental elites' continued training in the labyrinth.

Best of all, they continue farming in the Vice City labyrinth for stones to collapse dungeons and grow my own labyrinth while collecting more luminite.

I want to come back to an automated and growing system no matter how long I'm gone.

Once the sun starts to rise, I crush a transport crystal that brings me to Bri's workshop and climb the stairs to meet her in her office.

Today, we'll be heading off to the B-Class Exams.

"We're immediately greeted on the first floor by Bri, both surprised and impressed.

She takes us up to her workshop, and once I put up a hush barrier she finally speaks.

"I didn't recognize your mana control signatures at all... You're the only other person with these transport crystals, so I knew it was you... but still..."

She stares us up and down.

"These disguises are far more convincing than I even thought was possible..."

We step forward and she takes out a silver box from beneath her desk.

We both sit down in the seating while she opens the casing and we have a short exchange of words about this month's orders that my double brought over two days ago.

Bri is planning on expanding her workshop, making another building here in the black market of Vice City, and my double is going to show her around the Crimson City in sector 2, giving her an office space there for future expansion as well.

We even briefly discuss the events that occurred in the Talton region, and she's happy to do the business meetings there moving forward. In our next meeting, I plan to have Bri introduce me so I can make a more genuine connection with their leader in my Flame Emperor identity.

While I didn't spend much time in that jungle, their strength impressed me, and the dismissal of the association, even though their leader is a regional director, also catches my interest.

Bri makes a final comment on it as she pulls out two transport crystals from the silver containment case.

"I've never been to the Talton Region, so I look forward to checking it out for myself. I've always heard stories of it being an isolated region that doesn't easily accept outsiders, especially Association-affiliated hunters."

She shrugs and hands each of us a crystal.

"The Bedrock region is a lot different. As you probably saw when you visited before, they're hard workers. Mostly a mining district, a lot of raw materials like metals and special ores come out of that region. The influx of workers over the years has brought more dungeons too. They may be smaller than the Vice Region in population and hunter strength now, but they're on the rise. I heard a very high-level Regional Director was appointed there a few years back, and he spends a lot of time with the citizens. Straight-laced, follows association orders, but has good intent for his people."

I nod as we accept the gems.

"Yeah, we met him. Over level 900, he's the strongest Director I've seen- well-"

I think back to the green-eyed Talton Region's Director's mana control, and it was definitely higher than his.

"Highest level I've seen at least."

Bri smiles, then looks at a clock on the wall.

"Anyway, it's about time you head off. Your entry to the B-Class exams awaits. Careful out there. I'll stay in touch with your doubles while you're gone and keep orders moving as usual."

I look to Ember, and then back to Bri as we share a few more words of goodbye, then crush the white gems.

Once the light fades, we're both stood back in the same dark stone dome that we teleported into last time for the trade deal.

The only difference is the rectangular door at the back that leads outside to the mining view and cities all over the mountains is wide open. It's a foggy morning, but I can still sense the environment that I saw last time I was here.

When I look around, the Director isn't present, but two guards at about level 700 are. They look down at clipboards, then up at us, and one speaks up.

"Ray and Emrie. Survivors of the catastrophe. I was there on duty the day it happened, no joke huh?"

I nod and make eye contact for a moment. He continues.

"No need to talk about it if it's a sore spot. The name's Jamie. Nice to meet you."

I recognize this tall bearded man as one of the guards that was by the director's side when I initially met him for trade deals the other day.

He continues to speak.

"In your file here it's like you're ghosts. Not a single Association check-in or sighting of you in any official dungeons. The Director was quite surprised when an A-Ranker submitted the form that he found you two training in Black Market dungeons in the Vice Region, though he was happy to have a few more people to stack our applicant roster."

He leans in.

"I am curious though, how'd you end up out there?"

I tighten my gaze, but reply quickly not to add any extra suspicion.

"We were injured badly after the... Well you know."

I pause as he nods, then continue.

"We were already outcasts here without friends or family to rely on. We just thought it would be best to lie low and farm in the regions where more stable dungeons were. The stronger dungeons here in Bedrock were way too volatile to train without worry of another catastrophe..."

I pause for a moment, letting the guard that apparently lived through that event reminisce about it for a moment. Then Ember pitches into my fabricated backstory.

"We managed to find some training grounds in the Vice Region, but once we were strong enough and wanted to get access to B-Grade dungeons, the only way to do that would be through the

Association. No black market areas have dungeons of that strength. It was either reapply to the Vice Region where we were hiding out, or come back to our roots."

I smile inwardly and finish his thought.

"That's right. The Bedrock gave us our start, so we might as well give our thanks and apply through the region that grew us into the hunters we are today."

The guard crosses his arms and grins.

"That's what I like to hear. Come on, follow me. I recognize you from the pictures on file, but we're going to have an appraiser verify everything and officially check you two in. Come on, I'll bring you to see the other applicants. I'm sure the Director has a speech he wants to tell to prepare everyone."

We follow the tall bearded guard with two large silver axes strapped to his back outside the dome, and I take in the view of the endless mountain ranges filled with mining towns and caverns.

At the top of this mountain we're on, there's nothing but this dome structure.

We're led down a rocky path for a while, over a km of elevation downward, wrapping around the mountain until we come upon a flat base in a valley in between this mountain and the next. The fog begins to clear the further down we travel.

There's a City with a few thousand people in it. I can sense quite a few of these in between most of the mountains where the land is flat, stretching on further than I can sense.

It doesn't seem like any one part of this region is the center capital, but it is all very well distributed. Every building looks very modern and well maintained. There are single homes, apartments, shops, and everything a city needs.

It isn't what I'd have predicted in a mountainous region like this, but with a teleport platform so close by, it makes sense.

We're led into a white building with four marble pillars at its entrance, and once inside the floor is made of the same stone.

The ceiling is high and there's a slight echo to our footsteps.

I recognize a few more guards that greet us at the entrance, and the rest of the room is emptied out except for 8 people near the back.

Green Hunter's Association logos are on the walls and floor, and we're greeted by the familiar voice of Director Maylack.

"Welcome, welcome! Our final two surprise applicants have arrived. That brings us to 8 Hunters applying to become B-Class this year. Let's get you two signed in."

He smiles wide, giving off much more friendly body language than he did when he was meeting me for business trade deals in my other identity.

It makes sense, as he's definitely less intimidated and dealing with fewer unknown factors.

A brown-haired woman with glasses is by his side. She steps forward through a crowd of level 501-570 hunters. I see she has a special grade appraisal skill on her status and carries a clipboard.

She's the one who will be double-checking our status.

From the readings I'm getting from all of the other applicants here, they aren't anything special. There are two earth magic users, two fire, one water, and one wind. None of them are at the threshold for extreme element skills, and their armor and gear is standard high C-Grade gear.

They're strong, definitely ranked-up hunters, but I can't find anything impressive about them.

I didn't want to stand out too much right off the bat, but in order to follow through with the plan to actually do well in these exams, we're going to need to be a little stronger than the basic applicants here.

The brown-haired woman walks up to Ember first and asks for his ID.

As he hands it to her, a wave of appraisal seeps into Ember and he allows it to read his manipulated status displaying a level 612 hunter with extreme fire magic and a ranked up buff called Infinite Inferno.

I know that's not what his actual buff is called, but I'm assuming it'll be an excuse for him to use an excessive amount of fire at times if he needs to and blame it on the buff.

The woman's eyes light up at the status as she writes down what she sees and gives Ember back his ID, then walks to me and does the same thing.

I decide to one up him just slightly and put level 615 on my status, showing my extreme lightning summoning skill and a fake ranked up buff called Shockwave.

The lady's eyes widen even more as she scribbles down what she sees and verifies that the names, skills, and appearances all match what is in their records.

Then, she hurries back to the director to show him the clipboard.

His eyes widen as well while Ember and I just stand in confident stances behind the 6 other applicants.

He reads the file for abnormally long, then looks up straight at us, then speaks to the 8 of us again.

"Well, you've all been verified as the applicants submitted to the exams this year. We still have 4 empty slots available, but this will be one of our biggest showings in a while regardless."

He smiles and can't help glancing over to Ember and me.

"As you all know, the total applicants per region per year is limited to 12. We're not a strength-focused region, but over the years we have grown some strong warriors despite that. Just know, even if you fail, there is always next year."

He points behind us and we turn our head to see the tall bearded guard that brought us in.

"Jamie took three tries to pass, I've known some applicants that took even longer."

He nods as we all turn our heads back to him.

"Just know, if you manage to pass the exams, it's not only a great personal achievement for you, but a great boost in reputation for our region. Any members that pass will be greatly rewarded. You can have a position as my personal guard with salary, a pension from the Association, even any B-Grade gear of your liking. The region gets an increase in spending from the central Association

government, so it will help the whole region and you will reap those rewards directly as a thanks. Only a handful of applicants make it through, and most of the slots are taken by the Apex Region private trained recruits each year, but maybe we have a shot at taking one or two slots, you never know."

His eyes rest back on Ember and me before he continues his speech, and the assistant that was doing the appraisal before hands out new transport crystals with [APEX] and our names labeled on each of them.

"These transport crystals will bring you all directly to the exam site. There will most likely be an introduction there as well, but the rules, layout, and exact location of the exams change every year. I would give you pointers if I could, but there is no advice to give. All I know is that I'll be attending the exams in a few days to be part of one of the assessments, so will all of the regional directors. The only hints I have is that it will be a multi-stage exam. Your hard work this year will be shown off, and I wish each of you luck in your individual testing process."

The assistant makes us all line up in a single file line as the Director goes on about some of the other guards, and how his own B-class exam played out over a decade ago, but I don't listen to much of it.

Like he repeatedly says, they change the event every year, so I'll just have to go in prepared, on guard, and with an open mind.

Although my competitive nature urges me to show off and try to win whatever challenges are thrown in front of me, my real goal with this entire event will be to gather information on the Association's higher ranks. I want to know who this leader of the Apex region really is, why he won't show his face, and what correlation to the Sun God he has.

One by one, the line moves forward.

The Director has a quick one-on-one conversation with each of the applicants, then sends them off with a flash of light from their transport crystal.

The line reaches Ember, and I hear his tone completely change.

He motions for me to step forward next to him too and I do as he says.

"You two, you're not ordinary hunters... I can feel your mana control, it rivals that of some of my guards that have passed the B-Class exams years ago... Your file says you disappeared in the catastrophe- and now you're back out of nowhere with strength like this..."

Ember shrugs and I nod.

As I'm about to speak up, the tall guard that escorted us here speaks from the back of the room.

"They're good boss, the story checks out, they're real loyal Bedrock citizens. Just a tough past. Trust me, I was there when the catastrophe happened too. They're survivors, it makes sense that they'd be driven to be strong."

Director Maylack nods.

"Oh I know. I meant it as a good thing. I haven't seen hunters like you apply in the Bedrock region... Maybe ever. Usually stronger hunter's like yourself move out to the Vice Region or even the Veridian Region if not directly to the Apex Headquarters. This is the mana control of Apex soldiers

if I've ever felt it. Maybe we have a chance at winning some actual impactful Region Points this year."

He smirks.

"I know you're doing this for yourselves, but if either of you pass, just know I have an extra reward waiting for you. Even better if you make it to the final selection. Do that, and you can have anything you want, even his job."

He points to Jamie and they both start laughing, and make rude but joking remarks toward each other acting like they're old friends.

He looks back down at us and puts out a hand to shake, I do out of respect, then Ember does next.

"Pleasure to meet both of you. I may not have had the chance to train you myself, but Ray, Emrie, best of luck out there. Make your home region proud."

We both shake his hand one more time, then crush our transport crystals supplied by the Apex Region. A flash of bright white magic covers our vision.

Chapter 529

As the transport magic fades, the white color in my vision stays.

The floor I'm standing on is made of large squares of glossy white humming mana shielding, and it's far denser than any of the A-Grade shielding I've ever felt before in my life.

I turn my head left and right but see no one at all.

The only thing I see is an empty long stretching plane of mana shielding in every direction.

The sky above me is blue, but as far as I can see on the horizon, the floor below me is flat and white.

I do a scan of my surroundings and find that there are a few other people that have recently transported in and are just as confused as I am.

There are at least 20 people wandering around these empty white flats, but almost instantly, far off to my right side, I sense the presence of over 50 people in a concentrated area.

Ember's geopoint immediately pings his location in my Rising Emperor's Domain, and I can tell he's 10s of kilometers away, much closer to the large grouping of people than I am.

Over 75% of them are over level 500. Some are level 100-200 and there are a few people that are even between level 900 and 975 with golden collars made from the Sun God's Soul energy, just like the one that was around Rodrigo's neck when I sparred with him.

These stronger figures that show up in my enemy detection perception stand very far apart, most likely guarding something, but it's hard to tell exactly what from this distance. All I know is they are between the wandering applicants that have transported in and the 50 or so people inside some massive structure far off in the distance.

It's extremely far away, so I can't fully make out what's inside, but I'm certain this is where I need to go.

It's an eerie environment, seeing no one around me, and the only sound in my ears is the low humming of mana shielding that comes off the floor.

I whisper to myself and turn to walk slowly in that direction.

"Looks like the exams have already begun."

About half an hour passes, and nothing in the visual landscape changes, but I still sense the structure far off in the distance. I decide to turn my walk into a jog, then into a fast run.

Finally, after another half an hour of travel on this flat white surface, an enormous grey structure begins to reveal itself on the horizon visible to the naked eye. It looks like a wall, but there are large spikes and towers that are very blurry on it as well.

I even pass close by a few other applicants, some of which I don't recognize, telling me they're definitely from other regions.

However, I decide to veer off to stay my distance and not interact with anyone until I make it to the destination.

It seems like some people got lucky and spawned in closer to the massive grey wall, while others I'm sure are aimlessly wandering the white open flats too far away to see or sense a route to safety.

A few are flying through the sky to get higher vantage points, and this works for them, as they begin flying in the correct direction once they get high enough.

I just continue forward at a fast pace, speeding up even more, maxing out what should be possible for the level 600 mana control I'm putting out, not worrying about anyone but myself until I make it to the wall.

It takes another half an hour, but I finally see the huge grey stone structure up close.

It stretches about a hundred meters into the air, and there are enormous closed-off arching doorways every few hundred meters along the wall.

Each doorway is guarded by a peak B-Grade hunter, their level nearing 1000, and my guess is that these are the Apex Soldiers that Director Maylack mentioned while we were talking this morning.

Their mana control is impressive, and every one of them has an extreme grade element, along with 2-3 additional skills that are special grade and in some rare cases legendary grade.

They're all very common skills like extreme stat buffs, body hardening, and swordsmanship, just like the status modifications I've seen on other Directors.

This confirms the Association has definitely found a way to transfer these basic skills to their high-level officers, and the process is replicable.

The guard that I approach has a wind magic skill, along with extreme speed and swordsmanship.

His eyes are sharp, has a dark beard cut short, and silver armor shimmering and contrasting with the wall and floor.

He steps forward and lets out a strong aura as I get into visual range and yells out while creating large wisps of wind magic to ripple through the floor and push my feet back.

"Applicant! State your name, Region you come from, and why you desire to become a B-Class hunter!"

His loud voice rings out with the aura and wind magic for a few seconds, and it doesn't show any signs of stopping.

I yell back in return.

"Ray! Ray Anderson. I come from the Bedrock Region. I've come to these exams to gain access to stronger dungeons. Climbing the ranks of the Association, and becoming a loyal soldier like yourself is the only opportunity that will grant me this access to the power I desire!"

The wind magic and mana control aura bash against me for a few more seconds.

I'm roughly 30 meters away from him.

If I was an average hunter, like the applicants that were beside Ember and myself in the Bedrock Region, this amount of wind magic might knock me down. The impressive aura coming off of the soldier at the gate might even make me lightheaded or give me blurry vision while trying to withstand it.

This is definitely some kind of pre-trial testing going on.

The excessive wind magic ceases, but the aura coming off his body stays.

He speaks up again.

"Very good. Please, come this way and present your Hunter's ID. I will grant you access to the facilities."

He pulls out a black box from a pouch on his waist, and there's a small slit in its top.

He looks down at it, holding it steady in both of his hands, then looks back up to me.

The soldier doesn't say another word, but stares forward. This gives me the notion he wants me to place my ID in that box.

I take a step forward, and the aura around him becomes thicker and thicker the closer I get.

Once I'm within 10 meters, I can feel the pressure would be enough to make an average hunter pass out. If I want to make this interaction look real, I have to think of something to make it believable.

So, I activate my lightning magic and make an orb-like barrier around me that disperses large amounts of the incoming mana.

Static charges hum and crackle off as they collide with waves of his aura, and it cancels out over 90% of the charge.

I run forward, pulling my Hunter's ID from my side pocket and throw it forward with exceptionally fine precision.

At less than 5 meters away, there's a clicking sound that triggers the man's offensive aura to disappear.

The Hunter's ID slides right into the slot on the front of the box, and it flashes white.

My electricity-filled aura expands quickly when the attacks cease all of a sudden, but I deactivate my skill as well when the box opens up to present a black wristband inside.

The soldier smiles and presents the box.

"Very good technique, and impressive mana control resistance. Lightning types are pretty rare, I look forward to seeing how far you make it. Please, put this device on your left wrist. It will track your progress throughout the exam."

I take a few steps forward, take the wristband from the case, and click it onto my wrist and a few small letterings pop up on it.

It reads out all of the details that were on that Hunter's ID in white glowing text on the bottom half of the circular display screen, then at the top, there is a larger [00] that appears to be unlit or deactivated.

I assume it will show numbers at some point, ranging from 0-99, but can't figure out why.

I look up from the watch and back to the man, thinking that I'll receive the ID back, but he just closes the box and turns to the stone archway, pressing a silver device.

The center of the door splits open and begins to show what's inside as the man speaks again.

"You will receive your updated ID once the exam is over. Please, make yourself comfortable. Today you will assimilate with your fellow applicants and rest up before the exams begin tomorrow morning."

He motions for me to enter through the stone archway, and I see a long grey cobblestone path.

"Follow the path and you'll make it to the greeting hall."

I step forward onto the pathway and the doors begin to close behind me as I do.

He gives me a professional smile, then presses the sides of the black box and turns back to the never-ending horizon to wait for more applicants to arrive.

The double door shuts with a thud as the heavy stone comes back together and the chirping of birds and smell of honey fills my senses.

The scenery of green trees, flowers, trickling streams, and even docile animals like squirrels and deer roam around on either side of the path.

I walk forward, taking in the view, passing fruit trees, and watching birds fly through the open air.

There is no ceiling to this odd place, I still see the same blue sky above that I did when I first spawned in.

The further I walk away from the stone wall behind me, the more it feels like I'm really walking through the wilderness.

The grey stone path winds through the woods past ponds, flower fields, and mythical-looking swamplands with glowing blue mushrooms.

I don't sense much mana at all coming off of anything here, the only thing I sense is the excess energy floating through the air from the mana shielding outside these walls.

Flowing water, the sweet smell of fresh roses, and the beautiful wildlife continue to amaze me, but my gaze stays focused on the path beneath my feet.

Almost a full 20 minutes pass before the sounds of other humans hit my ears.

Cheers, laughter, music, and conversation flood through the wilderness until I come across its source at the end of the grey path that leads to a large stone castle in the middle of the wildlife.

Another stone archway comes into view, but this time the doors aren't closed.

Vines have grown up the castle walls, and birds have even made nests in some of the crevices in the hand-laid stone. They chirp and fly in and out of the archways to enter and leave the castle as they please.

There are six large archways covering the front side of this castle, opening it up to the outside world, and there are five other grey paths aside from my own that wind through the wilderness in directions far from where I came.

Everyone that was transported into that white abyss-like landscape and made their way to the stone wall all have come to the same exact place.

I see over 50 other people inside, but I can tell they're not all applicants.

There are long tables of food, fancy silverware and glasses, casino-style games being played, bars, stores with neon signs and various pleasure products and luxury items, fresh oxygen-rich air being pumped through the room, and many waiters handing out drinks and food on golden platters.

Once I walk through the gate, one of these men in a tuxedo welcomes me.

"Ray Anderson, I'm glad you've made it all this way. Please, make yourself comfortable. We want to make sure you're well-rested for the exams tomorrow."

He looks toward the back of the room, where over a dozen small closed doors rest through all of the activities taking place. They have all kinds of signs above them, and only two of them on the far sides are labeled [Exit].

"Once you have had your fun, you may leave, but you may stay as long as you like. All goods and services are on the house. The wristband you wear will tell you when you need to arrive at your next exam."

He hands me a drink and walks away before I can ask any questions.

Everything here feels very odd, even his wording feels very off. Next exam? Was that a slip of the tongue meaning I'm being tested right now, or just more nonsense to throw me off?

The bright lights, endless entertainment, and especially the calming nature outside.

This isn't at all what I expected to see when coming here...

Despite this, I walk forward into the crowded luxury lounge to see who has arrived and what I'm dealing with here. Over half of the people in here are employees, working gambling tables, serving food, and escorting guests to private rooms in the back.

Many of the workers are over level 700, while others like the waiter I just met aren't even level 200. I can tell who is a worker and who is an applicant by the wristbands people wear.

Everyone's looks the same, with their region, full name, and a blacked-out [00] on the face.

I walk further in with a tightened gaze and begin to recognize a few people.

There are three other applicants from the Bedrock Region that I see, and they look as confused as I do, as they've just recently entered this place on the other side of the room.

Two other people I see are the water-wielding guards from the Vice Region that accepted the trade deals with Leo a few days ago.

They're both drinking and eating food at a bar.

About two dozen other applicants with strong elemental skills catch my eye, and I see all kinds of locations like Veridian, Silca, and even Raya Region markings on a few applicants' wristbands.

Then a tall woman with strong arms and legs and a spear I recognize as my own craftsmanship catches my eye.

It's a warrior from the Talton Region.

She sits on a white couch alone, eating a plate of delicious-looking meat.

I'm confused as to why she's here, but don't want to ask because that would cause unnecessary problems.

I let out a long sigh and continue to walk through the entertainment around me, scanning people as they come in from the outside wilderness.

I swirl the drink that was presented to me when I entered around in its glass but don't dare to actually sip from it even though I don't sense anything out of the ordinary inside.

When I see an empty table on my way through the cliques of hunters, I leave it on the edge and continue walking through the room toward the most familiar status reading in my mind's eye.

Finally, I make it to one of the less crowded bars with a blue haired woman wielding water magic behind it talking to a single orange haired fire user.

The bar itself is in an awkward corner of the room, and it's not as easily accessible as the others that are all aligned on the center path.

As I approach, he turns his head and makes eye contact with me, waves for me to come and have a seat, then faces the woman again as she points to options on their menu and they continue their conversation.

I walk up and sit down next to him, putting an arm around his shoulder.

Then, Ember speaks the moment I take a seat.

"Took you long enough to get here. I was waiting to make my order until you arrived, but now I'm not sure I'm even hungry."

He grins, looks up at the bartender, and shrugs.

"I think our conversation was satisfying enough. Looks like those teleport crystals picked favorites, don't they? I spawned right outside the front gate, it seems some people weren't as lucky."

She nods, then looks at me and shows a professional smile while sliding me the same menu that's in front of Ember.

"Your friend is right. Luck is a much more important skill than most hunter's believe it to be. The fact that you even found this castle in the first place, and so early on is quite a good start. Now please, take a look at the menu. I'm sure you'll be here for a while, and want to rest up, so you might as well find something that interests you."

Chapter 530

I look at the menu and all kinds of options are available for purchase.

There are about a dozen food and drink items on the top half of the menu written in green ink.

The middle half of the menu is written in yellow, and there are less than half as many items as the green.

Below this, there's only one item written in red text. It's a meal and drink combo.

Beside every option, [0 Tokens] is printed.

I look up at the woman and do a quick scan of her status to find that she's over level 700, has extreme water magic summoning, and mana control strong enough to face off against a regional director if she wanted.

However, she's just calmly standing behind the counter polishing an unused glass while we read the menu.

I ask her a question.

"What are these color-coded options...? And- What are tokens?"

I scratch my head and look back down at the paper, but she doesn't respond right away.

I turn to Ember and he shrugs.

"I asked the same thing a few times, but got no direct answers out of her. However, I did pick up on a few clues and think I have a feel for what's going on.."

I tighten my gaze at him as he continues.

"Everything about this first stage of the exams is about luck-"

As he says these words, lights flash in the background and a dinging noise sounds out from one of the casino tables with a spinning roulette machine.

A tall man with blond hair stands up with a relieved look on his face and yells out in excitement as the thin worker behind the machine hands him a small black coin.

A man on the other side of the table looks depressed and pale-faced. I can't quite tell what exactly is going on. It's on the far side of the room and I didn't see what the stakes were before their game, but that coin in the winner's hand may have answered one of my questions already.

Ember grins and continues after they calm down.

"Those are tokens. I've seen a few people win them throughout the last hour or so, and a few have even left through those doors."

He points to the back of the room where the [Exit] signs glow with red neon light.

Then I reply, looking down at the color-coded menu.

"So even this is some kind of game."

The woman behind the counter shows a small grin as she continues to polish the crystal-clear glass reflecting her blue hair in the bright lights of the room.

I point to the menu.

"So what? The green options are safer? And the Red Options are risky, does it work something like that?"

I look her in the eyes, and she shrugs.

"I'm not permitted to answer any questions about the exams without proper payment."

I tighten my gaze, understanding that this means it will be possible to get some information out of her.

If proper payment means tokens, then I'll have to play in these games to win some, but maybe there's a way to get the answers without risking anything. I saw the look on that man's face at the table when he lost, but if everything is free, then I'm not sure why he'd be so down...

I ask another question.

"Do we have to participate in these games? Do we even need tokens? Or can we exit right now...?"

"I'm not permitted to answer any questions about the exams without proper payment."

She responds with the same tone, but I can tell she's enjoying herself by the small changes in her facial expression while she watches me think.

I let out a sigh, thinking over my options.

"Well, if I'm going to play, I might as well limit the times I'm going to test my luck. I doubt it's as easy as just picking a green meal and winning a token. High Risk, High Reward. I'll take the meal and drink from your red menu option."

Her grin grows as I push the menu forward, and Ember adds in.

"I'll have what he's having too. If it doesn't look appetizing once it's presented, I just won't indulge."

I nod slowly.

"Same..."

The blue-haired bartender places the overly polished glass back with the other clean glasses and gets to work on preparing a meal before our eyes.

With magic stoves, pre-cut meat and vegetables, and top-shelf drinks lined up ready to pour behind her, it only takes a few minutes before our meals and drinks are served on crimson-tinted plates and glasses.

The drink bubbles and the food steams.

I can sense a large amount of mana radiating off of both of the meals, similar to the dishes I ate back in Valor City. They will instantly re-energize the person that eats them and fill their mana stores to full, even giving minor strength buffs that linger after.

She places them down and takes a step back.

"Please, enjoy your meal."

The woman goes back to polishing the same glass that she put away before, and we stare down at the dishes.

I do a full scan of the food and drinks multiple times and find no odd curses or magical debuffs present. It's just like the glass that the server at the door handed me, nothing is off about it at all, and it feels like I'm just being overly paranoid for no reason.

Ember also looks down at his dish very hesitantly too.

Taken from Royal Road, this narrative should be reported if found on Amazon.

I come to the conclusion that there is really nothing wrong with these dishes in a magical sense, but that doesn't mean it's safe to eat.

I dip a finger that's covered in the silver armor of my gauntlets into the sauce that's cooked into both the meat and vegetables on my plate and smear a small amount on my inner right wrist against my bare skin.

I look at Ember's dish and don't even ask him first before I do the same on my left.

The bartender presents a sanitary towel for me to clean the sauce off my hands, but I leave the two blotches on my skin for a few minutes and wait.

In the meantime, I do the same thing with our drinks, dabbing a fresh towel into each of the glasses, and putting it onto my wrist below the sauces.

Nothing happens for a few minutes, and we wait in silence. The food stops steaming, and the bubbles in the drink all pop and fizz away. However, it isn't too long before I begin to feel mana from a passive skill being used up while a very strong burning sensation starts to make itself known in my left wrist.

I whisper under my breath while staring down at the plate where the sauce came from.

"Poison... This dish is poisoned..."

None of the drink splotches react, and the sauce from my own dish doesn't burn at all.

I wipe the sauce off both of my wrists, and only one is covered in a very faint rash that is automatically healing from the passive poison resistance perk of my self-regeneration skill.

Before it fully heals, I cover it up with my cloak and put my arm below the table, then switch my plate with Ember's.

I speak up while picking up some of the veggies with a clean fork and crunching down on them knowing that they're packed with poison.

Ember smirks, but the bartender's eyes widen with surprise.

I can tell she wants to say something, but just gulps and steps back while continuing to polish that glass.

Both of us dig in, and I feel the burning feeling in my mouth and throat rise and fall over and over after every bite.

My self-regeneration skill cleanses the entire meal of any harmful substances and even detoxifies the alcohol in my drink before it can reach my bloodstream.

It actually tastes like a unique flavor of hot sauce, slightly sour, and a strong aftertaste.

Whatever poison was in this dish was definitely a strong one, but it'd take far more than this measly dose to actually do any real damage.

We both push our plates and glasses forward when we finish, and the woman behind the counter is almost breaking a sweat at the sight before her eyes.

Despite that, she reaches beneath the counter and pulls out two black coins and slides them toward us.

"Congratulations. You've both earned a token for completing the red menu challenge. Now that you have a balance, you may order from our secret menu if you please."

She slides a new menu toward us while taking our dishes away.

[1 Token] Ask Me Any Question

[2 Tokens] Choose a Magic Item you Desire

[3 Tokens][Exit Card] Basic Room

[5 Tokens][Exit Card] Designer Suite

[10 Tokens][Exit Card] All Inclusive Lounge

I look up to the exit, then back to her and ask a question immediately.

"What does all this mean? An exit card? Does that mean we fail or pass? Is exiting a good thing? Or-"

"I'm not permitted to answer any questions about the exams without proper payment."

I let out a sigh when I hear her speak these words again, but think carefully about what comes out of my mouth next, because it seems like I actually do have the proper payment to get what I need now.

Although I am interested in this game and how it's really played, looking at this entire room on its macro scale is more worth my time.

I pause for a moment, then slide the black token I just won forward.

"My question is, how do we pass this first portion of the exam safely and efficiently?"

She smiles and takes the token from me, finally responding with a straight answer.

"Every vendor in this space has the same secret menu. To move on from this stage of the exam, you must collect at least 3 tokens and buy an exit card. You must move to the next room by morning and rest up with the remaining applicants before the real exam begins."

Her gaze moves over to the exit doors, then back to me.

"As I said before, luck and skill are very similar. One by itself will not make you a strong hunter. You're not only going to be tested by your physical capabilities during these trials."

I nod to myself, then speak up again.

"Well, in that case, if it's that easy, I'll have another course! One option from the red menu please."

Ember is deep in thought too, but adds in.

"Make that two."

The woman smiles and places her polished glass down to begin making two identical meals just like before.

They come out steaming hot, and drinks bubbling.

I do the same test I did before, but for some reason, this time neither of the dishes are poisoned. I'm unsure if that was a one-time thing, or we just got lucky this time around... Not questioning it much, we just dig in, and right after, two more black tokens are presented to us.

"Another round!" We both reply.

Without missing a beat, she cooks up a third round of dishes and when I do the poison test, they both come back positive...

The bartender catches onto this phenomenon but doesn't say anything.

I share my mythic grade self-regeneration skill with Ember and give him the heads up through telepathy once I do.

We both eat our third meal, and the bartender can't believe her eyes once she gives us our third coin each.

I used one up from before, so I just need one more before we can both afford the lowest exit card option on the secret menu, so I speak up the moment she starts to bring our dishes away.

"Let's do one last round, just for me this time."

She turns back with a smile on her face.

"Oh- I'm sorry, we're all out of that menu option."

This isn't the reaction I expected...

She turns back to me and begins polishing her glass again.

I reply.

"What do you mean? You're already out of food? Is there a limit per item or something? Or-"

"I'm not permitted to answer any questions about the exams without proper payment."

That same exact response comes back and I drop my face into my palm.

"Well, how about the yellow menu, or even the green menu, are any of those available?"

She shakes her head.

"No, it seems we're all out."

She doesn't change her expression and just stares ahead like we're not even here anymore.

Ember looks very confused too.

He turns to me.

"It must be some kind of limit per table, or maybe someone cut us off because we were winning too much."

He jingles the three black coins in his hand, then shrugs and places one down on the counter.

"We're either going to figure out how this is done here, or at least figure out why we can't order anymore. You don't have 3 coins, so we're going to have to play somewhere else anyway, I might as well ask."

He pushes his coin forward.

"My question is, what is the reason we've reached the limit on this table and how can we make sure this doesn't happen again today?"

She accepts the coin but doesn't respond immediately.

It looks like she's listening to someone talk in her ear for a few seconds before replying.

"That is two questions, but I've been permitted to answer in a long-form explanation."

She points to the basic menu of this shop.

"Every bar, table, or game in this room has its own set of rules and odds of winning. Here, if you choose green, you have a 1 in 10 chance of losing, however, you must consume 3 full meals to win. The yellow is a 1 in 5 chance of losing, but it only takes 2 meals to win. Red is a 1 in 2 chance of losing, but only 1 meal to win."

I think about these odds, and what she means by losing is picking the poison... Because the odds of eating deadly poison are 50%, anyone who completes a meal with the red label wins a token.

The green and yellow options have better odds not to die, but the person has to eat much more food and will most likely be very drunk by the end of it.

Even though the odds are lower to eat the poison, there is still far more opportunity to be unlucky each time.

The green option would have been the smartest choice, but using my self-regeneration perk, I've created my own luck.

The bartender continues.

"However, there is one rule that applies to every game in this room. You're only allowed to play three times."

I raise an eyebrow, and this makes me rethink my thoughts about the odds before.

If you're only allowed to play 3 times, that means the maximum amount a person could win on green would be 1 token. So, depending on how hard the games at the other tables are, maybe this was the best option after all...

I nod and she finishes her thought.

"You have tokens to use. If you'd like to successfully win 3 and move on to the next stage, it will be best to ask other vendors the proper question before you play. You have reached your limit on this table today, I wish you the best of luck."

She smiles and takes the menus away, then goes back to polishing the clean glass like none of this ever happened.

I want to ask her more, but I'm sure she'll give that same basic response unless I hand over a token, so I let out a sigh and decide that we've gotten all we can from this woman.

"Well, I guess, thanks for the meals."

Music, dinging, flashing lights, and dozens of ongoing games fill my senses as I bring my attention away from the bar we were just sitting at and back toward the rest of the games.

Over a dozen more applicants have wandered in from outside while we were playing.

Ember and I get up from our stools, both with 2 tokens jingling in our hands, and slowly walk further inside to look for another game worth playing.