

D. Diver 531

Chapter 531

We walk through the room and I take in the scenes around me.

Many more bars and restaurants catch my eye, serving all kinds of food and drinks.

There are tables where people are sitting down playing cards, each player trying to hit numbers closest to 21 without going over while still beating the dealer.

I even pass a station where a man with long black curly hair sells circular rocks from three different bins.

Two hunters are sitting in front of him, trying to split open the hard stones with metal devices provided, but nothing but more grey stone is inside as I walk past.

It catches my interest, but even while using my all-seeing eye, I can't tell the difference between the rocks.

It isn't until we round another bend and the booth is almost completely out of sight that one of the hunters cracking open stones finds a bright crystal inside one and celebrates as the man behind the counter gives them a token in exchange.

Everything in this room seems to really be based entirely on luck, just like the woman at the bar we left said.

I see hunters getting drunk, some collapsing on the ground and being taken away to one of the back rooms by waiters that patrol the room, and others celebrating their winnings and buying exit cards to leave through one of the two exit doors in the back.

All we need is one more token each, but that doesn't mean I want to risk anything unnecessarily.

As we continue to walk through, one of the booths at the far side of the room is making the most noise and has the most people surrounding it.

It's a large open table that lit up with lights behind us when we were first ordering our meals, the roulette table I passed right when I entered this room.

There are over half a dozen hunters surrounding the table as we approach, and one hunter is talking to the thin table manager behind the counter.

Two hunters in high-grade gear stand at the back of the table silently looking down at the others. It's clear they're a cut above the rest. Both of them are over level 700. One has short spiky blond hair with an extreme lightning summoning skill just like mine.

The other is very muscular, has his head shaved bald, staring ahead with his sharp blue eyes, and I read his status to find he has an extreme grade water summoning skill.

Both of these hunters have mana control levels far higher than a level 800 or even a level 900 monster.

I get a quick look at their wristbands and see they're both from the Apex region. The lightning user's name is Trax, and the water wielder is Callum.

Trax points to one of the lower-level hunters sitting at the table and says something to him, and the hunter nods with a scared look in his eyes, turning to the table manager and coming to an agreement with him quickly. He takes one of three balls that are held out in the table manager's open palm and moves toward the game area of the table.

The hunter's hands are shaking as he steps up to the roulette wheel, and the man behind the counter spins it.

On the wrist of the shaking hunter's hand, I see that he's also from the Apex region, just like the two strong hunters standing over him, but his mana control is nowhere near theirs, it doesn't even surpass my own perceived level 600 control.

This makes me very curious.

Moments ago the wheel was all gray without any markings on it at all, but now that it's begun spinning, half of the wheel is red and the other half is green. On its surface, there are small ridges that are just wide enough for the ball to land in.

I count 18 green ridges and 19 red ones.

My best guess is green is good and red is bad, but I'm still not sure what is on the line. All I can do is watch and find out.

The manager speaks.

"Please, make your spin."

The hunter takes a deep breath in and out, then spins the small ball around the upper ring of the spinning device in the opposite direction that the red and green wheel is spinning.

It rotates around the wooden wheel a few times, slowly with each rotation, and the manager speaks up as a small hole in the center of the table appears.

"Your bet has been placed on the high-risk roll, please insert your right arm up to the shoulder in the machine."

The man's arm is shaking even more now than it was when he spun the wheel, but he closes his eyes and shoves it inside anyway.

There's a clicking sound that locks his arm in place, and the whole table silently watches the small white ball spin around and around on the wheel.

The tension increases every rotation.

A woman, who happens to be another hunter from the Apex region with long white hair and worried green eyes, sits next to the man that just placed his bet.

Everyone's watching the ball spin and spin, and all other distractions from around the room fade away as the ball curves down and hits the green slot right on the edge of where the colors collide on the table.

Everyone's breath is held, but gasps fill the air as the ball bounces out and falls into the red area just a single slot away.

It rolls around inside the red slot, losing momentum as it tries to roll out, but within seconds it settles completely and everyone stares at the wheel as it continues to spin around the table in a hypnotic fashion.

I feel a surge of mana come from beneath the table and a metallic sound of gears turning, then the hunter's arm that's beneath the table jolts and he lets out a scream.

The lock holding him in place releases and he pulls out a stump where his arm used to be.

My eyes widen, but everyone else at the table just looks saddened like they knew that would happen.

The woman with white hair turns to him and immediately begins using her single skill on the affected area.

[Soft Heal][Legendary Grade]

I watch both her and the injured hunter drink multiple C-Grade mana potions taken from a pouch on their sides, and the missing limb starts to slowly grow back.

The lightning user points down at another hunter at the table to take his place while he heals and speaks in a commanding tone.

"You're next. He's all out of bets."

He jingles three black tokens around in his hand, pointing to his partner next to him.

"I have enough for me, but now we need a room for Callum. We're the stars of the show here, we need to be fully rested for tomorrow."

Without question, the next hunter places a bet and goes through the same process as the other hunter just did.

He chooses from three balls in the manager's hand labeled 1, 2, and 3. Every time he picks the 3, and the same split green and red table appears.

This hunter is far luckier than the last.

His first two spins land on green, and there's a light show to celebrate when he wins.

He's allowed to take out his arm from the contraption each time, and he wins a black token, but doesn't keep them for himself. Every time he wins he hands the tokens over to the lightning user.

He plays one more time. However, his last round doesn't go as well as the others.

Just like the hunter before him, the ball lands in a red slot on the wheel, and he loses his arm because of it.

Mana surges and gears shift. The hunter yells out in agony, but Trax shrugs while looking down at the tokens in his hand.

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He turns to the white-haired woman that is almost done healing the first man.

"Heal him up too. Five is enough for us, at least we can get a suite. The lounge may be a bit too risky to test our own luck at any of these games. You'll be able to make enough to pass this round by healing other suckers."

He smirks, then places the five tokens down on the table, speaking to the manager while ignoring the second bleeding hunter as he covers his wound.

"An exit card for a designer suite please. That will be all."

The thin man behind the table just smiles and accepts the coins, shuffling beneath the table, then handing the man a silver rectangular card.

They walk off from the table together without saying another word.

The woman lets the first hunter rest up. After a few minutes, it looks like he's completely healed up, in a physical sense. The arm that was lost is completely back, but he can barely open his eyes. He looks fatigued beyond belief and exhausted too.

I'm unsure exactly why, but my best guess is that the healing skill being used isn't as efficient as Abby's so it has side effects. Or, the hunter receiving the heal isn't able to handle the use of so much mana in such a short period of time.

Whatever the reason may be, it doesn't matter much to me, I just want to figure out how this game is played.

She starts healing the second injured hunter while I approach the table to get a closer look at the plays.

A random hunter from the Silca Region steps up to bet next, and they pick ball number 1.

He whispers to himself.

"I only need one more... My luck has gotten me this far, I just need to land one more win and I'm out of here."

He jingles two black coins in his hand that apparently he's won from other games today.

This man is in exactly the same position as me, but I still wouldn't risk betting on this table.

Even if I do have a skill that can grow a limb back like it's nothing, that still isn't a skill I want to advertise having to everyone around me. I doubt Ray Anderson, hunter from the Bedrock region, ever had the ability to grow back an arm in an instant.

I have to watch how this game is played and figure out a way to win while also not blowing my cover.

The manager begins the game.

When the wheel spins, there are only three slots that glow red, and six slots that glow green exactly opposite on the other side.

In between these red and green, there are still 28 greyed-out slots with no markings.

When he spins the wheel, the hole he has to place his arm into is only small enough to place a single finger.

After the ball stops spinning, it lands on a grey slot.

There are no ringing bells, and no punishments. Nothing happens, so the hunter plays again.

The second spin, the same result occurs, after a few spins, and a single small bounce, the ball lands in a grey slot and no prize is given nor are any punishments received.

On his third run, the hunter chooses the ball with a 2 on it.

When the wheel lights up, nine slots are red, and ten are green. The remaining 18 are greyed out.

The hole in the table fits his hand up to his wrist.

He gulps and spins the ball around the wooden machine.

After a tense 20 seconds, the ball bounces once in the grey right next to the line of green slots.

Before the ball even settles, I can see a bit of anger rising up on his face, and feel the activation of wind magic swelling inside of him.

With his free hand, a small concentrated gust is summoned, and the ball rolls up and out of the grey slot and into the green one.

It was such a minuscule amount of magic, and only my fine-tuned senses were able to detect it. I highly doubt the man behind the counter saw it.

The hunter believes this is the case too when he doesn't react, so he jumps up in the air with a smile on his face celebrating his win.

However, the lights don't flash and the moment he jumps out of his seat there's a burst of mana under the table, and a yell of pain follows.

The manager speaks up.

"Our system detected magic that directly affected the results of the game. Cheating is not permitted. This is an automatic loss."

His eyes widen and he looks around the room, but doesn't know what to do other than stop the bleeding with his shirt.

He swears under his breath and his face turns red.

The woman that was helping the other two hunters before looks pretty tired herself, but the two men she helped from her own region are both fast asleep slumped on chairs next to her in far worse shape.

She rolls her eyes and speaks up to the hunter.

"It was a good try. I'll heal you for a token, you're going to need that hand of yours later. What do you say, deal?"

He nervously looks around, holding two tokens in his good hand and gritting his teeth.

"Fine. You're right. It's worth it...Deal."

He tosses her a token and places the other in his pocket while giving her the stump of a wrist to start healing.

While he does, others start walking up to the table and playing with the ball labeled 1, but many walk away when they see the bloody result of losing.

Ember turns to me, disinterested in what's going on around us.

"Not a very good game. This one's going to be hard to hack. You'll be playing with real luck here."

I stare at the spinning wheel as another person plays deep in thought for a few minutes, then an idea hits me.

"You know what... I think it might not be impossible to beat."

I walk up to the table next and look the manager in the eyes.

"Ball number 1. That's what I'd like to pick."

He lets me take it from his palm and he spins the wheel.

I hold the ball in my hand, and try to focus using my mythic grade swordsmanship skill on the ball, focusing on only the green slots as a target, but it doesn't activate as I assumed it would.

The manager speaks up as I think deeply to myself.

"Please, make your spin."

The six green slots glow as I watch them spin around the wheel. However, the three red slots rotate and glow into my vision on the other side of the wheel too.

I take a deep breath in and out and try to concentrate, pretending this ball is my sword again, and the faint thread leading toward the green slots on the spinning wheel flickers, but it doesn't stay solid in my mind's eye.

"I guess I'll need a little more than that."

I bite my bottom lip, and reach into a fake item box on my waist to reach into my item storage and touch my sword with my opposite hand.

The instant I do, mythic grade dual wielding activates, and I'm able to see the same thin thread with far more precision in my mind's eye than before. Using an actual sword accustomed to this skill in one hand makes it far easier to visualize this ball as a weapon and the green slots as the enemy I'm trying to hit.

A swirling line of probability shows me exactly how fast and hard I need to push this ball to make it land where I want it to.

I'm not imbuing the ball with mana, and not directly affecting the game itself. It's just an advanced perception boost. Technically, it's a legal spin.

If using mana to increase my accuracy is against the rules, then it's worth losing a finger to test things out.

I take another deep breath in and out, then release the ball to spin around the wooden table at exactly the rate at which the thread from my mythic grade skill predicts a perfect shot on my target.

Once I stand back up, I pull my hand from my item box and place the finger I'm betting with into the table.

Even now, there's silence as the ball rotates around the table.

As the ball curves down, it bounces once, and lands directly into the center of the green slots.

Nothing happens for a moment, so I prepare to have a finger taken off, but to my surprise, the lights ring out and the manager behind the table smiles while presenting me a token as my hand is released.

"Congratulations on your win, sir."

I accept the coin, then speak up again with a grin.

"I'd like to do another, ball number 1 please."

"Very well."

He immediately stops the wheel from spinning and hands me the ball to spin it again.

I place my hand into my item storage to touch my sword, activate dual wielding, then do it all over again.

The lights flash, Ember laughs, I accept my token, ask to play a third time, and the man from before that lost his hand is fully healed.

He looks tired and pissed off about my winnings, so he walks away with a scowl.

Two waiters in suits walk up to the table next and don't say a word, they just watch the table closely.

It's pretty odd that they're watching so close, and it makes me a bit cautious of winning again.

Although I kind of wanted a designer suite of my own and to share the trick I'm using with Ember, it's better safe than sorry.

I aim with dual wielding again, but make sure to place the ball trajectory into the dead grey space between green and red.

The men in suits surprisingly don't seem to care once I let go, they just pick up the two passed-out hunters on the seats next to the healer woman and take them away.

I let out a sigh and shake my head, as it seems they weren't watching me directly after all.

Ember opens a telepathy link with me after my ball lands where I aimed.

"What was that? Did you lose on purpose, or is your strategy not perfect?"

I click my tongue and reply through our link.

"I lost in case those men in suits were onto me. I guess I lost a token for no good reason. My strategy is perfect."

He smiles while watching another random hunter step up to the game after watching me win 2 out of 3 games, spinning the wheel with false hope.

"Well, then tell me how it's done. You have four tokens, and I have two. That's enough for two basic rooms if we split them. If I win three more games here, we can probably learn a lot more about this place if we use the extra tokens to ask questions."

I nod, then explain what I did while a hunter goes on a three-game in a row grey slot losing streak and walks off the table shaking his head.

Ember borrows a C-Grade dagger that I pull from my storage out of my fake item box and places it on his waist then steps up to the game.

I share my dual wielding skill with him, and over the next three games, he places one hand on the dagger and the other throws three perfect shots directly into the green range, defying the odds of the game repeatedly.

Lights flash, tokens are received, and neither the manager nor the other players at the table have any clue what's going on.

We've both hit our table limits, so we start to walk off in the direction we just arrived from before anyone gets overly suspicious. However, a voice from the white-haired healer woman stops us in our tracks.

"Hey- you two. How'd you do that...?"

I turn and shrug.

"I don't know, we just got lucky I guess."

Her eyebrows scrunch, and the manager behind the counter's eyes are still wide in awe as she gets up from the table and follows us.

"No really. That's impossible. You managed 2 out of 3..."

She turns to Ember.

"-And you hit every shot you made, It's like you were aiming for the green!"

I count my coins in front of her and Ember counts his.

Neither of us reply to her for a moment, but I speak up as she continues to follow us through the room.

"Yeah, if we could game the system, we would have. It's too bad I didn't hit 3, I would have been sleeping in a suite tonight."

I shake my head and smile.

I don't actually care what room I get to spend the night in considering I've had enough sleep recently to last me a few more weeks if I need to. It would just be illogical to stop where I did, so it's a good comment to throw her off the scent...

The white-haired woman eyes our tokens, not speaking for a few seconds after my comment, but eventually responds.

"You know... that's not how exit cards work. Both of you could stay in the same suite if you wanted. Two are allowed in Designer Suites, only one is allowed in the basic room."

I raise an eyebrow and look back.

"Really?"

She nods, holding up a token of her own.

"If you want, we can all pitch in on a 10 token lounge. Up to four people are allowed in that one. It seems you don't know much about these exams yet if this is still a mystery to you. I can pay in information to make up for what I'm lacking in tokens. What do you think?"

I shake my head and turn to Ember.

"Only 5 tokens for a 2-person suite. So we could have stopped after I won that first spin."

Then, I turn back to the white-haired woman that continues to follow us through the room.

"Why should we trust you? You could easily sit by that table and earn 2 more tokens in no time at all if you wanted."

I do another scan of her status to confirm what I saw before was true. She may have a unique healing skill, but she's level 501, just over the minimum barrier to entry for this exam.

We keep walking forward, even faster now, and I notice her heavy breaths and pale complexion even more than I did when she was sitting at the table.

She replies.

"I'd be in horrible shape tomorrow if I continue at this rate. I healed up other Apex applicants before you even came by the table. It's not like I can use healing magic forever."

Ember and I stop walking and turn toward her, then I reply.

"So what? You didn't have to heal any of them in the first place. It's your own region's applicants taking advantage of you, that's not my problem."

She lets out a defeated sigh.

"True..."

I turn to look at a few other interesting games I could attempt to play for just one more token instead of wasting my time here, but the healer comes up close to me and whispers.

"I can tell you more about this exam than any of the proctors here are authorized to say."

She smirks, and green mist from my lie detector skill shows me that she's telling the truth about this.

"I am from the Apex Region after all; this is where the exam is taking place."

This development catches my attention, and I forget about the flashing lights and other games to play in this room to focus on her as she backs up from my ear.

"Well, if you put it like that, I guess I'd be missing out if I say no."

She shows no malice, isn't exceptionally strong like the other hunter applicants here, and has a good reason for not wanting to wear herself out by healing random people like I proposed. I've never met anyone claiming to be from the Apex Region.

Talking to her will cost a whole lot less than it would the woman at the bar, and maybe I can get some extra information out of her that isn't related directly to the exams while I'm at it.

Ember chimes in.

"I think it's a good idea; we have plenty of time to kill."

I put my hand out toward her and nod.

"Fine, let's do it. I'm Ray, and this is Emrie. We're from the Bedrock Region. Nice to meet you."

She places her hand forward too like she's going to shake mine, but her expression shifts a bit once she hears where we're from.

However, she just shakes my hand and doesn't comment on it.

"I'm Natalie, or just Nat is fine. Nice to meet you too."

She shakes Ember's hand next, and we turn again and continue walking back to that bar with the water-wielding woman in the back corner of the room.

The bartender's eyes meet mine once we get closer, and when I place my 4 tokens down on the counter, 5 from Ember follow, and a single from Natalie.

I speak up.

"One All-Inclusive Lounge from your secret menu, please."

She smiles and accepts the coins, then pulls out a gold rectangular card.

"Here you go, remember you can add a fourth member at any time before the morning check-in if you wish."

I nod and take the card.

"Thanks."

When we turn and start walking toward the exits at the back of the room, Natalie speaks up.

"We have to link the exit card to our bracelet IDs before it will let us through."

She taps the gold card against my bracelet, and my hunter name pops up at the top of the card.

She taps it against Ember's next, and his fake ID name pops up. Natalie does it third, and her name shows up below both of ours.

There's a single slot left open below all of them.

I hold the card as we continue to walk toward the exit doors but raise a question.

"Nat, so, if you know so much about this exam, then what do we do next? Leave through these doors to a resting area, then what? Just wait? Do another one of these wacky challenges? Or what? Honestly, this isn't a very good test of our capabilities as monster hunters."

As we approach, one of the exit doors slides open on its own, and a hallway is visible behind it. She replies as we walk through.

"Well, everything here is a series of minor tests even if it might not seem like it. Think of this room as the pre-exam trials."

The curved hallway we walk through looks like a semicircle. The floor, walls and ceiling are made of a very high quality white and grey marble. It seems the other exit door on the other side of the room would have led us here to the same center point.

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It's a single bronze door with a scannable keypad on the front of it. There's no doorknob.

Natalie speaks up again.

"Most applicants are probably very tired from trekking tens of kilometers through the white void outside, and possibly even fighting other applicants they found along the way."

I nod while bringing my wrist up to have my wristband hit the scanner on the door while she continues.

"In addition to that, the only way to get a room to rest in for tomorrow's test was to play in their twisted games or make deals with other hunters."

The door opens with a click, and a bright [26] appears on my wristband the moment it does.

Ember puts his wristband on the door too, and his lights up to say [27].

Nat does it last, and hers glows [28].

We all walk through the bronze door into a new hallway that leads straight ahead.

There are many doors on both sides of the hall; they all say [Basic Room] above them. Occasionally, I see a small bronze card on the door, but the majority of them are vacant.

We pass about 50 rooms until we make it to the end of the hall where there is a silver door with the same scanner.

Nat continues to talk while each of us scans our wristbands and walks through to the next hallway.

"As you witnessed earlier at that roulette table, some people know how to game the system. The higher level hunters from the Apex Region knew this event was taking place, so a few less talented hunters were chosen as sacrifices to give them an early lead. I'm one of the designated healers... I wasn't originally going to run in the B-Class exams this year, but I was chosen to do so as fodder for the chosen elites in my class."

"Interesting..."

I think about the cockiness and arrogance those two hunters had, taking the tokens from their fellow regional hunters, but shrug it off.

"They're pretty strong though; it makes sense."

Nat sighs.

"Yeah, a few more years with the Apex Region, and I'll have my time as an Elite too."

We silently continue walking down the next hall that's lined with more doors on both sides labeled Designer Suites. Only a few of them have silver cards on them.

One of the cards I notice has the names Trax and Callum as the two we were just talking about, but I don't mention it as we make it to the golden door at the end of the hall and scan our way through.

This final hall has less than 10 total rooms, and none of them are taken yet.

We walk to the end of the hall and see a big black door with a scanner just like the last ones.

Each of us tries to get through, but there are no clicks or even reactions from our wristbands.

So, I turn left and place the golden card against the room nearest the end of the hall.

It clicks into place, and there's a miniature pulse of mana that ripples through the door, then a scanner materializes below the card.

I place my wristband against it and the door clicks open.

Ember and Nat do the same thing, registering their entry as we walk in.

I'm hit with a rush of mana-dense air, similar to that of the suites at the Moon Bar in Valor City.

It feels like fresh mana to cultivate and heal faster is being flooded through the room.

Each breath is many times as dense with mana than it is outside. It isn't impressive to me or Ember, as we've been in circumstances with hundreds of times more mana-dense air than this, but it is still relaxing.

Natalie, on the other hand, walks forward with eyes wide full of awe, taking deep breaths and fluttering her hands around like she's never felt anything like this before.

The door clicks shut behind us, and I take in the view of the lounge.

There are many tables and couches, white carpets, fine art on the wall, and a stuffed fridge and cabinet with mana-imbued food to eat. Plus, an assortment of HP and MP potions lined up against a wall.

There are four separate master bedrooms for each person that is allowed in the suite, and there's a timer above the door that we just walked in from that reads [15:49:02].

Natalie immediately walks over to the food and potions once she's had her fill admiring the room, then starts eating and drinking as much healing supplements as she can.

A full minute goes by before she stops, and I see the color come back in her face as she collapses back onto one of the sofas in the middle of the room with a satisfied look on her face.

Ember and I examine the complimentary food and items, but nothing looks appealing or even high grade enough to pocket for future use.

We sit down on the couch across from her, and I ask a question.

"Well, now that we're here, I want to know what information about the exams you said you have that are so valuable not even the proctors can share."

She nods and sits up, looking back at the food and potions, then back to us.

"You two sure are weird. Not even a single MP potion? Or at least a taste of food? This is the kind of high-grade goods you can't find anywhere other than Nation-Wide Association events. We're not even treated with stuff like this during Apex Region training."

I shrug, thinking about how it's probably true that average citizens or even high C-Grade hunters would never get to feel these luxuries. However, I've been living at a much higher standard of living ever since I ventured into Valor City months back. The highest grade of goods provided here doesn't come anywhere close to the items I can produce myself.

I speak up again.

"That doesn't answer the question I was asking. What do we need to know about these exams? You said you'd make up for your difference in tokens, so I want to hear everything you know."

My expression turns stern, and she reacts to this with hands raised.

"Hey, hey. Sorry, I just assumed it wasn't that urgent."

She points to the clock on the wall.

"First things first, that's how much time is left until the first stage of exams even starts. Hunters are going to be wandering in from all edges of this exam site for hours and will spend even more time playing games."

I nod, and she continues.

"Like I mentioned earlier, this is the trial exam. A time for proctors to observe you in your natural state. Will you give in to temptations? Do you have unusual skills or a knack for luck? These are what are being observed today. Things that don't usually come out in battles and life-or-death situations."

Nat stands up from the couch and smiles.

"Also, it's a time for some hunters to socialize and make allies. Usually, we see Silca, Bedrock, and often a few Raya Region applicants trying to get on the good sides of the elites from Vice, Veridian, or Apex, but honestly, I didn't have time to observe many people today. I was worried I would get eliminated early from over-exhaustion healing my own Region's people."

I think to myself, putting together the hidden meaning behind her words.

This means the Vice, Veridian, and Apex Regions are usually the top performers, and the Silca, Bedrock, and Raya Regions do poorly.

She didn't even mention the Talton or Phantom Regions in this example, so I can assume they do even worse. However, now is not the time to fixate on this. I'm more interested in the exams themselves.

"Why would it be in their best interest to make friendly connections with other regions during the exams? Aren't there only a limited number of slots for people that pass? And your home regions get benefits from passing, so wouldn't it be best to align only with your own?"

She nods.

"True, but there are often events later on where regions have to work together. Out in the real world, there are missions where we have to all work together under the Association, so many of these scenarios will be simulated and tested in- Well..."

She thinks to herself while looking up at the ceiling.

"I think that will be in the 3rd stage of the exam this year. The sim tests are pretty interesting. I've only practiced in them a few times."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What do you mean? You know what the stages of the exams will be?? Now, this is the kind of info I'm actually interested in. Tell me, what do you know?"

She smiles and starts walking back and forth through the room to soak up as much mana as she can. Color is still streaming back into her face more and more every second.

"We had a few briefings and information leaks from the Director before we left. I know for certain there's going to be a written exam, basic physical testing, and grouped teaming simulations in the first 3 stages. The 4th and 5th I only have a few guesses for. There were some hints and clues

released, and I'm sure some of the higher-ranked Apex Elites know the actual nature of those stages, but I don't. I hear the last 2 stages are where all of the regional directors will be watching us live. There is most likely some kind of massive group event planned."

She looks back at the clock at the top of the door.

"I can explain exactly what will happen in the first 3 stages for you now if you want; beyond that is all a guessing game. We'll have to wait and see."

She turns back to Ember and me sitting in a relaxed manner on the couch.

I nod and reply.

"Good. Start talking, let's hear what we're in for."

Chapter 533

Natalie begins to explain everything she knows about the B-Class exams while continuing to pace around the mana-dense air in the room.

She explains that most years, there are 12 people accepted as applicants that pass the exams. It's very normal for the Apex region to take 4-6 of these slots, while the Veridian and Vice Region take the other 6 to 8 remaining.

All of these regions have submitted 12 applicants each, the maximum available.

None of the other regions hit the maximum that she knows of. The other 5 regions usually try to aim to squeeze in 1 or 2 passing slots with their most talented hunters every few years.

The Bedrock Region I came from only submitted 8, and that would have been 6 naturally if Ember and I didn't show up last minute.

For the exams themselves, there's always a very unique grading system used. Her best guess is that this year the wristbands will play a large role in grading applicants.

The first stage after today will be a written exam and will most likely be paired with general physical tests to see our natural intellect and combat ability.

Natalie recounts many of the training exercises she's been through over the last few months while living in the Apex region. Everything she's telling me seems like very basic procedure, making me realize again how overqualified Ember and I really are for this exam.

Still, I note down everything she says. Being over-prepared isn't a bad thing.

Finally, once she starts talking about the 3rd stage, this piques my interest. The white-haired healer describes a contraption that she's trained in similar to a device I've used back in Vice City. When I first visited the capital with a private guild from my hometown, there were special mana shielded rooms that provided high-grade gear to train with other hunters and not worry about being injured.

However, the descriptions that Natalie gives make the simulated rooms she used to train in sound like a step far above anything I've ever seen before.

She was able to fight simulated monsters of varying levels and in a small room it would feel like a vast dungeon all controlled by someone outside the room.

Once her explanation is finished, I notice the pale complexion in her skin return, sweat form on her face, and a wave of exhaustion wash over her eyes. She stumbles but catches herself on the edge of a sofa.

"Anyway, that's about everything I know... The sim stations usually hold about 4 people each, some of the big ones can do 6. So, that's something to keep in mind. Maybe you were looking out for other hunters while back in the game room. If not, we already have a room here, there's no rule that states you can't go back out and make connections. All you need is your activated wristband to move in and out of the rooms now."

I raise an eyebrow at her last remark, but see she's not in any shape for more questions.

I could give her a full regen potion right now, and she'd most likely be as good as new, but I'm still not too sure I can trust this woman as my ally. She is some random healer from the Apex region after all. I can't just assume that it's out of the realm of possibility this is all a part of the high-level Apex soldier's plan. She could just be a plant to hold us back even more.

Despite these thoughts, I reply in a friendly tone.

"Thanks, I think you've paid with more than enough information. I appreciate it."

She lets out a relieved smile and walks over to one of the master bedrooms, scanning her wristwatch on the door and walking inside. She speaks as the door closes.

"Thank you too, I wouldn't have had the resources to rest up for tomorrow without you."

It clicks closed and I turn to Ember immediately.

"I'm going back out there. If what she said about allies is true, I might as well make some other friends. It's not like we need to rest up like everyone else."

Ember shrugs.

"Suit yourself. I'm going to stay in here and keep an eye on her."

I leave the lounge and make my way through the marble hallways, scanning my wristband on every doorway—gold, silver, and bronze—until I make it back into the gaming room with a new outlook on the events taking place before my eyes.

I see every booth in the room as a personality test, and the eyes of all of the high B-Class proctors watching every applicant's move as a surveillance system that logs the data of everyone's trials.

I don't feel any recording crystals or advanced surveillance like there is in Valor City, but there are over two dozen level 700+ proctors in the room with their natural perception seeping through the room so not much can really be missed.

Even with all the eyes, I'm still determined to learn more about this event and make some connections while I have the free time to kill.

I wander around the room observing hunters win jackpots and outsmart proctors, while others lose limbs and even get poisoned and dragged away into unmarked rooms by waiters waiting nearby.

Many people from the same regions regroup after finding their way through the white plane outside, and on rare occasions some regions mingle.

To my surprise, the longer I wait, I actually see some hunters that were taken away get released from the private rooms the waiters brought them to.

Some look fully healed, while others still appear exhausted and injured.

My guess is private deals are being made, possibly at the cost of tokens, or maybe nothing at all. It's possibly all part of the exam, testing risk management but not actually killing prized, talented future B-class hunters over a simple mistake in a pre-exam trial.

The more hunters I see leave, the more I assume it's the latter, but I don't want to go into those unmarked private rooms myself to find out.

After a good amount of time wandering and observing, I decide to start playing a few more games I know I'll easily win without any real risk.

There's a drinking game where the applicant at a bar has to choose between extremely strong alcoholic beverages from platters of labeled intensity.

Of course, the higher the alcoholic potency, the less you have to drink to acquire a coin.

Many leave this bar staggering, but everyone that does has at least 1 black token in their hand when they do.

I take on the challenge and drink 9 of their strongest drinks in under a minute without batting an eye. By the time the liquid even makes it to my stomach it's already been completely neutralized like I'm drinking water.

I leave this booth with three black tokens and a baffled bartender.

There's one other food stand at the other end of the room that I haven't been to yet, and I decide I might as well stick to what I'm good at.

It's a similar game to the one I played when I first entered this room where one of the plates they offer has a high chance of some kind of toxin inside it.

There are a few applicants sleeping headfirst in their food sat at the table in front of a chef, so my best guess is it's some kind of sleeping drug.

I clear 3 of their hardest plates in just a few minutes, and feel the toxins in my body being dispersed in two of them.

I receive another 3 tokens for completing this challenge.

If there were more food or drink booths, I'd do them in a heartbeat. My body burns through this sustenance almost instantly, so I hardly feel like I've even eaten anything.

After my many long months of mana control and Qi training, I'm more used to consuming pure energy than food itself. While I need some vitamins, minerals, and water to survive; food itself has become less and less important to me. Today is one of the first meals I've eaten in weeks.

I let out a sigh while jingling the coins in my hand, looking through the crowds of people in search of a new game to successfully cheat or something interesting, but everything left feels like pure luck to me.

Playing these games isn't really worth trying.

I walk past the geode cracking game again, and see a random hunter open one of the stones to find bright red crystals inside.

Without warning, guards bring him away to a back room even though he looks healthy and fine. I'm happy I didn't test my luck on this one earlier. I still have no idea how it's played.

A case of literary theft: this tale is not rightfully on Amazon; if you see it, report the violation.

Though, my eye does catch a familiar spear-wielding woman from the Talton region sat alone at an empty table holding two tokens in her hand, clearly deep in thought about something.

She's been in this room since before I even initially showed up.

Either her luck hasn't been good, or she's a very cautious player.

Her wristband isn't lit up, and she hasn't talked to anyone this whole time I've been wandering around, so I'm sure these two tokens are all she has at the moment and doesn't have a room.

While my identity as Jay wants to see the Talton region do well, and I'd help them if they asked; Ray Anderson from the Bedrock Region has nothing to do with them.

I'd offer her a place in my lounge, but that may come off as far too forward. She wouldn't make the connection that her doing better in these exams means that there will be more funding for her region and as a result of that; they could buy more goods from me.

So, instead, as I walk by I flip a single token in the air toward her.

"Hey catch, I had an extra."

I show 5 coins in my open hand as she catches the one I throw.

Her expression is a bit confused, but she looks me in the eyes and nods with a serious gaze.

"Thank you. This kindness won't go unnoticed."

I smile, and continue walking through the room.

She immediately gets up behind me and buys a basic room exit card at the nearest vendor with her tokens while I look for others that it would benefit to help out in the

long run.

I remember the two water-wielding guards from the Vice region that I saw when I first walked in here, but after another walk around the room I find that they too are gone.

They must have already saved up enough tokens and moved on.

The longer I wait around, the less impressive the crowd in this room becomes.

There's no one left that remotely compares to the strength and level of those two Apex Elites from before, and it makes me wonder if there are others of that strength level or even higher in the 25 applicants that made it into the suites and lounges before me.

While making my walk back to the back of the room to call it quits, I pass a card game table with chairs hooked up to higher-powered electric chairs.

I see a few players lose on my way over, and the mana-imbued charge that comes out of that chair has mana control nearing a level 850 monster.

Any normal hunter would be paralyzed and burned to a crisp by this attack.

Many are dragged away and given health potions on the spot to heal even before being taken to a back room.

If your hand goes over 21 or the dealer's hand is higher than the player's, the chair shocks whoever is on the seat. However, if the player has a higher number than the dealer, the player wins a token.

It seems like a very simple game, and the fact that I'm a lightning type adds to the believability that being shocked by this chair wouldn't hurt me.

I whisper under my breath as I see the exit sign close by, and sit between two level 531 and level 560 hunters in the seat that is still hot from the hunter who was shocked within an inch of his life.

"Alright, one more game, then I'm out."

I hear a very recognizable voice reply to my mumbles from across the tables.

"Yeah right, you should have said that an hour ago when you cleared out that roulette wheel."

The same man that was healed by Natalie for a token sits a few seats away at the card table nervously tapping his feet and holding two tokens in his hands.

I smirk and shove my hand in my pocket while doing a scan of his status to find he's level 602 and has an extreme wind summoning skill. His overall mana control isn't too bad. It's up to par for a level 600, he isn't falsely power-leveled.

I pull out a token and hold it up between us.

"You're from the Silca Region aren't you?"

He nods while the dealer behind the counter starts to shuffle up the deck to get ready for the next round of play.

The dirty blond-haired wind user replies to me in an annoyed tone.

"Yeah, and you're from the Bedrock, aren't you? What's that matter to you? We're both from weak regions so there's no point to rub it in that you already managed to get a room out of here."

He points to my wristband, and everyone else's attention at the table shifts to the bright [26] on my wrist.

I shrug, understanding that he's had a rough day, and not wanting to ruin the potential chance I have here for making a strong connection from another region.

So, I brush off his remarks and ignore everyone's stares, rolling the black token across the table and replying.

"How about you rest up for tomorrow. Us weaker regions have to stick together if we're going to put any number on the board right?"

He catches the coin with a surprised look on his face.

"R-Really?"

I reply while pulling out 4 more coins from my pocket and jingling them around before putting them away again.

"I've got plenty of them to throw away. Don't think too much of it. Just a friendly gesture from the Bedrock Region. The name's Ray by the way."

He pushes the coins forward at the dealer behind the counters and quickly yells out.

"One basic room, please, get me out of here!"

The dealer accepts his tokens and gives him a bronze card then the man turns back to me.

"I'm Dane- I- Thanks, man."

He wipes sweat from his forehead and runs toward the back of the room while everyone else at the table starts asking me for a spare token too.

I ignore all of them, as their mana control hardly even reaches Natalie's level, and their advanced grade elements won't make the cut if we have to do any team events later.

The dealer quickly shuts this down once he senses the disinterest I'm taking in the other offers and calls for those who are interested in playing to stay and those not to leave the table at once.

Two leave, and 4 people not including me stay at the table to play.

The first round of hands gets 2 people shocked very brutally. One is dragged away immediately, but the other somehow manages to stay upright, but it's clear he's badly injured from the charge. Only one person wins this round, he's the hunter to my right who hits exactly 21, while myself and the player a few seats to my left tie the dealer with a 19.

We don't get shocked, and don't get a token. However, it does count as an attempt at the table game so I only have two tries left.

The second round, the three of us remaining at the table all win when the dealer busts by making his hand go over 21, hitting 24 total and paying all of us out a full token.

After this win two players leave, and it's only me and one other sitting at the table once the dealer spreads out the final round.

I'm happy with a 20, and the hunter next to me is satisfied by his 19.

However when the dealer flips his card and draws another to hit, he reaches 21 and beats both of our hands.

The instant the card is placed down, electric mana imbued shock courses through both of our veins.

To me, it feels like a delicate static tickle, even without activating any defenses or special mana blocking skills, the shock of a non-double ranked up monster doesn't affect me at all.

The man next to me shows a whole different reaction as his hair stands straight up and he falls to the floor off his seat.

I accept my loss, as this was really just a game based on pure luck, and walk away from the table like nothing happened with the same number of tokens I had when I approached in the first place.

With 5 tokens in hand, I make my way back to the exit, but stop by the bar with the blue-haired bartender one last time to ask her one thing.

"Hey, your secret menu option, the second one. The part where it says any item I desire. Are there any limitations to this?"

She smiles and responds.

"Welcome back so soon. It looks like you have gotten quite busy today. You're one of the applicants I've had my eye on the most so far..."

She pauses and takes out the secret menu again for me to look at it and points down at the second option that reads: [2 Tokens] Choose a Magic Item you Desire.

"Hand me two tokens and ask for what you'd like. If it's not in stock, I can provide a refund immediately."

I nod, then push two tokens across the table and think carefully about what I'd like.

Once she accepts the black coins I speak.

"I want a teleport crystal that brings me back here, to the Apex Region."

Her eyes widen for a moment, then she looks up at the sky and waits again, like she's listening to someone speak, then finally looks back down at me and looks me in the eyes.

"Your request will be granted. Please wait a moment."

She places the black token beneath the table, and a few moments later one of the side room doors opens.

A low-level waiter in a tuxedo walks in with a black box and places it on the bar counter, then walks away quickly to leave us be.

The bartender opens up the box to show the glimmering transport crystal inside, then closes it and pushes it forward to me.

I grab the box and she speaks up.

"Is there anything else I can help you with before the exams begin?"

I think for a moment then respond while pushing another black coin forward.

"What will the contents of the exams be? I want an explanation of all of the stages."

She smiles and pushes the coin back toward me.

"Unfortunately, I am not permitted to answer questions of this nature."

I push the coin forward again.

"Will tokens be valuable later on in this exam?"

She smiles and accepts the token.

"No, tokens will only be used in this trial portion of the exam. Once the testing begins, they will be worthless."

I push the two tokens I have remaining forward and smile.

"Well, in that case, I want another transport crystal just like the one I bought that leads here to the Apex region."

She listens in and looks up at the ceiling again and shakes her head while pushing the coins back to me.

"I'm afraid we're currently out of the item you desire."

I think to myself for a few more seconds, then push the tokens forward.

"Well, then how about a lightning stone. The highest grade you have. High B grade, even A grade if you have it. Don't worry about me being able to handle it with my current mana control, I'm just thinking of this as a future investment. I might as well take advantage of this while I can."

She nods again and accepts the coins while listening to something in her inner ear again, then nods and responds.

"Very well, your request will be granted."

The same procedure takes place, and a waiter comes by with a clear containment case and a static-charged bright yellow lightning stone floating inside it.

I do a scan of the box and it feels like this really is a high B-Grade, borderline low A-Grade element stone.

If I had to guess, it was farmed from some monster in the 900-950 range.

There are no monsters that I know of like this in the Vice City labyrinth, so it gets me very curious about where it's come from.

I accept the item and turn away with the two boxes in my hands.

"Thanks again. Looks like this time I've really gotten everything I can out of this room."

The bartender watches me leave all the way to the exit door. I feel her curious eyes on my back until it shuts behind me.

After a series of clicks, and opening door locks, I finally make it back to the lounge to be greeted by Ember with his feet up lying back on the couch.

I throw both the items into my item storage through the fake item box on my waist, then lie on the couch next to Ember and tell him about the events that happened in the game room while I was away.

My eyes move to the clock above the door when I'm done, but I still see almost 12 hours left on the timer.

We both decide to lie back and relax until the time is up.

It's been a very busy month. Between training, fulfilling orders, and dealing with new businesses and citizens coming to the Crimson City back in Sector 2.

Just sitting back in this mana dense room with nothing on my mind but a single task ahead is pretty relaxing.

I let out a sigh and close my eyes.

"Alright. I'm fully prepared. B-Class exams bring it on."

—

We relax in the mana dense room as intended all throughout the night.

Ember and I discuss a few things about training and random crafting ideas through our telepathy link from time to time, but for the majority of it, we really do sit in silence and relax while absorbing some of the fresh mana in the air.

Once the timer on the door hits [00:00:00] a loud constant ringing sound vibrates throughout the room, and all of the master bedroom doors open wide automatically.

On the panel where the timer stops a new message [Stage 1: Now Begins!] flashes in bold white text.

Natalie comes walking out from where she was resting with a startled look on her face like she just woke up.

At the same time, there's a series of loud knocks at the lounge's front door that leads out into the hall.

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We all walk over to the door as the knocking gets louder.

I reach forward and open it to see a low-level waiter holding the golden exit card that's on the back of the door. He looks us over for a moment before speaking.

"Ray, Emrie, Natalie, right this way. Stage 1 of the exams will now begin. I wish you the best of luck."

He slips the golden card into a small black box similar to the one I put my ID into when I first met one of the guards outside of this compound when I arrived.

It disappears inside, and he turns to the black door at the back of the hall to scan a wristband in the scanner at the door.

Unlike yesterday, when all of us tried ours, the door clicks open and a bright white room shows itself within.

We walk out into the hall, and when peering in the opposite direction, I can see the gold and silver doors wide open with countless other men and women in tuxedos greeting dozens of hunters at their doors.

Everyone is escorted to the end of the hall and through the black door into the mana-shielded white room.

It's enormous.

The room stretches out over 300 meters in every direction, and inside, there are small cubicles separated by another layer of extremely dense mana shielding.

A strong silver door with a screen displaying a number is on every cube.

The attendants escort each of us to the cube with our numbers on them.

Ember is assigned to the cube right next to mine, and Natalie's is next to his.

However, once we walk inside, and the silver door clicks shut, the outside world completely disappears from my senses.

To see through these walls, I'd need to use mana control with precision that rivals a level 1500 monster.

While it is very possible, I feel heavy surveillance auras in this room and decide it's best not to let out any suspicious mana radiation of my own if I don't have to.

A few minutes go by in the silence of the tiny white cube, as I assume all of the other applicants are brought into the room and escorted into their cubes as well.

Then, a voice echoes through the small space while a pure white table and chair come out of the floor as if they're made of liquid mana.

"Your written exam now begins. You have 3 hours to complete this test. If the timer runs out and you have not filled in all of the answers, this will be accepted as your final score. You may not leave this room until the testing is complete."

The liquid mana consolidates, then a digital screen becomes visible on the center of the table.

I walk over and have a seat and look down at the screen.

It has [02:59:51] counting down, along with all the details about the hunter's ID they have in their system.

I look down at the first question on the test, and I raise an eyebrow.

[After Expending 0.1% of your total mana control in a single training session, what is the optimal rest time and procedure that should be taken before another serious session of this intensity commences?]

There's an empty blank space beneath the question, and as soon as my eyes finish scanning the text, a thin white pen made of the same material as the chair and table materializes out from the desk.

I grab it and think to myself while I look at the [Back][Skip][Next] options beneath the text.

I try to picture what most of the applicants here possess in total mana control to visualize what kind of training I did back then.

The average strong hunter here has between 100-300 million total MCP.

So, the amount of mana being used during training wouldn't be more than 100-300k MP in a single session.

From my own experience, it feels as if the data is not very solid to compare. I have regeneration skills, a teammate with an instant fatigue curing ability that lets me train endlessly, and too many unique scenarios to count.

My mind races trying to come up with an answer here.

I'm unsure if a day is too long or too short. The same goes for a week or even a month.

I decide to skip it and come back.

[What is the maximum Level Monster a team of 5 level 500 Association Hunter's should attempt to subjugate?]

I scratch my head and think about this one too for a moment, but skip it and move on to the next one.

[What is the hierarchy of command in the Association Between the ranks of Elite to Regional Director?]

I skip again as I have no knowledge of this topic either.

[Skip]

[Skip]

[Skip]

Over and over, I skip through niche questions that want descriptive and direct answers about topics I'd really only know if I were trained classically by members of the higher-ups in the Association.

There are a few about why and how dungeon breaks form that I manage to get lucky on, along with identifying what kind of item drops fall from certain kinds of monsters. However, these questions hardly make up more than 20% of the total.

I continue to skip through the questions I have no idea about and make it to the 100th question where at the bottom of the page it reads [Finish].

Over half of the time is leftover on the counter while I spam the back button and start filling in answers to the questions I left blank.

The knowledge I have about the inner workings of the Association is very minimal. That's about 30% of the test questions. I'm able to logically deduce certain answers, but others are just niche knowledge that can't be learned.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to the original site for the genuine story.

A solid portion of the test, over 10%, actually deals with the average cost of magical goods; I ace this section without a problem.

However, the remaining 40% is filled with questions asking about random scenarios like the average level that hunters should fight up to when in teams, or an explanation of why fire types should never challenge water or ice types of similar strength.

I can fudge answers that seem to be correct, but it all seems far too rigid, like they want me to recite an answer that a teacher has given me.

From my actual battle experience in countless fights against the odds, I've found that many of these scenarios can be flipped right on their head.

While it may be the safest way to train recruits on a massive scale, this kind of brainwashing to play it safe and not push the limits of each hunter's individual understanding of their abilities irks me quite a bit.

It's like they're making mindless rule following soldiers that all think the same.

These ideas bleed through into my answers quite a bit on some of the scenarios that are asked about.

They give the freedom to write abstract answers, so that's exactly what I give, explaining how it is very dependent on what skills each teammate has and their base stats as well.

Just because a monster may be higher level than the hunter, or even have a massive mana control advantage; sometimes the hunter has a better understanding of the landscape and can use the

dungeon mass to their advantage. Other times they may have a speed or agility edge and can wear the monster out.

Many hunters create unique styles and even have high-grade gear that outclasses high-grade monsters too.

As I really get into answering these final skipped questions, I lose myself in the fun of it, and basically write [It Depends] just in a much longer thought-out way on almost half of the questions in this exam.

If an experienced hunter were to read through my answers, they really are far better explanations to these scenarios than any of the boring exact technical answers I know the screen in front of me wants me to write down.

Once I sit back and finish the final one, the timer on the top of the screen reads out [00:13:42]

I click [Finish] and let out a sigh.

"Well... either they accept these answers, or I have a lot of catching up to do on the physical exams..."

I chuckle to myself, then sit in silence as the counter falls down to 0 and the screen disappears.

There's a light dinging sound, and the chair beneath me and table before me start to dissolve and fall back into the floor while the silver door behind me clicks open, and I'm greeted by a new attendant in a black tuxedo.

"Right this way."

I walk out the door and follow him to see dozens of other applicants following their guides through the rows of white cubes.

Some look happy, others stressed, and some don't show any emotion at all.

Many look down at their wristbands, and this prompts me to do the same.

I watch the [26] on the face of it change into a [59].

My eyes scan around the room more, and I see Ember's number read [40]. When I see Natalie's band read [7], I get the feeling that a high number isn't exactly a good thing... It appears my long winded answers weren't appreciated by a machine.

We're all led to the back of the room, away from the back door we entered through.

I manage to get in line next to Ember, and he nudges me with a grin.

"Should have studied more, don't ya think?"

I roll my eyes and comment back.

"Hey, you didn't do too hot yourself."

Both of us are smiling and joking about it, while Natalie looks back at us with a confused stare.

"What's up with you two? I thought you were capable hunters!"

She even looks annoyed, like she's wasted her time and energy investing in us, but I couldn't care less if she's upset.

There's nothing I could do about it. Plus, the physical exams are where we'll shine.

Nat tries to get in another word, but one of the guides motions for her to be quiet while the door at the back of the room opens up with a click and a wave of mana-dense air comes out.

We're all led into the room, and the door closes behind us.

The ceiling is higher, the walls stretch out even further, and I can hardly believe how massive this mana-shielded room is. It's easily 5 times as large as the last one, with shielding around the walls that is higher grade than even what was salvaged from the Valor city towers.

I can feel there is a divider in the center of the room that has been artificially placed there to block off the other side. It's made of high B-Grade shielding at best, meaning they're probably going to tear it down after this exam is over. I can feel the presence of a few proctors on the other side of this wall and various kinds of magical gear that must be used for the physical exams.

It must have cost a fortune to make this place.

The guides separate us into two groups. In one group, everyone with wristbands that show 30 or below is situated. In the other, where Ember and I stand, there are 36 of us that have numbers above 30. The highest I can see is a large tank with advanced earth magic and an extreme strength skill from the Maya Region with a [66] on his wrist.

I murmur to Ember.

"See, I didn't do the worst."

There are others in the crowd that whisper to themselves, when all of the attendants that brought us here step away from us.

A single man's voice rings out above everyone else.

"Good Morning, Hunters. I hope you all had a good rest and managed to test your luck and make it this far already. There were only 10 of you that had to be sent home during the pretrials. 66 remain, and we'll hopefully all be seeing you in the final round."

The speaker steps forward, and I recognize his face.

It's that same wind user that was over level 900 with the golden collar I met at the gate of this entire fortress.

He speaks again while hovering in the air on a gust of wind and looking at all of us with the vast white empty room behind him.

"Your tests have been graded automatically by our in-house machine to get your basic results for stage 1. It has 99% accuracy, but further grading of the raw answers will be looked over by our staff to make sure nothing was missed while you continue to stage 2."

He smiles and turns his body to the low-quality mana shielding at the back of the room with a single door in it.

"Now, if you have perception sharp enough, you know that behind this wall is where the basic physical exam will take place."

He pauses while everyone listens carefully.

"I want everyone in group A, applicants numbered 1 to 30, to line up single file in front of the door. Those of you in group B, 31 and over, may stay here and talk amongst yourselves. Once group A is finished and has moved on, we'll set up the tests again for you."

His tone and even facial expression toward us in the second group is dismissive and looks like he can't be bothered to even look like he cares.

His attention shifts to the rest of group A.

All of the Apex Region's 12 recruits are in this group, even the ones that were dragged away from the counter during the pre-trials at the roulette table. In addition to the two outliers, Trax and Callum, that I can feel radiating mana control from here, there are 3 others that are over level 700 in their group that come in close second to these two.

Many from the Vice and Veridian regions are in this top 30 too. I see the two water guards from Vice City at spot 16 and 17, then the last person I recognize before they all walk away from us to the back of the room is that blond man from the Silca Region. He's managed to slip in at spot 29.

Here, back in group B, many people begin to socialize and ask each other about the questions on the test to see what they got right or wrong.

The only person I recognize is the Talton Region woman.

Everyone else doesn't stand out much to me.

However, 4 men in black robes with considerable high mana control do stand out, as I haven't seen them at all before during the game rooms even.

Two of them wear heavy hoods that make shadows over their faces while the other two just straight up wear black masks.

Their wristbands show that they're from the Phantom Region. This is the first time I've heard of or seen anyone from this place, and they sure do dress the part to match their name.

I let out a sigh and watch the line of the top 30 slowly begin to move.

It appears as though they're being tested individually, one by one. Each test takes over 10 minutes, so we're going to be here for a while.

I decide to just sit down on the mana shield floor and wait. Ember sits down next to me and does the same.

Then, an unexpected guest comes and sits next to me on the opposite side.

It's the woman from the Talton Region carrying the spear and wearing the armor I upgraded for her by hand just a few days ago, but she has no idea it was me.

She speaks up while sitting down and putting out a hand with a [65] on the wristband, and I shake it.

"My name is Marcie, by the way. Looks like they don't teach that nonsense that was on the test from wherever you're from in the Bedrock Region either."

I smirk and respond.

"Yeah, I guess not."

I look down at her watch, then continue to introduce myself and ask a question.

"I'm Ray by the way. I've never met anyone from the Talton Region before. What brings you all the way out here for the exams?"

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"Well, if it was solely up to me, I wouldn't be at these exams at all. I'm doing it for the safety and well-being of my home region."

I raise an eyebrow at her words, and she continues.

"Every region has to enroll at least one applicant per year to stay in the good faith of the Association and continue receiving its aid and protection."

It begins to make sense why none of the other strong hunters from that region are here. I recall seeing dozens of worthy applicants strong enough to enter these exams in the Talton jungle.

She leans in closer to me.

"If by chance I do manage to pass the exams this year, I'm not accepting a license. I'm just here to show up and do my part."

"Makes sense. I guess we're all here at the B-class exams for our own reasons."

I scan her status again to double-check my findings as I remember them from when I did a brief scan of her in the Talton region and find interesting results.

The armor with mythic-grade body hardening and spear with a +300% strength buff plus all of the other boosts appear to be used and even have grown slightly.

Even in the past few days since I left, it seems she's trained and tested out this gear against some high-level adversaries.

She has advanced grade mana manipulation and a legendary grade body hardening skill. Despite being in the mid-level 600s, her skill upgrades aren't optimized. It seems like she either used an upgrade crystal before level 600 and wasn't able to increase her mana manipulation to extreme grade, or it automatically prioritized her body hardening skill.

I think about ways this could be optimized in the future, and wonder how her mana manipulation skill works without access to any other elements. I want to see it in action.

While pondering this thought, the line of group A applicants moves on and I introduce her to Ember under his false identity of Emrie and we both explain our fake backstory.

For the most part, I think Marcie believes us, but there is a fire burning beneath her eyes that sees this whole exam a lot differently than everyone else here.

I can't quite tell what's on her mind, but decide not to pry and keep the conversation very surface level.

The line doesn't move too slowly, but it doesn't move fast either.

It takes over a full 2 hours for everyone to make it through before the wind magic proctor with the golden collar comes out of the door and floats above us to speak again.

"Group B, please line up in single file according to your corresponding numbers. Stage 2, the physical exam will now begin."

We do as he says and line up, Ember and I agree that we will both go a bit above and beyond during these tests to make up for the lack of information we had in the previous stage. The goal is still to pass these exams and get as close to the upper management of the Association as possible.

I watch applicant 31 enter the door in the wall first, and the line slowly begins to move.

Ember is about a dozen people ahead of me in line. It takes another hour and a half before it's his turn to enter.

Once he leaves behind those closed doors, it takes almost another 2 hours for my turn to finally come.

As the doors automatically open, I'm greeted by the same collared proctor on the other side.

Once the door closes, he speaks up with a confident smile.

"I remember you."

His eyes lower down to a silver tablet in his hand, then down to my wristband.

"Number 59? I would have guessed you would rank much higher from your performance at the front gate. Top 20 or maybe even top 15 was my initial guess."

He shrugs.

"Well, there's still plenty of tests to raise those ranks. The written exam is weighted as a large portion of this exam, but there's still a chance for you if you are exceptional in the following stages. Please, follow me this way."

I do as he says and follow him toward a series of magic mechanical devices I see lined up across the massive room.

It's over 500 meters to the back wall where another door rests, and the room itself is at least a kilometer wide. It's split into a few sections, but he brings me to a large black cube that is heavily bolted into the ground first.

It seems very familiar, and it doesn't click in my head what this device is until he tells me.

"This will be a standard strength test. Use as much armor, running start, or mana as you wish. The only valid attacks on this machine will be a direct punch or kick, please do take your time."

He motions for me to make an attack on the cube then steps back.

I remember using one of these devices back in Valor city before being accepted into the fight arena. It will give a numbered score estimating my strength.

Back then, I had far less control over my power, but now I'm very capable of doing so and can make this device light up to whichever number I wish.

With very low written test scores, if I want any chance of making it into the top 12, I'm going to need to up my game quite a bit.

I step up to the black cube and get ready to punch it in its center.

I picture the mana control of the two strongest applicants in this whole exam, the lightning and water users from the Apex region, and tone my own strength down just a small amount.

I want to give a good score, but don't want to make it obvious that I'm the strongest hunter in this whole event, that would raise a lot more red flags than I want.

Once I can picture the perfect strength of a level 750 monster in my mind, I lunge forward and cover my fist in equivalent mana shielding imbued with lightning magic to match it.

A loud mana-on-mana twang echoes throughout the room as the instructor grins and looks down at his silver tablet where my number score must be.

He looks up at me with a more appreciative expression now while he points to the next strength test.

"That's more like it, I knew you were strong."

The next test is a long curved metal bar that is connected to the floor, the instructor tells me to pull it upward as hard as I can. It appears to be testing grip strength and leg strength, not only pure power of a strike.

The next test is a large crystal orb on a table, whenever the orb turns green, I'm told to send as much mana as possible into it through my fingertips in as dense wavelengths as I can.

Between each green light, I'm provided a high-grade mana potion to regenerate my MP if needed. I accept, even though it's not necessary.

Next, I'm timed running a 100m dash, and a 2km run as well, starting on one end of the room the long way and touching the far wall before coming back.

The final test is a reaction time and accuracy test.

I have to dodge floating mechanical magic metal orbs that attack me at faster and faster speeds. Dodging the incoming attackers turns the orb from plain metal-colored to green.

Once the orbs turn green, I'm allowed to attack them back.

For this portion of the test, I'm allowed to take out my daggers and I send small lightning crescents at the orbs to hit them with very fine accuracy.

I don't miss a single target, and I hold total concentration to suppress all of the wind magic in my blade to make sure I only use one element at a time.

The proctor resets this test a total of 3 times.

On the second round, I feel the orbs get much faster and more unpredictable.

Despite this, I don't let a single one hit me and don't allow any of them to escape.

On the 3rd round, however, I do feel the difficulty of a test like this is nearing levels that should not be possible for a hunter like me, so I allow a few of the orbs to graze me instead of upping my speed to levels I didn't show were possible during the raw testing earlier.

Still, my movements are near perfect. Every time I'm grazed, I only allow them to get near non-vital areas and position myself to always be perfectly aligned for a counterattack once the orbs turn green.

I disarm all of the orbs, and the proctor claps slowly while walking over to me keeping the silver tablet floating in the air with his wind magic.

"Very nice job. Only three other people managed to clear that difficulty level on the agility test with similar accuracy to your own. Not bad..."

The tablet comes floating over to him and he notes down a few more things on it.

Then, I watch the number on my wristband shift from [59] to [32] in a faint flash of white.

He points to the exit door once it opens.

"It's a live updating ranking system. As I said before, the written test is weighted pretty heavily. Even though the system sees you're one of the highest graded on the physical, there's still a long way to go before you move all the way up the ranks. That's quite the impressive jump there. One of the other Bedrock applicants did pretty well on the physical too, he made it into the top 30 actually."

He motions for me to leave.

"There's still plenty of stages left, best of luck hunter."

Then, he turns to the other side of the room to go and starts testing the next applicant while I walk through the exit door.

As it closes behind me and I take in the view of this room, I catch the presence of a hunter that is also very familiar but not someone I was expecting to see at this stage of the event.

An A-class hunter with a light magic skill greets me at the door.

"Welcome to stage 3 of the exams, hunter Ray Anderson. My name is Rodrigo, I'll be the proctor that guides these next tests."

Behind him, there's a wide open lounge.

It looks similar to the gaming room from the pre-trials, but all of the hunters that accept drinks and order food at the bars and restaurants seem much less on edge than they did before.

At the back wall, there are many large gold doors. Each of them is labeled 1-13, and it looks like 7 of them are already occupied because I see names above them that correlate with the names that are shown on a projector on the ceiling.

Every member's face from their ID and live ranking is shown for everyone in the room to observe.

Many of these names are grouped together in teams of 4, 5, or 6 hunters. The groupings are all very close now.

Some groups share a common region, but the most common pattern is that most groups are very close in ranking.

One group is all Apex Region Elites, and they hold rankings 1-6 all to themselves.

Three other groups each contain all of the hunters with rankings between 7 and 21 as well.

Rodrigo speaks up, and his words confirm my suspicions.

"For this next stage, you may create your own team because you will be facing a series of trials together. The minimum a team must have is 4 hunters, and the max can be 6. The recommendation

is to have a versatile lineup to be prepared for any challenge that comes your way in the next stage. I hope you've mingled with your fellow hunters during the exam so far, because connections will be very helpful moving forward."

He gives me a thin smile.

It looks very professional and fake, however, I'm fairly certain he knows exactly who he's talking to right now and is playing the part.

To many hunters, this description is very vague and can't mean much, but thanks to my unexpected roommate in the pre-trials of this exam, this perfectly describes the simulation tests she has already explained everything about and prepared me for.

So, I reply and walk past him.

"Thanks for the advice, I'll do my best to make a team. Looks like being last in line doesn't come with any good perks."

I chuckle to myself and spot Ember and Natalie talking to each other on a long red couch that creates a wide semi circle near the back of the room.

Ember's wristband says [24] and Natalie's reads [30].

She looks pale and weak, similar to how she did after she'd healed up an entire team of hunters in the pre-trials.

My best guess is that she healed the Apex Region's applicants that were injured during the agility tests of the physical and then they left her to form their own Elite team once they were finished.

Considering she was ranked [7] before stage 2, it seems the physical aspect of these exams isn't her strong suit at all. However, considering the recommendation Rodrigo gave me at the door that we should have a versatile team for the next upcoming event, I see a promising future teammate in front of me.

While I walk over to the two of them, I begin to brainstorm who else I should try to bring onto this potential squad for the 3 remaining slots.

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As I walk closer to the two of them, I realize there are plenty of other hunters surrounding them.

Ember is the one being approached the most. I overhear many of them trying to get him to join their team.

Upon closer inspection, I find that he has by far the lowest number still in this room; everyone else sub 30 has already formed a team and is behind a closed door.

Some ask Natalie to join as well, but many are fixated on Ember as he's clearly a strong asset to their team.

As I arrive, I let a moderate mana aura leak out from my body and sit beside them, looking at all the random applicants shiver from the mana vibrating through them.

I speak up.

"If we've never talked before this stage, get lost. We already have a team picked out. Go find teammates in your own league."

It's a bit rude, but I get my message across perfectly, and the leeches scramble.

Left behind after the weaker applicants go off and group in their own teams, giving up on the possibility of snagging an easy target, I see the wind user from the Silca Region that Nat healed and I gave a free black token to earlier.

His wristband reads [31].

I'm surprised he hasn't found a team yet. Considering he was [29] before, his physical scores must have been pretty decent to still be near the mid-range.

I wave to him.

"Dane, right? Still looking for a team?"

His eyes perk up when he walks over.

"Yeah... I am still looking for a team. I thought I might be better off waiting it out than picking the first team that'd accept me."

He looks up at the ceiling, and I follow his gaze to study the teams that are already up there more thoroughly.

It seems teams of 6 are most prevalent in the higher-skilled hunters; near the mid-section, there are more teams of 5 and 4.

I don't know if this is an advantage or a disadvantage yet, but I know I'd rather be on a smaller team with people I have some history with rather than a team of complete randoms.

One of the teams of 4 up on the board is the entirety of the Phantom Region's showing, the 4 of them in a single team.

This is why I've decided to pick this man from the Silca Region. I gave him a token in the pre-trials, he seems competent, but also this will come with a sense of loyalty because he may feel partially indebted to me from before.

We have 4 people right here, but I want to let all of my options run out before making a final decision and approaching one of those numbered golden doors.

Dane shakes Ember's hand and they formally meet.

Natalie recognizes him in an instant, realizing he's the one that paid her to heal him in the pre-trials.

I speak up while more people begin to form into teams, and additional applicants walk in after finishing the physical exams.

"Dane, you're a wind type, right? Does that mean you're capable of long-range attacks?"

He raises an eyebrow, most likely wondering how I knew this, but I point down to his wristband that shows he's a Class 3 Wind type according to the Silca's grading system.

"Yeah, I can be your long-range attacker."

I nod, remembering some questions in the written portion of the exam referencing the main structures of hunting squads. There should be a support type, whether that's a healer or buff user, long-range attackers, close-range damage dealers, and lastly some kind of defensive tank to distract and keep larger enemies occupied and protect the damage dealers.

Although this isn't how I would usually hunt at all—I usually just go in solo and take every role for myself—there's a very good chance this is what the exam proctors are looking for when we're forming teams.

I nod and reply.

"Good. You'll be our long range then."

I turn to Natalie.

"Obviously, you'll be our support."

Then turn to Ember.

"Emrie. You and I will be the damage dealers. You'll be close range, as you fight with your fists, I'll be mid-range."

He nods, then Nat chimes in.

"What about a tank? We'll lose points in the long run if we don't have one of these. None of us look strong enough or defense-focused enough to fill in this role."

Dane raises an eyebrow.

"Lose points? What do you mean? They haven't even explained the rules of this test..."

Nat smirks but doesn't say anything.

Ember speaks for her.

"Just trust her, she hasn't been wrong yet."

I nod, thinking to myself how she successfully predicted over 75% of the equipment that was used during the physical test.

"It's true. I just wish she would have known the answers to that written, I wouldn't have flunked it so hard."

As soon as I say this, a huge man with armor and a heavy shield comes walking out of the physical room with a [41] on his wristband.

It said [63] before, so he definitely performed well.

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Nat looks over and points at him.

"How about that guy, 41 isn't bad. He increased over 20 ranks. I'm sure he's strong. There are only 3 other applicants after him, we might as well get a tank while we still can."

It appears a few other teams look toward him too as he walks through the lounge after Rodrigo gives him a brief introduction.

Dane even speaks up.

"I can go over and talk to him if you want—"

I shake my head.

"I have the perfect applicant in mind. Let's wait."

The next hunter comes out about 15 minutes later, and he's a long sword user with fire magic and very low mana control for his level from the Raya Region ranked [61]. No one jumps to recruit him, but he does settle with another team filled with other rank 50 and above applicants.

More people are getting restless, and just decide on their teams before it's too late.

Random groups of 4-6 are formed, filling doors 8, 9, and 10.

There aren't many people left in the lounge.

When the next hunter emerges from the physical exam room and a bright [33] glows on her wristband, I smile, knowing Marcie performed extremely well on the physical exams to rank just 1 point away from me considering our written test scores must have been pretty close.

Once Rodrigo finishes explaining the basics to her, she looks around the room, takes a glance at the leaderboards on the ceiling, then ignores every hunter that pesters her on her walk over to us. She then looks at all of our wristbands and speaks up.

"Well, looks like your team is the only reasonable option for me here."

I reply as the disappointed looks of other hunters multiply behind her.

"Welcome to the team. We have our tank."

While I could snag a 6th member from any of the others in the lounge and I'm sure they'd accept, this team of 5 will suffice.

It feels like I know everyone well enough individually that if I take the role as team leader they'll all work together once the trials begin.

Everyone else understands that I'm the common link between them and that this is what will work best. We walk over to door 11 to scan our wristbands.

The door clicks open, and as soon as we're all inside, it clicks shut, leaving us in a small 10-meter by 10-meter white mana shielded room with a silver door on the back wall.

Above us, a ceiling projector shows the 11th team has been formed, with all of our names in it, then shows 2 team slots still available to be made with all of the solo applicants in a straight line with their ID pictures next to their ranking waiting for them to form a group.

A single line of text appears beneath the ranking board.

[Please wait for all applicants to form teams and enter their rooms. Stage 3 of the Exams will begin shortly.]

At the same time, the floor begins to move, and it feels just like it did when we were in those white cubes during the written exam.

A total of 5 beds come out of the ground, and dozens of crates filled with food, weapons, potions, and various magic items that are graded high C. There are even some near middle B-grade.

Most of them are health and mana potions while others are weapons like swords, daggers, bows, spears, armor, shields, and all kinds of things necessary for a team to use on an extensive dungeon expedition.

There's no description that pops up, or instructions about how to use this gear or even why it's been given to us.

The only thing we can do is wait.

We all introduce ourselves to one another, and there is a good amount of interest in Marcie's origin from the Talton Region. Natalie is especially surprised, but Dane takes it in a much more nonchalant manner.

We each tell each other our levels, fighting styles, general skills, and what to expect when working together, then each of us looks through the gear provided to see if anything is to our liking.

Ember and I are the only ones that don't sift through it much, as everything here is basically useless to us, but the others are captivated by the B-grade items and swap out weak pieces of armor and gear that will raise their stats a few percentage points here and there.

It takes another 15 minutes before another team is formed, my best guess is because they were waiting for the final applicant to come out of physical testing.

Just half a minute after this team is formed, the final team comes together and lights up on the screen on the ceiling.

It flashes white, then the screen is split in half. One side still shows the 13 teams and their applicants all together, and the other half shows a large live image of Rodrigo standing in the center of the empty lounge outside.

He stares ahead and speaks.

"Welcome everyone, to the 3rd stage of your B-Class Exams."

The moment he speaks, all of our attention moves to the ceiling.

"For this portion of the exams, you will all be partaking in extensive testing within the Apex Region's Simulation Rooms."

He points toward the side of the screen where all of our team names are, and it zooms in to show that there is a big [0] next to each person's individual name.

"You will be scored with a simple point system during this event. The simulation rooms will test various facets of what it means to be an Association Hunter. Your strengths, weaknesses, cognitive function under stress, and ability to work as a team under pressure and even in your natural element. This is just the surface of what we're looking for today."

He pauses and smiles as it looks like someone is speaking in his ear.

Then, a new screen appears above the silver door in our room. It's split in half.

The top says [00:55:00] and the bottom says [24:00:00].

Rodrigo speaks again.

"There will be 24 trials. Each will last 55 minutes, and 5 minutes of rest within the safety room you stand in now will be allotted between events."

He nods, then the top counter changes and displays a 5-minute clock [00:04:59].

It begins to tick down as he continues to speak, and the clock below it moves as well showing [23:59:57] a few seconds later.

"You are all required to participate in the first trial. You may bring any magical items that are on your person or that have been provided in this room. There is no such thing as cheating; whatever resources you find or strategies that make themselves known are encouraged for you to use. However, we strongly advise against killing your fellow applicants."

Rodrigo takes a deep breath in and out then continues.

"Every trial completed in the allotted time will grant every person on your team a single point. Not every trial after the first needs all applicants to be present inside the simulation room to be passed. There may be times when some applicants want to rest and others can carry on completing trials for the team to conserve energy. Applicants that are not present in the simulation room when a trial is completed will still receive a point for the completed trial."

The clocks on the wall continue to count down. I see it drop below the 3 and a half minute mark as Rodrigo continues.

"If a trial is completed before the time limit allotted, the next will not start until the timer runs to 0. All team members may rest during this time. In addition to the 1 point per completion, the team that completes any given trial first out of all 13 teams will receive an extra 1 bonus point per applicant present. This bonus point will only be given to the members present in the simulation room during the trial. "

He points to the leaderboard again, and it automatically scrolls through all of the [0] markings next to everyone's name.

"Lastly, an MVP point will be awarded to the single applicant that contributes the most during each individual trial..."

Rodrigo pauses for a moment, and lets all this information sink in while the clock on the wall ticks past the 2-minute remaining mark.

"You've all formed teams with fellow regional allies, as well as applicants from regions unknown. Maybe you're already a well-oiled team, or maybe this is the first time you've ever fought together. Today is not only about working together as a team to push each other toward a common goal, it is also about doing this and still showing your individual skills and ability to stand out amongst the crowd."

He pauses again and the reality of this test's true nature sinks in.

The clock on the wall falls below one minute, showing [00:00:59], and the silver door clicks open.

A wave of hot mana pours out, and the visual of a lush green jungle meets my eyes.

It looks like there is a portal to a whole new world right behind this silver door.

I can already sense ranked-up monsters inside roaming the dense trees for what feels like kilometers ahead.

If I wasn't told that this was a simulation room, I would believe it was a real B-Grade dungeon...

The clock above the door continues to tick down and Rodrigo speaks again.

"The door will close once the timer hits zero, so enter while you still can. It shall open once the trial is complete. It is time for the 3rd Stage of the exams to begin. What will you choose? The satisfaction of bringing your peers around you to success together, or will you sacrifice those around you to achieve personal glory above all else? I wish you luck in your journey over the next 24 hours, applicants. Remember, there are no rules and no wrong answers. Do what you believe is right. Let the trials begin."

Chapter 537

We all walk forward into the jungle environment through the silver door.

Once it clicks behind us, the exit disappears, and it feels like we're inside a normal dungeon.

However, there are a few major differences.

Floating high in the sky is a visible timer now counting down from 55 minutes.

Below it is a large blue holographic text prompt.

[A Party of B-Class hunters failed to subjugate a dungeon break. They've been separated into multiple areas after splitting up to defeat this dungeon. Save the 3 remaining survivors and clear the break!]

Four massive holograms pop up in the distance. Three of them are yellow exclamation points, scattered far out into the jungle, pinpointing where each of the hunters are, and the 4th is a red arrow with [Boss Room] hovering above it.

When I scan the dungeon using enemy detection, I do sense enemies in here, but they feel much different than normal monsters. There's enough mana inside them to trigger my perception, but there's a visible holographic [Lv. 668] hovering above the head of the closest one I find in my mind's eye.

That's not from my inspect skill; it's visible to anyone that looks at it.

When I try to fully appraise the creature, nothing shows up; it just feels like a huge energy blob of pure mana being manifested into the form of a monster.

Everyone in the squad takes in the view and reads the message in the sky.

Before we can even devise a plan, the monster closest to us starts to make itself known. I yell out to make sure everyone's prepared.

"Incoming! Lizard monster, twelve o'clock! We take this out together then come up with a plan!"

Immediately, everyone gets into position.

Marcie begins to glow with mana and runs up ahead of us, activating her armor set and imbuing large amounts of energy into her spear while scanning the jungle ahead.

Dane jumps into the air and takes out two thin curved swords imbued with wind stones and hovers in the air while Natalie runs back to stand beneath him and stay alert.

Ember and I stay put, right behind Marcie, and wait for the monster to show itself from beneath the thick trees.

I pull out my daggers and let the lightning magic crackle on them, and Ember ignites his fists with a low sizzle of flames.

We all move forward slowly as the cracking of sticks and presence of a strong aura grow closer.

A 6-meter-long green-skinned lizard with massive beady eyes and a long red tongue comes flying out from the trees.

The moment Marcie jumps up to make the first contact with it, a layer of dense stone is summoned all over its body.

Her spear tip hits its underbelly, and a layer of pink mana shielding forms around her in a semi-circle to block the shattering stone as she pierces through to land a hit.

Wind blades come curving in from behind as Dane lets out an attack at the now-exposed monster's underbelly too, while Marcie steps back and pulls out her spear.

I curve to her right while Ember curves around her left.

The wind blades create a wide-open X-shaped gash, far deeper than the spear wielder's hit because the monster's outer shielding has already been shattered.

I aim for its neck with my blades while Ember lets fire erupt from his fists to attack right where the weak spot Dane and Marcie already created is.

The creature's body explodes in a ball of fire, and its head rolls to the artificial dungeon floor as its long red tongue crackles with static electricity, still reacting to the clean slice I followed through with to its neck.

In a matter of milliseconds, our opponent that out-leveled every one of us dissolves into thin air and its holographic tag disappears into the air.

The flesh I cut through felt real, but the lack of any system notifications after the kill convinces me this is truly not a legitimate monster. It is somehow a lifelike manifestation of what a monster would feel like.

The Apex Region has their hands on tech that can replicate the mana shielding and skills of monsters for training scenarios like this.

We all float to the ground, then put our weapons to our sides, and Natalie speaks up.

"That was... very impressive. Just know, moving forward, even though this is a simulation, the monsters might as well be real. You can get seriously injured just the same as any real monster attack in a legitimate dungeon. I'm not sure what parameters they're set to; sometimes they're programmed to stop the simulation once the hunter inside looks like they're in critical condition. However, I wouldn't be surprised if they took this safety feature off for the exams."

I can see she's a bit wide-eyed and frazzled by the display we just put on, so I just nod and reply.

"Thanks for the heads up. I've never been in one of these before... so I'll just assume everything is real."

Similar remarks come from Dane and Marcie, as they've never tried tech like this either and just assumed it was real too.

We all discuss the mission at hand, and come up with scenarios of how to fulfill it efficiently.

Dane and Natalie both agree that the safest way for this mission to be completed is to go to each hunter checkpoint that needs to be saved one by one as a full team.

In the prompt itself, it said that these hunters split up and couldn't handle the dungeons.

Ember and Marcie have different opinions about it; they believe that we're all stronger than whatever hunters came here before us in this scenario. If we want to have any chance of winning the fastest pace prize, we need to split up and rescue them in three groups.

I consider both options but speak up with my own idea in mind.

"What if we just go straight for the boss room?"

There are a few confused looks at me, but then they consider what I've said in more depth.

I grin, turning to Natalie.

"I don't know how these simulation rooms work, but if this were a real break, the smartest thing to do would be to focus on taking out the boss monster. The whole dungeon would collapse and all excess dungeon mass would be automatically teleported to safety."

I shrug.

"We wouldn't have to prioritize one hunter over another to save first, and we wouldn't have to risk splitting up into groups to save time and sacrifice our own safety."

Marcie chimes in.

"I like that idea better. Even if it's not what the test wants us to do, it's what the right thing to do in the actual scenario would be."

Nat thinks hard but can't come to a conclusion, whispering to herself.

"I don't know... I don't know if the sim room is programmed to work like that..."

Before anyone talks us out of it, I jump in the air, stepping on small yellow platforms of lightning magic and point toward the red arrow at the back.

"Come on, I'm the reason we're all on a team together, at least humor me. I want to see what happens! Let's fly there; it'll save us even more time."

Ember fire-steps up to follow, while Marcie uses pink platforms of mana to follow, and Dane floats up with wind.

Natalie lets out a sigh, manifesting mana beneath her feet and following upward.

"Fine, but we're going to use my safer strategies in the next tests if this backfires."

We soar over the trees, and occasionally large green lizards jump up into the air toward us, but we fly way too high for any of them to actually hit us with attacks or engage in battle.

Less than 3 minutes later, we pass right by one of the yellow exclamation points less than 500 meters away to our right.

The next one passes less than a kilometer away on our left. Then the last is far out about 2 kilometers in the opposite direction of the boss room.

We hover down to the simulated dark grey portal and jump through; they all follow my lead.

An enormous tree with leaves that stretch over 5 meters long is all there is in the boss room, and a huge camouflaged lizard over twice the size of the first one we fought is what we're meant to fight.

It has a body hardening perk to it as well, and its tongue sharpens to punch holes through whatever it makes contact with.

There's a large blue [Lv. 690] over its head as we fight.

While either Ember or myself could easily end this battle in a single strike, we let our teammates shine and leave any special moves for emergencies.

It really only adds an extra minute or so onto the battle.

Dane has extremely proficient accuracy from long range, and works well with Marcie as she is able to shatter its armor for brief moments of time whenever she attacks.

Using these distractions, Ember and I chip away at its vitals.

Natalie waits and stays out of attack range, feeling a bit out of place until the battle is over.

The massive lizard falls from its tree and disappears before hitting the ground.

Soon after, the boss room disappears around us too, and a loud ringing sound fills the room as our surroundings turn white, then a silver door opens in front of us with blue text hovering over it.

[Congratulations! [00:25:56] Remaining! Trial 1 Complete! 1 Point awarded to all applicants! 1 MVP point awarded to Ray Anderson! You've come in 3rd place, better luck next time! Please rest until your next trial begins.]

We walk through the silver door and find ourselves back in the resting room we came from.

The leaderboard comes into my vision as the door behind me closes and I see that the team of Apex Members 1-6 came in first, finishing the trial 10 minutes faster than us. Another team finished about 4 minutes after them.

Marcie and Dane celebrate, then go off to drink mana potions and water from the stash supplied.

Natalie looks a little confused and somewhat upset at the situation while she looks up at the leaderboard to see her region mates must have used a similar strategy. I speak out loud what she's thinking.

"They either thought the same thing as me and were just much faster to jump right to it, or they're just that much better than us."

I think about how fast and strong Trax and Callum are, and try to picture it in my head. If they really stepped on it, I'd believe either scenario was possible.

However, my best bet is they went straight for the boss room too. That's what any competent hunter of their caliber would do. I wouldn't be surprised if they had separate simulation training for the Elites of their class, that may be why Natalie thinks this way by default.

She replies.

"Sorry I doubted you. Maybe taking the creative approach is necessary if a weaker team like us is going to score any points."

I shrug.

"Who says we're weak? Third place isn't really that bad for round 1. We still have 23 trials to go; there's room for improvement. I just need to get a better feel for how these simulations work."

Over the next 30 minutes, more and more teams complete the trial and get their points on the board.

Once the timer rings, only 11 out of 13 teams have completed the challenge. Many hunters have 1 point, all the MVPs from each team have 2, and the Apex team, team 1, all have 2 points other than Trax who has 3.

Once the timer hits 0, it resets to 5 minutes just like it did when Rodrigo was speaking, and once it hits 1 minute, the door opens again.

I see a desert landscape before me at dusk, and we all walk through to begin the next challenge.

[Clear the Two Dungeon Breaks and protect the village by helping them fix their Automated Defense System.] Shines bright in the sky and I see two bright red dungeon breaks on either side of a valley.

Dozens of monsters are pouring out from the breaks, charging toward the village down below.

There are almost a hundred simulated people in the village, and none of them are even close to strong enough to face the level 400-550 monsters charging toward them.

I stare forward for a moment, letting out a pulse of mana to observe what's going on in far more depth, then think of a way to solve this as fast as possible while the time ticks down above us in the sky.

"Emrie, you take out that break. Go straight for the boss room, I'll handle the monsters that squeeze out."

I turn to the other red dungeon portal..

"Marcie, Dane, you two on that one. Do the same, head straight for the boss room, clear it as fast as you can without looking back or stopping for pointless fights."

The three of them head off to my left and right, not hesitating at all.

"Nat, you come with me, we're going to see what's going on in this village."

We fly forward and are already making progress before the timer in the sky even ticks down a full minute.

We soar past the charging monsters below and get to the town before they do to meet with scared townspeople at the flimsy wooden front gate.

There are maybe 30 houses in this whole village max, and two enormous humanoid robots out front that appear to be powered down.

A middle-aged townswoman calls out to us for help.

"Adventurers! You've come to save us! Our mechanic has fallen ill and we need someone to find the activation crystals for our defense system before it's too late!"

We come to a halt and float down to the ground in front of them, and I take in the situation, then reply.

"Okay, how can we find the crystals...?"

She lets out a sigh and covers her face with her hands.

"If I knew, the machines would be up and running as we speak! We need you to fend off the monsters and help us search the town. I heard some adventurers have a 6th sense for this kind of thing."

She looks up at me with her eyes wide, and I do a full scan of the town but find nothing out of the ordinary like she's describing.

If it were this easy, anyone with half-developed mana senses could figure out this quest in an instant. There must be other clues.

A boy in overalls peeks his head through the crowd beneath the woman's arm.

"Old man Robert works in the red house on the south edge of town... or no... was it the yellow one?"

He scratches his head, and I let out a sigh.

An old woman tells her story of where the man works sometimes too, then another kid chimes in and says somewhere else.

I turn to Natalie and roll my eyes.

"We may just have to start looking around the old-fashioned way on this one..."

Then I hear a teenage boy speak from deep in the crowd.

"If he'd just wake up for a minute or two, maybe he'd tell us where those crystals were... He's the only one that knows where the crystals are."

At the same time, a wave of monsters from the dungeons up on either side of this valley comes charging toward us about 500 meters away.

The townspeople begin to panic and scream, but I immediately turn to the boy and speak to him while grabbing his collar.

"You said the old man was asleep, he's sick right...? Where is he?"

His eyes are wide, watching the approaching wave of monsters from a distance, but he stutters out a reply.

"He's uh- He's at the town doctor- But there's nothing they can do, he won't wake up-"

I turn to Natalie as she's also staring at the stampede coming our way with miniature beads of sweat rolling down her forehead.

"You want to win a round, Nat? Go follow this kid to the doctor's and heal that mechanic. If he wakes up, he'll be able to fix those robots himself."

Nat's eyes lighten up as she realizes my plan.

I pull out my daggers, then turn toward the monsters coming our way.

"In the meantime, I'll handle these. Trust me!"

I run forward, and the white-haired healer follows the boy back into the town full of panicking villagers.

As the timer in the sky ticks down, arcs of lightning fill the valley, and I decapitate all of the ranked-up beasts that get in my path.

I push my suppressed mana control to its limit, and even move slightly faster than I did during the agility trials during the physical exam to make sure no monsters get by. This is definitely a 2 or 3 hunter job, but I'm the only one left capable of doing it, so pushing my perceived limits is what has to be done.

About 7 full minutes pass before the monsters from one dungeon completely disappear while I'm fighting them.

Then, No more than 4 minutes later, two enormous metal robots join me in the fight to protect the town using mana-powered lasers to mow down the ranked-up monsters with deadly precision.

I look behind me to see Natalie waving with one hand while using the other, glowing bright white on the back of an old man carrying a set of tools and all kinds of colorful gems. Even from here, they don't give off any mana aura at all; they're just for show.

However, my idea of healing the only man that could fix these things worked. I delegated all of the tasks and we wasted no time at all for this trial.

Another 3 and a half minutes pass, then the next dungeon break is cleared, and the monsters coming out dissipate into the air.

[Congratulations! [00:36:17] Remaining! Trial 2 Complete! 1 Point awarded to all applicants! 1 MVP point awarded to Natalie Sterling. You've come in 1st place, 1 additional point awarded to all applicants! Please rest until your next Trial begins.]

The whole desert scene fades away, and we're left in a white room again with an open silver door leading back to the resting area.

Marcie and Dane are both sweating hard and out of breath, while Natalie looks somewhat pale from healing the mechanic.

However, the room fills with excitement once we look at the leaderboard on the ceiling and everyone realizes we just won a round.

Despite not being the strongest, smartest, or from the Regions that have hidden information about these exams and guided toward victory, there's still a chance for us to rack up some serious points during this event if we play our cards right.

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It takes more than five extra minutes for the Apex Elites team to finish up this trial. According to Natalie, there's a more battle-equipped healer on their main squad. He is their tank with an extreme strength skill, but also has a similar healing ability that must have healed the mechanic in the same way Nat did to get a time like that.

However, their bit of lag time behind us must have been the need to allocate more hunters to defending the village from rogue monsters.

One team must have been sent to clear both dungeons individually while the other stayed behind in the valley to fend off the dozens, if not hundreds, of monsters attacking.

I keep this bit of information to myself as it takes another fifteen minutes for any other teams to finish this round.

Once the timer runs out, there are even four total teams that don't finish and miss out on the basic completion points.

Even after the long rest we're allotted, I can tell that the stamina of my teammates is not going to last forever.

Ember and I may be able to play these games for hours or even days on end without having to rest. At the rate that I see the other three restoring their MP and even HP after a simple round like this, I realize soon I'll be doing some of these rounds solo with Ember.

This becomes more and more clear as the rounds go on.

Trial three begins, and we're put in a large open icy cave environment. Hundreds of level 500-550 ice golems attack us, and a few dozen between level 600-650 in total spawn once all of the lower mobs are defeated. There is no boss room or clear exit to this large icy lair; there is only a prompt reading [Defeat All of the Enemies[1/6]] in the sky. There are multiple waves, and the next waves only begin once the previous are cleared entirely. We take about forty minutes to clear all six waves, and once the trial is complete, we come in fourth place.

Ember wins the MVP point, as he must have gotten the most final blows on the golems.

The fourth trial is a similar event; with a clear goal and no way to really cheat it. We have to escort three carriages through a mountainous region and protect them from enormous monkey creatures that wield fire magic.

We also come in fourth place this round, and I win the MVP point, but I'm unsure how we could have won either of the last two events. The team of Elites from the Apex Region has somehow won every event so far other than the one we managed to squeeze a victory.

I come to the conclusion that they're definitely working with more information than us.

However, it may just be that they're strategically positioning their most capable hunters to complete the tasks.

I believe this is the case because when they come in first place and win the bonus points, not all 6 of them are always rewarded. It's only a select few, meaning they've already begun to leave hunters behind during certain trials.

It's clear that both Dane and Natalie are nearing their limits after the labor-intensive trials we're completing. Dane has been giving it his all, launching hundreds of long-range attacks and contributing a lot to our battles, but he can't continue at this rate. Natalie healed up Marcie's arms after the ice golem dungeon as she was frozen pretty badly from continued exposure, while Dane got caught up in a large fire attack during the escort mission.

Marcie is holding up fine after the heal, but Dane and Natalie are considerably weak. Both Ember and I are still not showing any signs of wear.

They stay behind during the fifth round, and I assure them we'll pass it and get them points.

Since the second round, where we managed to luck out on a first place win, the Apex Region team has been hoarding all of the first place bonus points since.

While out of the sixty-six applicants on the board, I'm in the top ten because of my MVP points and extra points for the second trial, I still want to try to get ahead of some of these Apex region hunters. It's not like they've done anything in particular to make me want to defeat them; top twelve is all I really need to place in. I'm just feeling competitive and see a challenge in front of me that I want to accomplish.

My guess is I'll have a better chance at doing so once we get to the later trials and even these elite hunters must get tired at some point.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh trials go similarly to the last two. They're dungeon breaks, having to save stranded hunters at checkpoints and protecting villages from hoards of monsters.

Dane joins us for the seventh trial after he's rested up, but it is one of the most intense ones we've faced so far.

The seventh is another multi-wave trial, and some of the waves even consist of multiple level 675+ monsters. Ember and I push our speed and striking power to the max, clearing out waves of ogres, serpents, orcs, giant scorpions, and even some unique humanoid monsters.

Dane is overwhelmed by the ruthlessness, strength, and pure power of some of the monsters after a few stages go by. He's hit hard by a few attacks and stays high in the sky to wait out the rest of the waves while we continue to battle it out.

Stolen story; please report.

We come in third place for this stage, but surprisingly only five total teams even passed this trial. This makes Dane feel much better about having to sit out the strongest waves.

Marcie holds up very well, but after seven hours of straight fighting monsters at and above her level, even she begins to get fatigued and exhausted, especially from the healing procedure done after this seventh trial to mend some of her deep gashes and burns.

Dane is healed up too, but falls asleep to fully heal once the process is complete.

Every time Nat heals, her own fatigue grows too, but she understands this is part of being a team player.

While the HP potions provided can heal standard injuries and slowly heal flesh wounds, some of the larger injuries being tanked would take many days to heal or even longer if not for our healer. No one on the team would be taking the risks in battle if not for this insurance.

Moving onto the eighth round, I can tell Marcie is getting tired, but we agree this will be her last one then she'll take a rest.

"I don't know how you two manage to narrowly miss injuries over and over and keep using so much mana in your attacks while not getting fatigued, but I guess it's best not to question it and just be glad you're on my side."

As she says this, I realize Ember and I have been outputting hundreds of thousands of MP over the last few trials like it's nothing.

I remember back to one of the exam questions about how much rest time a hunter needs after exerting 0.1% of their mana control, and if this were my true control that I'm showing her, right about now would be when I'd start feeling the effects of using up so much mana.

However, I shrug it off.

"We've been through worse. Don't worry about us."

Once the door opens and we walk through, the three of us are stranded on a desert island.

The sky is covered in clouds and there is fog that hovers over the sea in all directions, limiting our vision to a few dozen meters ahead at most.

Text pops up in the sky next to a timer.

[Memorize the pattern of safe stones to make it all the way to the final island. You have 55 minutes to make 100 steps. You must travel from step to step in order to complete this trial! Go back to the start as many times as you wish, but if you step on a danger stone, you have failed to complete this trial.]

As soon as we read this, massive rocks float up in the ocean in rows of three.

Two of the rocks are red while one is green on every step.

"Is this some kind of joke...?" I whisper out loud.

The rock all the way to my right is green on the first row of three, and I can see clearly that about ten meters ahead of it, in the next row of three, the middle rock is green.

I shrug and jump up in the air to land out in the ocean on top of the furthest right rock.

Nothing changes, then I motion for Marcie and Ember to follow.

They do, and once both their feet touch the rock, all three in the first row turn green.

However, when I look further out into the ocean, all of the other rocks that were lit up red or green in the distance turn grey and dull.

"Well... it was the middle one, I'm sure of it..."

I jump another ten meters off to the middle rock on the second set, and once Ember and Marcie follow, the second set of three grey rocks turn green.

"Interesting...."

I don't remember what the third set looked like at all, and neither do either of my teammates.

Marcie speaks up.

"Well, it said we can restart as many times as we want, right?"

I nod.

"Right..."

We all fly back to the starting island, and once our feet hit the sand again, the rocks reset.

One hundred sets of three massive boulders trail off into the ocean.

Two are red on each one, and one is green.

I stare off into the sea thinking about how exactly we'll remember this pattern in such a short period of time.

A few minutes have already passed, and every second we wait will only add up to make this problem harder.

It is possible if we concentrate hard, and split it up by taking 33-34 each, flying over the entire puzzle and memorizing as much as we can that could work, but there must be another way...

Marcie proposes exactly what I was thinking, and Ember agrees that it's possible, but there must be an easier and faster way to complete this challenge.

The corner of my lips curl upward as I shove my hand into my fake item box and pull out a bright blue recording crystal.

"Emrie, you're right. I think we have a much more efficient option right here."

I imbue mana into the gem, then float up in the air with lightning crackling beneath my feet while the recording crystal records a lifelike image of whatever I point it at.

I turn back to the two still standing on the island.

"Stay here. I'll be right back."

With the crystal pointed down at the rocks, I lightning step high above every one of them until I make it back to the final island we're supposed to reach.

Considering we haven't stepped on the first rock yet, the green and red patterns showing which rock is safe to jump on are still visible on all of them.

There's no need to memorize the pattern anymore now that I have a perfect picture of the answers in front of me.

Once I get back, I set the recording to play, and we hop from rock to rock with confidence, turning every one of them green, making it across the entire maze in less than 10 minutes.

Once we all step foot on the final island and all of the rocks are glowing green, the simulation around us disappears, and the silver door appears with a message above it.

[Congratulations! [00:44:52] Remaining! Trial 8 Complete! 1 Point awarded to all applicants! 1 MVP point awarded to Ray Anderson. You've come in 1st place, 1 additional point awarded to all applicants present! Please rest until your next Trial begins.]

I can't help but wave an excited fist at the door.

"Take that, Apex Region! One step closer, we just need to do that a few more times!"

Ember chuckles.

"You really want to win this thing now? I thought top 12 was all we were aiming for."

I shrug and walk through.

"It can't hurt to win in this event. Thanks to that written exam we're still pretty far behind, I say we get a little more serious."

I turn back and nod.

"It's time we start using our ranked up buffs. No more conserving energy."

Through our telepathy link, I send a message to Ember explaining that what I meant is we should start using a little more of our power because based on Marcie's body language, she's about to take a break too.

By saying we should start using our buffs, if there is anyone watching us through the surveillance system, this will be a proper explanation for any odd jumps in power.

If it's just going to be Ember and me completing trials alone for a few hours while the rest of my teammates rest, we might as well make the most of it.

As the silver door closes behind us and we make it back to the resting room, Marcie pops open another MP potion and sits on her bed, staring across the room with a puzzled look.

"Who are you two really...?"

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Ember and I look at her cautiously, not answering. So, she elaborates.

"I've been to the Bedrock Region plenty of times for private missions. I've never seen hunters like you... Your stamina, mentality, even fighting instincts... something is up. That blue crystal that took videos of everything it saw, how'd you even get your hands on one of those? I've only ever seen association officials use those—"

There's another long pause, however, this time I do reply while looking her in the eyes.

"I don't think any of these questions need to be answered. How would you like it if I started digging into your past?"

I can tell she's really just curious, but based on the heavy aura of foreign mana in the room, I can tell everything we're doing and saying is being watched and analyzed.

So, to nip this conversation in the bud, I decide to take a risk and open my telepathy link with her.

"You want to cause some havoc, right? The stronger nations are used to always controlling winning spots with their Elite hunters in the B-Class exams."

Her pupils shift, and I can tell she's very confused about the voice in her head, so I speak again.

"I don't feel comfortable talking about this where others can listen. This is telepathy. A special perk I acquired after... Actually, I won't elaborate. All you need to know is that It's how I coordinate attacks so flawlessly with Emrie. I'd appreciate it if you kept it a secret from the Association as well."

She nods once, and I peer over to Dane and Natalie, then to Ember and continue through my link.

"What if a few extra applicants won this year's exams? Wouldn't it be fun to place higher than the chosen Elites from the Apex Region and reject their honorary B-Class license anyway?"

She replies through the link.

"Well, if you put it like that. A scenario like that would be satisfying...."

I grin as she nods once, then replies out loud to split the perceived awkward silence in the room to make the conversation seem natural to anyone listening in through a surveillance system.

"Right. I guess I don't know much about you, and you don't know me. Let's just do our best to win this thing."

Ember stands up and lets out a long sigh while stretching his arms.

"Well, I'm glad that's settled. I wonder if any other teams are going to figure this trial out."

It takes over 30 minutes for the Apex Region's team to finally complete the trial, and after them, only two other teams even manage to finish before the time runs out.

Marcie decides to rest while Ember and I continue the trials.

While she's up to do more, it would be best to have her and all the others fully rested by morning to help with the later trials at full strength.

Once trial 9 starts, it seems clear that many teams are taking a similar strategy.

We get another standard dungeon collapse trial, and Ember and I speed off through the sky to the end of it without waiting at all.

We disregard any hunters that need saving and plunge right into the boss room.

There's a huge humanoid tusked giant creature with many minions that spawn inside; however, we aim straight for the vitals and don't have any teammates or baggage to protect. We can go in straight for the kill without having to think about the recoil of our attacks hitting anyone at close range.

The monster's counterattacks miss us by mere millimeters.

It looks like we've nearly died, but both of us know that even if these attacks hit us, it wouldn't feel like anything more than a pinprick.

[Congratulations! [00:50:47] Remaining! Trial 9 Complete! 1 Point awarded to all applicants! 1 MVP point awarded to Ray Anderson. You've come in 1st place, 1 additional point awarded to all applicants present! Please rest until your next Trial begins.]

Surprisingly, only 7 out of the 13 teams even complete this trial.

We rest in the room again and take on trial 10 alone too while our teammates all sleep and recover from their long day of testing and trials.

There's a wide open desert with a single boulder at its center that stretches about 2 kilometers in distance. The prompt reads [Split this boulder in two.]

Ember and I both verbally agree to use our ranked-up buffs, but in reality, we're just lessening the barrier of our mana suppression and letting out more mana to send off stronger attacks.

[Congratulations! [00:42:18] Remaining! Trial 10 Complete! 1 Point awarded to all applicants! 1 MVP point awarded to Emrie Carter. You've come in 1st place, 1 additional point awarded to all applicants present! Please rest until your next Trial begins.]

Ember wins the MVP point for having more explosive attacks.

Fire is far more destructive against rock than electricity is.

Again, only 5 of the 13 teams complete this trial completely.

As the night goes on, fewer and fewer teams complete full trials.

While the first few trials it was 13 for 13, now we're lucky if even half complete them. Some teams are up against the wire on time, completing the trials with just seconds to go.

Eight more trials go by.

The only other team that completes them all is the Apex Region team. While the three teams consisting of Vice and Veridian hunters constantly place high in the rankings, they are not as consistent as the Apex Elites team.

The three first-place wins from us on rounds 8, 9, and 10 in a row were merely luck.

As there are more puzzle events that require different elements like water to put out fires or healers to bring villagers back to perfect health.

While I could use water magic of my own or even use self-regen potions on the villagers, it isn't worth exposing our identities for a few points.

We still manage to win 2 more out of the 8 events that pass through the night and do end up completing every one of them which gives our team an overwhelming advantage above many of the others.

Between Nat, Dane, and Marcie, every few rounds when they feel up to it, they join us to complete challenges together.

However, as the rounds go on, the challenges only get harder and stronger monster spawn. Under the facade of mine and Ember's ranked up buffs, we're easily able to dispatch these higher-level trials. Though, it's clear many teams are not even supposed to be able to complete these nearing the end.

As everyone gets progressively more tired, the trials get more difficult. Some of the monster waves have level 700-750+ monsters. They're tough, but not impossible. It's supposed to be this way.

Even so, we make it a point to clear every one of them to gain extra points for everyone.

From this alone, as we move onto the 19th round, everyone on our team is in the top 15 of this stage's point leaderboard. Ember and I are both in the top 5, outranking a few of the Apex members that haven't had the opportunity to gain MVP points as often and some that have taken rests while their teammates complete rounds and get 1st place points without them.

Some of the other teams from the Vice and Veridian Regions have single hunters that are being pushed up the ranks for claiming MVP every round. It's a smart strategy to gain personal points if you're much stronger than the rest of your team.

We complete the rest of the trials, and the completion rate falls lower and lower.

By the 23rd and 24th trial, there's only two teams that are finishing. It's me and Ember, along with the two Elites from the Apex region.

Their stamina and drive is impressive as well. We go back and forth on winning the 1st place prize with them on the final few rounds.

However, overall they've won far more in the earlier rounds to maintain their early lead.

On the final leaderboard, [Ray Anderson] is in 3rd place, and [Emrie Carter] is in 4th. Scattered within the top 15 the rest of our teammates still stay, carried by the basic completion points awarded that many teams failed to receive on every round.

Marcie has accepted the fact that there is something very off about us, but doesn't care as long as she's benefiting from it in the end.

Natalie on the other hand gets increasingly confused as every time we walk out from the silver door with another stage completion, neither of us ever need heals, and don't even touch the gear on the walls.

Unlike Marcie, I don't feel confident talking to Nat through my telepathy link to explain what I need to. She's still from the Apex Region. It feels a bit too closely related and loyal to the top brass of the Association for me to be sharing any secrets.

Occasionally, we'll drink mana potions to restore MP after long battles, but usually I'm just consuming mana from the simulation room itself to restore myself while battling.

All hunters with mana control awakened are capable of absorbing the mana in their environment to a certain extent. With the occasional MP potion I take from my storage for show as well, it all seems very convincing to me.

To Natalie, however, something is very wrong. I can see the confusion growing on her face every trial, but as she also watches her own points rise from our efforts, she doesn't say a word and continues to heal Marcie and Dane when they come back after long battles.

While Dane is about half as active in trials overall by the end of it, he still gives it his all and does whatever I say with no questions asked while inside the sim room.

He doesn't seem curious or cautious at all about the seemingly never-ending stamina we have, his eyes only show gratefulness. The final 24hr countdown hits zero and the 3rd stage of the B-Class exams is over.

Rodrigo's face reappears on the ceiling next to the now updated leaderboard with everyone's name and ranking on it.

"Congratulations, hunters, you've all completed the 3rd stage of the exams. If you're still worn out or in critical condition from these trials, do not worry. There will be a total rejuvenation and private room allotted to any hunters that wish before you all move on to the 4th stage."

I hear a mechanical shifting sound behind the silver door that the simulations just took place inside. It sounds as if the room itself is being moved away...

Then, the entire resting room that we're standing in shakes too and it feels like we're being moved around in space by a huge machine. I'm tempted to use my all-seeing eye to see through the shielding around us but I refrain from doing so.

Rodrigo continues.

"Your wristbands have now been updated with the weighted scores of the 3rd stage. Do not fret if you feel your score does not appropriately reflect your performance in the exams so far. In the 4th stage, you will be able to show off your solo abilities in a grand event starting in 16 hours. Be prepared to fight, and take advantage of our amenities."

He pauses, then grins just slightly.

"As you move to this next room, sabotages and fighting are permitted in the public areas but not in private labeled rooms. Please, no killing before Stage 4 begins, I will have to intervene if you take things too far. More information will be provided closer to the time the events of the 4th stage begin."

The silver door clicks open, and at the same time the numbers on our wristbands update.

A final word from Rodrigo echoes through our ears as his face and the leaderboard disappears from the ceiling of the resting room.

"Allies will not be helpful to you during the 4th stage, but it would be wise for you not to break your bonds if you want any chance of prevailing in the 5th."

There's a moment of silence as we think about his final words, but I waste no time to look down at my wristband to see [14]. Then, I peer over at Ember's and it reads [10].

Natalie's says [17], Dane's reads [18], and Marcie's says [19].

We all jumped up in ranks a lot from performing well during this stage. This increase in rank is just what I needed to cancel out those test results of the first round. With 2 more stages to go, I only need to raise 2 more ranks to reach my goal.

I whisper out loud to Ember.

"Looks like you already made it into the top 12, not bad."

We walk through the door into a very large circular room with nothing inside. The walls are bright white and mana shielded just like the rest of this fortress.

Its diameter is 100m at most, and the ceiling is high, about 10m, but nowhere close to as massive as the training rooms we were standing in during the 2nd Stage physical tests.

Once all 5 of us step out, the silver door shuts behind us and I hear the same mechanical shifting sound like the room is moving away and being replaced with something else behind it.

There are at least 75 doors on the outer edges of this room, but only a few of them open and more teams come walking out.

While our team looks a bit tired and fatigued, others come out looking far worse.

Some are missing limbs, others are still covered in blood and deep unhealed wounds, while some teams even carry out sleeping or passed out members into the room before the doors shut.

The mechanical sound of moving parts outside of the humming shielding gets much louder once everyone is in this room, then numbers 1-66 light up on all of the doors on the outer rim of this massive circular room.

A screen appears on the ceiling of this room now and reads out a single sentence.

[Please relocate to your private suite to receive a full rejuvenation before the 4th Stage.]

Another timer counting down from 16 hours is visible below it, and no other instructions are given.

I look to Ember, and he looks to me with a nod and speaks.

"I guess, see you in the next stage—or whenever we meet again."

I nod.

"I guess so."

He walks off to the room numbered [10].

Marcie looks at me with the same serious look she's been giving me ever since I talked to her with Telepathy the first time.

"Thanks for being a good teammate. I hope we aren't enemies in the next round like that proctor said."

She turns to walk toward her door in the opposite direction that Ember walked and says a final line without turning to me.

"If we are, I won't hold back."

I smirk.

"Fine, me neither."

Then, Dane speaks next and I see a very unexpected notification ping in my ear.

"Thank you for the boost in ranking, It may actually be possible for me to go home to the Silca Region with good news and extra funding. It'll just take 6 more ranks. Whatever you need, I'm there for you, Ray!"

He looks up to me with a wide smile, and I see his status and geolocation in my Rising Emperor's Domain as clear as day.

For some reason, a link of loyalty was formed with this applicant from the Silca region.

It wasn't my intention, but it can't hurt to maintain this bond...

I smile and place out a hand for a shake.

"Of course, maybe when all of this is over you can show me around your home region."

He grabs my hand and shakes it, then thanks me profusely again before leaving to enter the door next to the one Marcie just left to.

The only person left near me is Natalie, and her eyebrows are still scrunched with confusion.

With her hands on her hips, looking me right in the eyes, she's about to ask me something, but we're interrupted by a loud yell from across the room.

"You traitor! I can't believe you! An Apex Hunter giving up simulation tactics to help the Bedrock Region! One of them even made it into the top 12 already because of your lapse in judgment! I'm going to kill you!"

My head turns to the noise, and I see all six members of the Apex Region's Elite team storming our way with angry looks on their faces.

Trax, the one who yelled, has a bright [1] on his wristband. He's leading their group and is crackling head to toe in violent electricity.

Chapter 540

The team of Elites walks over to us like they own the place and completely ignore me, all staring at Natalie.

Trax yells again.

"You're a disgrace! We should have never picked you up from the Veridian Region!"

He raises a fist, and lightning crackles around it.

His words interest me.

I assumed Nat was from the Apex Region, but it seems there's some information I was lacking. My eyebrows raise as the water user puts his hand in front of the spiky-haired lightning mage.

"You know how protective the Director is about healers. Careful, Trax."

His fist crackles, and he stares ahead at her, then grunts out a reply through gritted teeth.

"I know... but she's definitely not the one he's looking for. That's clear after today..."

His eyes track over to a tank in silver armor with a [6] on his wristband.

"Plus, Mack has the same skill as her. If anyone manifests that ability, it'll be him. I don't think the Director will mind me taking out the garbage. I don't know why you sold out to these low-grade hunters, but now this year's exam results may be tarnished if I don't do anything about it."

Callum, the water mage of nearly equal strength to Trax, lowers his hand and nods.

"Do as you wish, I just thought a fair warning was in order."

Trax grins and stares Nat in the eyes while replying.

"Your consideration is appreciated, but I'll make my own decisions."

He lunges forward with what feels like a full-powered attack aiming straight for Nat's chest.

I think to myself while the scene plays out in slow motion thanks to my real perception.

While Natalie technically did give us information that would help in these exams during the pre-trials, none of it was really that helpful.

We were a bit more prepared for the tasks ahead, but if we followed her advice on the Simulation tests, we'd be in much worse shape than we are now.

It's not like she gave us secret answers on the written exam or some way to cheat the physical either.

Everything they're mad about was not Nat's fault at all. If anything, it's my fault. Trax is actually thinking pretty clearly. There's no possible way normal recruits from the Bedrock Region would have passed the tests like we just did.

All of the other recruits that came with us were either prematurely eliminated in the pre-trials or aren't even in the top 30 right now.

However, reacting in such a drastic manner without any solid proof is quite disturbing.

I let out a sigh and lunge forward, activating my own lightning magic.

There's a powerful twang of mana as Trax's fist slams into my open palm centimeters before impact aimed at Nat's heart.

Arcs of electricity surge through the air, and a shockwave of energy radiates through everyone.

Nat falls backward from the blast but grabs onto my free arm to stabilize herself before standing to her feet and shaking her head to rid herself of the shock and understand the situation.

I feel another pulse of electricity surge through me with the mana control output of a level 850-900 monster as the angry eyes of the man who threw this attack stare into mine.

I finally release his fist from my hand and he yells out again.

"It's you! You and that Emrie guy! It was you two that were stealing our points! Just another one of the Bedrock leeches! 14th? You're in 14th place now... Are you kidding me? You weren't even in the top 30 after the written or physical exams! There's no way you racked up enough points to pass without this one whispering the answers in your ear!"

He turns to Nat.

"I never even liked you in the first place. This is all because you were taken from your home to support the Apex Region's future, isn't it? Some kind of selfish revenge?"

He turns back to me, and I feel a probing sensation of Trax's aura go through me to try and figure out how strong my mana control is.

With the divine limiter on, my output still feels like a level 600-700 at best.

He feels this and yells again.

"It's because he's a lightning user too, isn't it! The only other applicant with this element in the exam. You wanted to take away from the rarity of my ability."

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

He turns back to Nat.

"That was it, wasn't it? I understand now!"

She looks shocked, with her mouth open, and stutters out a reply.

"No- I- I thought my duty was done. I did what I was asked to get you through the pre-trials. My teammates made it this far themselves. If anything, they're the ones helping me-"

"That's enough! I don't buy it! From what I can sense, there's no possible way he could put up a fight against me in the sim rooms without extra information. There's just no way-"

Natalie has been nothing but nice to me, and with added information that she's most likely been working for the Apex Region for some reason that has to do with their Director searching for a healing ability, the questions in my head only grow.

One thing is for sure, though, it comes out of my mouth as I take a step closer to Trax.

"Hey! Believe her. She didn't tell me anything. The B-Class exams don't revolve around you, buddy."

His eyes widen at my remark, and I feel a very intense power surge behind his eyes.

His pupils turn yellow, and a wave of electricity bursts out to cover his entire body in the same bright yellow color as he responds.

"Actually, you're wrong. I will be the next A-Class hunter and train with the Director himself. These exams do in fact revolve around me, and you are all merely stepping stones to my rise in fame as the Association's strongest hunter."

A twisted smile forms across his face, and he replies.

"There can only be one Lightning Mage that will be known across the 8 Regions. That will be me."

He lunges toward me with speed and power far faster than what he showed before.

His energy output with this ranked-up buff activated nears that of a level 1000 monster. The energy being multiplied throughout his body artificially increases his mana control momentarily to create an attack that is far deadlier than I expected.

His speed has also drastically increased, far greater than that of a double ranked-up monster. It feels almost like I'm facing that lightning wolf in the Vice City Labyrinth's 40th-floor boss room.

He is not as powerful but definitely shows the speed and agility of a level 1200 monster.

With an ability like this, it makes far more sense why they were able to clear the trials so fast.

If he wasn't unfortunate enough to have met me in these exams, his previous words might actually be true.

The strength and capabilities he shows are far greater than everyone here and could definitely be a candidate for an A-Class hunter.

However, with his fiery temper and attitude toward others, showing violent hostility without any concrete proof, and a god complex that he's trying to push on everyone around him just for being pampered by the association, it really makes me want to bring him down a peg.

As a lightning-imbued fist comes rocketing toward my face, I do a scan of the room and find there are less than a dozen people left here. The rest have gone inside their rooms.

While I could block his punch right now and beat him to the ground, that wouldn't be a feat Ray Anderson could do with the fractions of a second left to think of a plan against an unexpected punch.

Then again, a few words from Rodrigo repeat in my mind from his speech before we all made it into this room.

He said, killing will not be permitted.

If anyone takes things too far, he will be made to intervene.

I smirk, then slowly turn my eyes to meet Trax's gaze while he follows through with his punch.

I don't lift a finger or even attempt to block it.

His expression shifts for a moment, as my reflexes and perception of the situation shouldn't be this quick.

At the same time, a circular panel in the center of the massive room opens up, and a flash of light pours out, wearing a golden collar.

A blast of electricity and light magic follows, and I play along, letting myself get thrown back by the blast as Rodrigo blocks the lightning punch while in his ranked-up form.

He yells out.

"That's enough! I said you may sabotage and quarrel, but no lethal blows will be permitted!"

Trax looks at Rodrigo, and they both power down their buffs as I get to my feet pretending to act flustered.

However, Trax lunges forward again. Rodrigo blocks him from moving forward at me with a single arm covered in light magic, but lets him yell out.

"No! That- That wasn't a lethal blow at all- he- he saw it coming. His eyes, he was watching me throw that punch-"

Trax replays the imagery of my subtle smirk and eyes tracking his punch over and over in his mind, but his face turns pale as he murmurs under his breath.

"At least I think... That's what I saw, right..?"

He looks down at his hands, then up at Rodrigo.

"But if it was... you would have seen it too. An A-Class hunter wouldn't miss a detail like that..."

Rodrigo stares at him with a serious expression.

"This hunter didn't even see your attack coming. His pupils tracking your movements may be a survival response, but there was no effort made to block or move away from the blow aimed for his vitals at speeds far faster than anything recorded in his physical exam or even during the sim trials. That was in fact an intended Lethal blow."

Trax shakes himself out of his trance.

"Right... yeah- right. There's no way he could have seen that. He wasn't even top 30 in the written and physical, right...? He's not even top 12 overall now. I don't know my own power sometimes."

He smiles, chuckling a little, nodding, and reassuring himself of this fact while Rodrigo responds, staring at everyone here with stern expressions.

"I don't care if it was an accident or not. I'm just here to keep the peace. If you really want to kill each other that badly, save it for the tournament event in the next round."

Everyone's eyes widen at this statement, as Rodrigo just dropped a major hint about the 4th stage.

He jumps in the air as the circular hatch in the ceiling opens again.

"No more talking! Get to your rejuvenation rooms and stop causing problems. You've had a stressful first three trials, be glad you've made it this far. Heal up and mentally prepare yourself for the next stage."

He watches us from above and doesn't disappear into the ceiling again until everyone walks back to their room.

I walk in front of the door labeled [14], but turn around one last time to get a look at the large circular room as the silver door behind me opens.

The angry gaze of the lightning mage is locked on me from across the room as he stands in front of his open door too.

I lock eyes with him and give a convincing stare back, as it seems I've accidentally made quite the aggressive and strong rival to deal with in the upcoming rounds.

Our death stare across the 100-meter room holds for about five full seconds before the ceiling turns green and a new announcement rings out in the tone of a woman's voice I've never heard before.

[Attention all applicants. Stage 1 written test results have been reviewed by our proctors, and the machine-graded scores have been manually updated to include more creative solutions. There have been a few slight changes. Please review the updated rankings.]

I can hear and see that the same message is being played inside the room behind me, so even hunters inside their private suites are getting this update too.

As the message flashes a few more times, then a display of the updated rankings appears in front of us, my emotionless stare turns into a smile, and Trax's turns to one of disbelief.