

## D. Diver 541

Chapter 541

The list of rankings on the ceiling shifts around.

Some of the numbers above the silver doors in the room shift too, matching the hunters' updated rankings for those already inside.

Many applicants move up and down 1 or 2 slots as they've managed to squeeze in a few points past their fellow applicants.

I see Natalie's score actually get worse, moving from [17] to [19], while Dane's moves from [18] to [16], and Marcie shoots up the rankings all the way from [19] to [13].

Ember moves up in the rankings one slot too, hitting [9].

My grin grows as I see myself move all the way up to position number [5].

The first four slots are still filled by Apex Region Elites, Trax and Callum taking first and second.

It seems that portion of the written test where niche association hierarchy knowledge is still holding me back a little, but my in-depth explanations of scenarios and training tactics were enough for the experienced proctors to see that a majority of my answers were correct where the machine didn't.

I call out across the room while taking a step back into the rejuvenation room.

"What was that about me not being in the top 12? Huh? Looks like it was just a system error."

My laugh echoes through the room as the perfect 1-6 rankings of the elites are broken up by a rogue no-name Bedrock hunter.

While the silver door begins to slide shut, Trax's angry yell echoes back.

"This is another trick! You've cheated again! I'll kill you in the next trial and prove you're nothing! You do not deserve to rank this high! Just wait, wait until I get my hands on you without that A-Class holding me back!"

I make a final glance of eye contact with him.

"Looking forward to it."

The door clicks shut, and a wave of hot soothing mana rushes into me from the floor and through all of the walls.

It's at least ten times as strong as the golden lounge in the pre-trials.

It is very impressive and would certainly speed up natural healing to a significant degree, however based on some of the injuries I saw on the other applicants, they're going to need a bit more than just a mana bath to bring them back to 100%.

I take a stroll of the small 10m by 10m room to find a bed, a large desk and chair, food, potions, and a complete wall of armor, pendants, weapons, and all kinds of unique-looking high C and low B-Grade gear.

A message above the items in glowing holographic text reads out that I should help myself to whatever I desire.

On the ceiling of the room, a 16-hour timer ticks down and the live ranking still sits there without moving.

After a quick scan of the items on the wall, I confirm there is still nothing worth taking.

I walk over to the desk and comfortable-looking chair, then sit down and take a deep breath of the fresh mana flooding through my veins.

A few hours pass as I fall into a peaceful trance-like state while absorbing just enough mana to not be abnormal.

Then, my concentration is disrupted by a light dinging sound and a new text screen on the ceiling.

[A personal Healer will arrive shortly. Any additional injuries will be rejuvenated now.]

Seconds later, the silver door at the back of the room opens and I turn in its direction to find a level 994 woman with silky blond hair that waves in the air below her waist.

She has the same legendary grade [Soft Heal] skill as both Natalie and that tank healer from earlier.

However, this woman has the mana control of a hunter that has far surpassed the double ranked up status. It's surprising she hasn't hit level 1000 yet given the mana radiating off of her, but I have a few guesses as to why when the golden collar around her neck enters my field of vision.

Her eyes are a dull blue, it looks like there is no life behind them. However, she still smiles and keeps her body language graceful as she walks over and speaks in a steady tone.

"Please show me where any lasting fatigue or injuries may be after your trials. I will make sure you are able to fight at full capacity before the next stage."

I stare forward for a moment, still looking her up and down as she comes to a halt in the middle of the room, staring back at me with a lifeless gaze.

I shake my head.

"No thanks. I feel fine already."

She doesn't move, still staring forward and replies in the same tone.

"I insist. You may have injuries you're not aware of, Mr. Anderson."

I stand up from my desk and look back at her.

"I said no thank you, I've already fully recovered. There are applicants that need your heals much more than me."

She nods.

"They have already been assisted. You're next in line for a full heal. Please allow me to do my job. I need to make sure you're in your top fighting condition, that is all."

I reply back with lightning flickering in my eyes.

"I don't know what your deal is, but I don't want whatever treatment you're offering to give. If you lay a finger on me, I'll be less ready for the next trial than if I'm left to my own natural healing."

Surprisingly, she nods and takes a step back.

"That is a satisfactory response. I find no visible injuries and your mana control base appears to be stable."

As she turns to leave through the door she mumbles to herself.

"You Bedrock applicants sure are difficult this year..."

The silver door clicks shut and the messages disappear to leave me in a blank room again with only the timer and rankings.

Her odd behavior is one thing, but it leaves my mind as the fact that she left without much of an overreaction means she most likely wasn't trying to do anything devious. The thing that interests me most as more hours pass in the rejuvenation room is that woman's skill.

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Trax's words about the Apex Region's director and his obsession with healers stick in the back of my mind as I try to piece together this puzzle.

I've come across other healers in my travels through cities when I do broad scans.

While this [Soft Heal] skill is far more efficient than the [Surface Heal], [HP Heal], [Self Heal], and various other lesser healing abilities I've found, it's not like it's a unique or overpowered skill like the [Restore] skill Abby has.

Whatever the Director is looking for here, it's either way over my head and has something to do with this [Soft Heal] skill that I can't understand, or a far more likely option, the director is looking in a totally wrong direction.

Whatever it is, my only hunch on the matter is thousands of kilometers away underground cultivating Qi beneath Valor City... Overthinking this matter any further won't be of use until I can figure out why the director is looking for a healer and what the exact ability is he's looking for.

Until then, I will focus on getting close enough to the higher-ups to actually have the ability to find this information myself.

More hours pass, and eventually the timer on the ceiling hits the 1-hour remaining mark.

While I'm sure most people slept during this time, I sit in silence and wait.

There's another soft ding that breaks my concentration, but this time the text on the ceiling is rather open-ended.

[Prepare to fight. You have 1 hour before the matches begin.]

It flashes a few times, then I feel the entire room move, along with the mechanical moving parts making it seem like the entire room is gliding on a long rail and constantly switching tracks.

The ceiling text disappears, then a large video screen of Rodrigo standing in the center of the circular white room we left 15 hours earlier appears.

However, as it pans up, it's now clear that the ceiling of the room is gone.

It's been replaced by a large blue transparent dome.

There are a few hundred seats surrounding the entire room outside the dome.

The audience seating is split into 8 sections and I see a large throne sitting in the center of each section. There are a few people that I recognize.

Sitting in one golden seat with about a dozen C and B class hunters surrounding it is Brutus, the Vice Region's director. A bright light is showing on him in his Association armor and shimmering rings.

Next to him, less than 20 meters away is another throne made of glossy black rock. Director Maylack, the Director of the Bedrock Region sits there with a few of his B-Class guards and quite a few C-Class hunters.

Across the ring in the curved seating, I even see the green-eyed woman with earth magic from the Talton Region. She sits in a stone throne but has not brought a single guard or hunter with her. The section of the audience around her is empty.

My vision tracks over to an old man with grey hair on a silver throne. He has a strong build and noble stature with similar strength and armor to Brutus. He has over 20 guards around him, and I assume that this is the director of the Veridian Region.

Beside this, about 25 meters away, there is another region. There is a figure in black robes with 6 guards around him in masks and matching dark outfits. I can't see any of their faces, but I assume this is the Phantom Region.

Lastly, on the far edge of the ring there are two more regions.

One Director is a young woman who hovers in the air above a white throne with wind magic, while the regional throne beside them is less than 10 meters away. It is led by a young man flickering with fire.

Each of them has about 10 C-Grade guards around them.

These are the Silca and Raya Regions. From the way they're positioned so close together in the seating, it seems like they're one. However, there is a clear distinction between their clothing, and there are two thrones.

I cannot definitively tell which region is which.

To my surprise, there is no throne for the Apex Region visible either.

The positioning of the camera pans back down to Rodrigo who stands in the center of the room.

"Attention, applicants. The 4th Stage of this year's B-Class exams will begin shortly."

He pauses, and the screen on the ceiling of my room splits in half to show the ranking again as he continues.

"We will be holding a tournament to display each individual hunter's strengths and weaknesses in a solo match environment."

The ranking boards with all the individual hunters' names start to move around and form groups of two. Their faces show up next to their number in a long line.

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[1][66], [2][65], [3][64], [4][63], [5][62], [6][61], [7][60], [8][59], [9][58], [10][57], [11][56], [12][55], [13][54], [14][53], [15][52], [16][51], [17][50], [18][49], [19][48], [20][47], [21][46], [22]

[45], [23][44], [24][43], [25][42], [26][41], [27][40], [28][39], [29][38], [30][37], [31][36], [32][35], [33][34]

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It seems the lowest rated applicants are matched up with the highest.

Only one line comes up from each pairing and it leads to two new blank spaces where the line from another pairing meets.

The winner of each match moves on, making the chart look like a pyramid.

There is a single blank space left for the pairing of two at the top of the chart for a final event.

This will allow for the highest-rated hunters to make it to the later rounds and won't have the most intense matchups first.

This means it's already skewed in favor for the higher ranked hunters to do well in the tournament. Middle-ranked hunters will be the only ones fighting fair matches, at the start at least.

This works in my favor so I don't mind much.

My eyes scan the numbers as Rodrigo continues to speak and explain.

"You will be fighting in 2-minute rounds. The winner will be decided by death or verbal submission."

He smirks and holds up a pendant.

"Of course, you will be given a protection item that ensures your safety. This is given to make sure no valuable Association hunters are unnecessarily killed, but also to make sure you don't hold back and show us everything you've got."

He points up to the circular seating that wraps around the mana-shielded fighting pit.

"If both parties are still standing after the 2 minutes are up, our 7 Regional Directors will vote on a winner."

The camera pans up even further to show a solid black box with no doors or windows floating in the sky above the dome.

"-And of course, our very own Apex Region is overseeing the event itself."

The video view pans back down to Rodrigo and he continues.

"Every round you continue to fight will affect the live ranking on your wristband. If you win a match against an opponent of a higher ranking than your own, this will allow you to rise in the ranks. However, if you defeat an opponent at a far lower rank than your own, it won't affect your own ranking at all."

He pauses and smiles.

"With that being said, all of the rankings are weighted. So, the stronger the opponent you managed to defeat, the more it will affect both of your scores following the match."

He nods and waits in silence again before continuing.

"This 4th stage may be the final step in this year's B-Class exams for some of you, as only the top 20 will be moving on to the final stage of the exams."

He steps forward and places a hand in the air.

"However, if you fail to reach this goal, your journey in the hunter world does not end here today. This is an opportunity for all of you to grow and make connections with all of the Great Regions, not just the ones you came to represent. Every Regional Director here will be watching you perform. If your abilities and style suit their needs, they may send private contracts to whoever catches their eye as long as Apex Region deals are not already in place with the applicant in question."

The video zooms out again to get the Regional Directors in shot again.

"With that being said, the prize for today's tournament, for those who believe they have a shot at winning it all, will be awarded a B-Class License no matter their results during the 5th stage, and in addition to this, a guaranteed lifetime contract with any region you desire. This includes a seat on the board of contracted Apex B-Class hunters, and extends to every region here tonight."

My gaze tightens at this statement, as this prize seems like it's meant for the Apex Elites to win no matter what and receive their B-Class ID anyway, but it is still great incentive for other regions to give it their all.

Rodrigo smiles and the split screen shifts to show the first matchup in the tournament event with a large timer counting down the minutes.

"Applicants, make sure to stock up on all of the gear you have available to you in your rejuvenation rooms. Any magic items you've brought with you today are fair play. These matches will be simulating real-life or death situations. Your opponents may not always be monsters with solved ways of defeating them, you will have to know how to react to situations well within the unknown too."

A small circle in the floor of the room pops out and a silver pendant on a black string comes out with it.

"Please, place on your respawn items and prepare for the tournament to begin. Once it is your turn to fight, your door will open."

I take the small silver necklace and appraise it to find [Rodrigo's Silver Amulet] as its name. It is very similar to the item that was used during the C-Class exams, imbued with the A-Class hunter's respawn skill.

I know it works, I've seen it in action before. When the hunter wearing the item hits a low enough HP threshold, they will be sent back to a set location away from danger and with restored health. However, I know the previous version of this item had its faults. They may have fixed it for a large event like this one, but I'm definitely not going to trust my life to a magic item not made by myself or tested very carefully. I'm only wearing it for show.

I place the necklace on and the visual of Rodrigo disappears, leaving only the tournament chart of future matches on the ceiling screen and a timer ticking down the remaining minutes before the first match.

Once the timer reaches five minutes remaining, I begin to feel the room around me shift and rotate. The ceiling lights up green with a new message telling all applicants to move to the front half of their rooms and equip all items necessary to fight.

I do as it says, and a wall comes out of the floor, cutting the room in half and leaving me staring at the silver door.

Soon after, the mana shielding around the front half of the room falls away, revealing heavy-duty glass imbued with the same blue mana as the shielding that makes up the dome.

Even the silver door fades away into a semi-transparent material.

As I look around, the walls of the fight area are all made of the same see-through substance. Behind every door, there is another applicant in an identical room, ready to fight.

The timer counting down hits zero, and a new timer floats in the air, set at two minutes, while two doors of applicants open up.

Once they both step out, the two-minute timer begins. However, it is paused at [00:01:58] after a bright flash of lightning fills the arena.

Rodrigo's voice fills the room.

"In the fight between applicant 1 and applicant 66, Trax, from the Apex Region, has moved on to the next round!"

There are a few laughs that ring out from the audience above, but the next match starts almost immediately after, and the same result occurs.

The clock is stopped mere seconds after it starts, following a massive blue flash of mana and a barrage of water jets.

"In the fight between applicant 2 and applicant 65, Callum, from the Apex Region, has moved on to the next round!"

The following two rounds are the same as a fire and wind user from the Apex Region both demolish their opponents in seconds.

Then, my turn comes, and the transparent mana shield door opens up to put me in the fight ring with applicant 62.

He's sweating all over and holding a long silver sword along with armor that I'm positive came from the resting room rack that we were both just offered items from.

He's level 516, and on his wristband, I see he's from the Raya Region.

I let out a sigh and pull my daggers from my waist, sending a single crescent of lightning magic his way faster than he can see.

It collides with his midsection before he can even block it, and the timer above our heads stops as a flash of white light teleports him away.

"In the fight between applicant 5 and applicant 62, Ray, from the Bedrock Region, has moved on to the next round!"

At this announcement, I feel many eyes from the audience above turn to look at me as I walk back to my transparent room.

Director Maylack is smiling wide and clapping for my victory while the Vice and Veridian Directors both look at each other, then stare at my back until I'm in my room again.

The tension clears once the next match begins.

It's over very quickly just like the others.

It takes no time at all to make it to Ember's match.

"In the fight between applicant 9 and applicant 58, Emrie, from the Bedrock Region, has moved on to the next round!"

The same reaction takes place when he wins his match in a single punch of hot fire.

While these matchups are very unfair, placing the strongest against the weakest to start, this blue barrier still allows for hunters outside the ring to feel the power of mana being used inside.

Although they aren't full fights, every match right now is giving both the Regional Directors and all the other fighters in the tournament a taste of what they can do.

The only notable matches I see next are the two Vice Region fighters ranked 10 and 11; they too quickly dispatch their enemies.

A few more matches go by until Marcie wins hers too without any issue. At slot 13, she faces one of the remaining Bedrock applicants at rank 54 and finishes the match with a single strike of her spear.

Dane at 16 defeats 51 with ease, but the two have an actual exchange of blows. The match takes over 20 seconds to complete.

He's up against one of the members from the Phantom Region.

Using an extreme speed skill along with advanced wind magic and many speed and perception-boosting items, the applicant dressed in black robes is quite the tough adversary.

The two of them fly around the dome and send wind slashes at each other, but Dane's extreme-grade skill along with slightly higher mana control allows him to win the battle by pure strength.

His wind blades shatter the Phantom Region applicant's blades every time they collide, and eventually, he lands a few clean shots that bring him the victory.

Even so, as he walks back to his room, he is breathing quite heavily.

There's a single region clapping for him as Rodrigo announces him as the victor.

It is the young woman that sits on the white throne. Before, I couldn't tell if she was the Director of the Raya Region or Silca, but if she's rooting Dane on, then my guess is this woman is the Director of the Silca Region.

As I observe her much closer, her eyes, hair color, and facial features share traits with Dane, but it must be a coincidence.

Before I think of this too much, the next match begins, and applicant 17 defeats 50, another applicant from the Phantom Region in a match that also takes more than just a single blow.



Their brawl goes similarly, with 17 just scraping out a victory because of a difference in mana control and element strength.

The next match is 18 vs 49, and the outcome that takes place is not what I expected.

Applicant 49 is from the Phantom Region, just like the last two fighters; however, he doesn't have an elemental skill.

When I look at his status, all I see is one called Shadow Step, and it's legendary grade.

When the match begins, he lunges forward with a black sword in hand, then disappears right before 18 lands his attack. The Ice mage in the ring is a strong fighter from the Veridian Region that carries large white ice-imbued axes.

If the man in black robes was hit with the attack that was hurtling toward him, he would have been killed on the spot...

However, he's nowhere to be found.

The audience goes silent for a moment, and the ice mage looks around the ring, waiting for the announcer to call out his name as the winner.

It looks as if this fighter was teleported away, possibly the teleportation magic was just not present or masked by his black robes.

Many theories are thought of, but when he reappears behind the ice mage and shoves his black sword through the hunter's back, thrusting upward to eliminate him on the spot in a flash of white light, the audience realizes what has happened.

He puts his sword back in its sheath and bows, then walks back to his room as Rodrigo announces him as the winner of this match.

No one claps, not even his own Regional Director. Although, I do see him give a subtle nod of approval.

The room is eerily silent until the next match begins.

Natalie walks into the white arena in new armor from the preparation room, along with two silver daggers in her hands.

Number 48, her opponent, is another applicant from the Phantom Region.

All four of them are right next to each other in ranks.

Given their abilities so far, it seems like they did very poorly on the written exam, decent on the physical, and all shared the same score for the simulation trials as they are clumped together here.

However, their fighting capabilities are far higher than their base rank shows.

Natalie is the opposite. Her knowledge in the written exams and contribution as a healer during the simulation trials is what brought her rank up so far.

The worried expression on her face shows that she is thinking exactly the same thing.

In a battle of pure strength and mana control, she has no chance of winning and moving on.

After the verbal disagreement she had with Trax before this tournament even started, her losing a match like this will only add fuel to the fire.

I do a quick scan of both of them as they face each other in the ring. The Phantom Region applicant has mana control higher than Nat's, and even an advanced earth element skill that will make for even more of a tactical advantage.

He uses an earth-imbued longsword, and all of his dark robes are imbued with speed and agility buffs just like the other applicants from this region.

The match begins, and as he sprints forward, it's clear that Natalie is most likely going to lose this fight.

There's a bright clash of mana and stone as they collide in the center of the ring, and the earth sword clashes with Nat's enchanted silver daggers.

She manages to block the first incoming strike but is blown flying backward by its force to slam back-first into the side of the ring against a random transparent door about a dozen rooms away from me.

She coughs up blood but gets to her feet in time to see the earth user ruthlessly coming in for another attack.

My eyes wander around the ring, and I see all of the Apex Elites watching the match with their arms crossed and smug looks on their faces.

Their internal affairs have nothing to do with me, and as much as I want to see Nat win and rub it in their faces, I whisper to myself and try to think about the situation harder. "Does it really matter if she wins or loses...?"

In the same instance, Nat is hit with another heavy slash from the earth user, only one of her daggers manages to land a clean block, allowing his sword to slide by and rip a gash through her side.

Blood stains the white floor as she jumps away to dodge his second incoming strike in the same motion.

Her eyes are still sharp and her breathing is heavy.

Nat grips a dagger with one hand while dropping the other and using her now free palm to heal up her side to make sure at least the bleeding slows before anything else.

She could surrender at any time, but is still looking for a way to fight back.

The muffled yell of Trax comes from behind his transparent door as the direction Nat managed to flee from her attacker is right in front of his room.

"You'll lose. Ha! You'll lose to a lesser region. And you'll drop below ranking 20! Once I win this tournament and get a place on the Apex's B-Class board, I'll make sure you never get your license no matter how many times you reapply."

As he taunts her, another earth-magic-filled slash comes toward her, and with only one dagger to block, she's hit again in the side and her previous wound opens up while another is created.

Trax laughs and yells out as she flees again.

"And after today's showing, the Veridian Region will never take you back either! This is what you get for betraying the Apex Elites!"

She grits her teeth and tries to heal up both of the wide-open wounds in her stomach with one hand, but it isn't enough.

Nat has to use both hands to stop the bleeding before it's too late and is completely unarmed for the attack that flies at her next.

Even now, she stares the sword covered in earth magic down without fear, but I'm certain this hit will end the match.

Even if her stare looks like it's full of resolve, there's nothing she can do, and she knows it.

After thinking about Trax's words for a moment, and considering the prize of this tournament, a plan begins to formulate in my head.

It includes securing a future trade partnership with the Veridian region and at the same time will bring me one step closer to figuring out what really goes on within the higher ups of the Apex Region.

To follow it out, Natalie can't lose this fight...

So, I make the decision to open my telepathy link from across the ring and send her a message.

"Listen to me very carefully. If you want to win, you're going to have to do exactly what I say."

Chapter 543

Nat's eyes widen once she hears a foreign voice in her head, but she takes in a gasp of air and I continue talking to her before too much time passes.

"I can grant you the power to win, but you're going to have to put your full trust in me. Focus. To win this battle, you must visualize me as your leader and recite these words."

Nat grits her teeth, conceptualizing the situation in slow motion, nodding while I tell her what to say. The words that travel through our link are words I didn't imagine I'd be saying during my time in the Apex Region, but when an opportunity like this makes itself known, I can either take the risk or lose the chance.

Her eyes widen more as she hears the order I've given, then replies through our link while she gets stabbed through the gut by an earth-imbued sword.

"Whoever you are... If this is true, I would do anything to win. I swear my loyalty to you, The Flame Emperor, grant me power, please help me..."

Blood gushes out from her mouth as she attempts to heal her wounds and get away from the attacker.

Nat's eyes are filled with fear as her health drops dangerously close to the respawn trigger threshold.

Trax's laugh echoes through the arena as the floor becomes stained red with blood.

Nat mana-steps toward my transparent door as the earth user from the Phantom Region follows her while charging up a final strike to kill.

I speak through the link again.

"Out loud... Yell it out for all to hear. Give me your trust and you'll make it home to the Veridian Region. I promise you that."

She coughs up blood to clear her throat, then does as I wish, yelling out for the whole arena to hear with tears in her eyes.

"Flame Emperor! I swear my loyalty to you! Grant me power... The power to win!"

While this isn't what it would take to actually create a link of loyalty, a simple verbal acknowledgment or even a strong bond of trust is usually enough to make the connection; I need something more for Nat's link to trigger in such a short amount of time.

A much more simple display could have been done, even her whispering under her breath, but I want all attention to be on her once the link is created.

The more flashy and dramatic the better.

As a notification rings and our link of loyalty forms, my eyes sparkle with excitement.

I take a deep breath and begin mentally activating portions of my Rising Emperors Domain's interface to grant her 5% of all my base stats, 1% of my mana control, and the ability to now use extreme fire summoning.

A full 10% of everything isn't necessary. The mana control I've shared is already overkill.

The fire magic touch isn't needed either, but if eyebrows are already being raised, I might as well give them something to look at.

The arena goes silent as Natalie's echoing yells cease and the only thing remaining is the earth blade aimed straight for her heart.

It collides with the silver lightweight armor chest plate she took from the resting room and melts through the metal like butter.

However, at the same time, she feels a warm surge of intense energy fill her body.

Billions of MP worth of mana control energy enter her bloodstream, and her proficiency with shielding increases by over 1000% in a matter of milliseconds.

Her baseline stats all raise a noticeable amount and are multiplied by the full set of gear she has on.

Nat's perception of the entire arena changes.

With this added level of mana control coursing through her, she mana-steps out of the way before the tip of the blade can touch her skin.

She can feel each individual mana particle floating through the ring.

Her breaths in and out feel deeper, and she can instinctually formulate entire battle strategies before she even breathes in again.

The white-haired healer places both her hands on her stomach, healing all of her injuries on the surface while turning her gaze to see one of her daggers on the blood-stained ground less than 10 meters away.

Her steps feel both light and filled with new limitless power.

Before the earth magic user can even turn to attack again, she's already picked up her knife and turned in the air to make a counterattack.

Mid-air, while pushing the blade in her grasp forward at her attacker's head, fire begins to flicker in her eyes.

Every mana-step she takes forward begins to pulse red and grow in brightness.

By the time the silver blade in her hand makes contact with the Phantom Region applicant's forehead, her steps are flickering with flames, and the blade she carries erupts into a massive dark red ball of fire.

As she follows through and slashes downward, the white transportation magic of the item around the man's neck activates, and he disappears from the ring.

At the same instant I see him disappear, I deactivate my buff and take all of the stat enhancements and shared skills away from Natalie, and she falls to the floor panting as the mana-imbued flames in the air dissipate to leave the healer lying in a pile of her own blood in the center of the ring.

No applicants say a word.

Everyone stares at the scene in the arena with disbelief.

Even the regional leaders are surprised to see what happened.

The Vice and Veridian Region Directors both stand up from their thrones to step forward and get a closer look into the ring.

After over 10 full seconds of silence pass, whispers begin to build up.

Not only between the applicants surrounding the ring, but also the directors and their guests.

No one understands what they just witnessed.

Even as Rodrigo announces Natalie as the winner, I can hear in his tone that he too has no clue how this match turned around so quickly for such an explosive victory.

Nat manages to get up off the floor and heal herself enough to walk slowly back to her room.

The most entertaining expression in the arena is Trax's face, baffled by this display, with his mouth wide open.

Rodrigo senses the tension and speaks up before announcing the next event.

"Today is a trial to show off our abilities. Remember, applicants, there are no rules to this tournament. You may use whatever powers are at your disposal. Magic amplifiers, cursed items, and especially hidden abilities like the one shown here in the last round. Anything goes, remember, you are fighting for your future! Only 12 of you will become B-Class hunters this year. Give it everything you have."

While he does this, the arena is cleaned by a pair of Apex Region workers.

Chatter begins to spread between everyone, and I feel my telepathy link with Ember open next.

"Are you sure that was a good idea?"

I stare forward, watching the men wipe away Nat's blood, and reply.

"Helping her win, yes, that is a good idea. Having all 8 regions hear the name of the Flame Emperor in broad daylight, on the other hand..."

I let out a sigh, looking over to Nat's room, then up at the black box above this dome. Then continue my reply to Ember.

"Well, it's neither good nor bad yet, it's just what has been done. I was planning on making an expansion out of the Dark Continent sooner or later... Might as well get people accustomed to this name and power now. It's not like I'm showing my face, I'm just giving them a teaser. Those who are not truly strong will fear unknown and unpredictable outcomes... My plan is now set in motion."

I cross my arms and grin while staring up at the Apex Region black box in the sky while the 7 regions below continue to discuss this round's events and make theories of everything they just witnessed.

The leaderboards have information on each hunter's skills, Natalie's says nothing about possessing any fire abilities and this is what makes her prayer to summon this power all the more mystifying.

While Rodrigo announces the next match, chatter dies down, and I share my mythic grade self-regeneration skill with Natalie next. It has passive properties to heal fatigue and minor injuries even if the user is not consciously using it.

I don't say a word as she's sat in the middle of her room staring down at her hands.

After a few seconds, once I see the color come back in her face, I deactivate my buff and take the skill off of her status while opening another link.

"You did well."

Her eyes open wide and I can tell she wants to look my way but doesn't.

I reply before she does.

"You can ask me as many questions as you want once this is all over. I don't know your situation, and you surely do not know mine. However, I have a hunch becoming a B-Class hunter will solve a lot of your problems."

She still stares at the ground when she replies,

"Yes. It would."

"Good. I get you a B-Class license, and you show me around the Veridian Region after the exam is over... and it goes without saying you will never speak a word of how you received this power, understood?"

I see a smile come across her face as she stands to her feet and watches the next match start.

"Understood."

Chapter 544

All of the matches in the first round finish before the hour is up.

The rankings get closer to even as the matches go on, so many of the final battles are evenly matched and take up the entirety of the 2-minute timer.

Once the 33 vs. 34 match comes to an end with 33 winning in the last 10 seconds, the leaderboard screen shows up projected on the top of the blue mana dome.

There are 33 applicants left, so the scoreboard shifts and creates a brand new matchup between the two lowest-ranked fighters. Rodrigo announces a final match to finish round 1.

This is between fighter 33, who just won, and the fighter ranked 32.

There were 66 applicants at the start of this trial, meaning in the second round there are 33 left.

If the event organizers were to just allow 1 applicant to move on without fighting because of the odd number of matches, round 3 would be filled with 17 fighters, making there an odd number continuously.

The best way to make things fair is to have an extra elimination match this round.

The match is close, but fighter 32 wins in the last 20 seconds of their long brawl.

He walks back to his room, and the final matchups for the second round begin to shape up.

All the fighters that defeated hunters at a higher rank than their own had their rank changed in real time.

The most noticeable shift is that Phantom Region fighter who was in the high 40s last round but moved up to slot 27 in just a single victory.

Those that lost to fighters with lower ranks than them fall in rating too.

The next round's matchups move around to make some of the matches far more fair.

It's not only low vs. high this time around; it looks as if someone is pulling the strings to create exciting matchups for this event.

Once the rounds start, this rank movement becomes far more apparent.

One of the first matches in this event is Ember against an Apex Region applicant ranked number 4.

He puts on quite the fight, battling against an extreme wind magic user over level 680.

Wind blades and fireballs fill the dome, but after a full minute of battling back and forth, Ember squeezes out a victory.

His speed and power during this event reached peaks equivalent to the highest skill we showed off during the simulation trials.

With mana control and speed peaking around that of a 750-800 hunter, the match finishes with Emrie Carter being announced as the winner.

The Apex Region's applicant falls down 1 slot in the ranking, hitting position 5, and in turn moving me up to the 4th slot without even taking part in the fight.

Ember moves up two rankings for his victory, hitting the 7th slot while there are loud claps and cheers coming from the Bedrock Region as he walks back into his room.

Dane is matched up against a similarly strengthened opponent as he fought in the previous round, defeating fighter number 31 in under 15 seconds.

Marcie also has an easy time taking out number 22 in her match, finishing the round in 4 solid blows without being struck even once.

Natalie's picture matches up with a hunter ranked 28 from the Raya Region.

It seems like many of these matches are far more fair than the earlier round one matchups. As insurance during her fight, I still use my ranked-up buff to share 5% of my base stats but lower the mana control I share down to 0.25%.

It's more than enough for her to have the advantage during the fight.

While many hunters present are waiting to see her fiery display like last round, I decide not to give her this skill and let the audience believe this is her natural state.

She keeps the round going for over a full minute before finally ending it in a flash of white light.

I can see the Regional Directors watching with much more interest, but they seem disappointed when her massive burst of power like last time isn't shown.

I smile inwardly, whispering to myself, knowing they'll get what they're looking for soon.

"Patience..."

A few rounds after this, I have my own battle against the 3rd ranked fighter from the Apex Region.

He's an ice mage that uses two longswords to fight. His armor is all specially ice imbued and crafted by a specialist.

Once we enter the ring, he wastes no time before running forward and freezing the entire floor of the arena in an icy covering.

I jump in the air, filling my feet with lightning, and dodge his attacks for over 30 seconds while letting him get more and more comfortable getting closer to me.

This fighter is very strong. With strength, power, and mana control rivaling that of a level 800 to 850 monster.

Given the speed and power I've shown in all of the previous trials and stages of this exam, I really shouldn't be able to beat him.

Using lightning in my footsteps and boosting my mana control just slightly, I manage to become agile enough to dodge all of his slower-moving long-range attacks without showing off mana control or abilities too far out of reason.

My long-range attacks are all dispelled by sheets of ice every time I send them out, but I find that every time he gets close enough to me to try and send fatal blows my way he leaves a weak spot open near the back of his left knee.

When following through with his swings, he also leaves a small opening in his armor near his right shoulder too.

After a few exchanges, I decide to act on this weakness.

While I could fake the activation of my ranked-up buff, I want to save that for a future round.

As my dagger slashes through his knee and shoulder, I let surges of electricity rattle through his body, narrowly missing his right ice sword's swing by less than 3 millimeters from my neck.



I laugh while lightning stepping up to the top of the dome and dodging his counterattacks.

They're even slower than before, and once we exchange more near misses and he goes in for another fatal strike, I'm able to pinpoint his weakness even easier.

There's another yell as his insides are cooked and his respawn item is triggered, leaving me in an icy ring with Rodrigo yelling my name out as the victor.

I slowly walk back to my room while my ranking moves up to [3] and the Bedrock Region's cheers echo through the room.

There is only one more notable fight that I witness before this second round is over.

It's the man from the Phantom Region that has that very odd skill called shadow step.

He's faced up against the rank 10 applicant from the Vice Region.

The water wielder has an enchanted blade that I created for him, one of the strongest artifacts in this entire tournament.

I'm very surprised when I see the man in black robes disappear from everyone's eyes the moment the water swordsman swings his blade.

The same exact scenario plays out as the last match with this Phantom Region applicant in it...

He reappears right behind him, stabbing him in the back with his blade and thrusting upward to finish the match in just a few seconds.

The Director from the Phantom Region gives him another nod of approval as his ranking moves up to the 20th slot.

The man from the Vice Region falls to 13th place, and from this movement, Marcie automatically gets pushed up in the rankings to 12th.

Rodrigo announces the winner, then shows the matchups for the next round of this event with only 16 applicants remaining.

There are four notable matchups this round.

Dane faces the healer tank from the Vice Region.

Their skill levels are nowhere near equal.

While Dane is capable of maneuvering away from the tank's attacks, the large man pulls out a hammer with multiple high-level enchantments that easily dispel every wind attack Dane throws in.

The wind mage plays on the defensive for a majority of the match.

I consider giving him a boost in power, just like Natalie, but hold off.

Dane is ranked 15. Even if he loses this match, there's no way he could fall below the 20th rank no matter how many more matches pass.

As a matter of fact, all 16 applicants left now are in the top 20. No wins or losses will push anyone out of the exams, everyone is just fighting now for a chance at winning first place in the tournament.

I allow the match to go on as intended.

In the final 15 seconds, Dane gets desperate and uses his ranked-up buff, manifesting a massive wind blade, but at the same time, the tank activates his own ranked-up buff too and creates a white glowing shield around himself that deflects the attack.

Seconds before the timer hits 0, the Tank jumps in the air for the first time and lands a single deadly attack with immense speed that wasn't shown previously. Before, he was just playing defense. This attack makes direct contact with Dane's chest and he's eliminated in a flash of white light instantly.

After this match, surprisingly, both the Raya and Silca Region's directors stand up to give an applause of respect to Dane for making it this far.

Marcie has a very tough match too.

She faces the water wielder from the Vice Region for whom I made the water armor.

Its design is very similar to the set of armor she wears.

Their defenses are equal, but the armored fighter from the Vice Region doesn't have a weapon as powerful as Marcie's spear.

She slowly tears away at the fighter's HP with very strategic blows. It takes over 45 hits, and she too is hit a few times by his counters, but almost 5 times less. The battle finishes with a flash of white light, and Marcie is declared the winner. She moves up to rank 11 after this victory.

After Ember's tough matchup in the last round, he's given a far easier opponent this time, a random Veridian Region applicant ranked 16th.

He doesn't hesitate to take him out in a series of blows, finishing the match in under 5 seconds.

Nat gets an opponent of similar strength.

One of the Vice Region Applicants made it to 17th place; however, this is the strongest opponent she's faced all night.

Just like the previous match, all eyes are on her.

To prepare, as she walks into the ring, I match the power I shared with her in her first match, and even give her fire summoning, but give her instructions to follow out.

As the two applicants are left in the ring, they slowly walk toward each other.

I can see the fear on the Vice Region applicant's face as he walks forward.

Then, Nat looks to the sky and whispers under her breath.

The moment she looks back down at her opponent and the timer of the match begins, fire starts to flicker in her eyes and gasps fill the arena again as everyone witnesses the flames creep down her arms and into her daggers.

Nat's mana control increases at a rapid rate, and her aura spreads throughout the ring, sending a wave of warning through her opponent.

Less than a second later, a yell comes from the applicant across the ring.

"I-I give up- I surrender- I'm not risking my life against a possessed fighter! I don't want anything to do with this Flame Emperor!"

He kneels on the ground and puts his hands in the air.

"I'm already into the next round- There's no point in fighting a demon like this...."

Nat smirks and her flames disappear as the man is automatically teleported away from admission of defeat.

While Natalie walks back to her room, there are many mixed reactions from the hunters and even regional directors.

Some are still mesmerized by this power, while others are angry and are starting to think it's all just a trick.

These seeds of doubt are most likely coming from the angry yells pouring out of the number [1] rated room with Trax in it from across the ring.

"She's a fraud! Don't fall for her illusions! So what if she won in the first round, that guy was ranked in the 40s, of course, she'd beat him! That last round too, you saw she took almost the whole two minutes to win, she didn't even use this so-called Flame Emperor's power. You're giving in to her tricks! She's fooling you all!"

These words are echoed and repeated throughout the ring, even people in the audience begin to discuss if what they saw in that first round was real or not.

Once she's back in her room, Rodrigo's voice rings out.

"Well, it seems we have some rumors going around about our applicants..."

He turns down to the lightning user that said these statements.

"That's enough. Let the fights speak for themselves. We will all know soon enough if these powers are real or just an illusion as you say."

There are 3 matches already made for the next round.

Natalie is already set to go against one of the remaining Apex Region fighters that was on the team of 6 in the simulation trials.

Ember is set to fight the 2nd ranked fighter, Callum.

Marcie is facing the healer tank that eliminated Dane this round.

Then lastly, Trax's name is all alone, waiting for the winner of this round's final match to move up on the chart to face him.

The final matchup is [3] vs. [20], me and the disappearing man from the Phantom Region are up next.

The door to my room opens and I walk out into the empty ring, taking out my lightning-filled daggers and pointing them straight ahead at the man in black robes that has won every match up until now in a single strike.

Whoever wins this matchup will be facing the number [1] ranked Apex Elite in the next round.

Chapter 545

The match starts, and I point my lightning daggers forward and wait for any sign of the applicant from the Phantom Region to activate their skill.

Every time this man disappeared in the previous matches, it was right after his opponent attacked.

I can feel his mana control, and it's nearing that of a level 700. I witnessed him defeat an opponent from the Vice Region stronger than himself in seconds.

I'm confident whatever skill he's using will have no effect on me; however, I do want to know how it works...

We both stand in silence, eyeing each other down for a full five seconds.

I even do an appraisal on his black sword, but it's nothing more than a 120% Strength and 110% Speed enchantment.

He stares forward at me from behind his black mask. All I can see are his dark eyes waiting for me to make a move.

I whisper under my breath.

"Alright, I'll humor you... Let me see that skill of yours..."

I run forward to mimic the other attacks I saw him defend earlier, and just before my dagger hits him, the same phenomenon occurs.

He disappears from my vision, and less than a tenth of a second later, appears right behind my back with his sword pushing forward to kill.

If I were to only use the perception of the hunter Ray Anderson, I'd be killed by this attack in an instant.

I didn't even see him move...

This is because he didn't move around me at all. Upon activation of his skill, this hunter really disappeared. He teleported from in front of me to right behind me, mere millimeters away from my heels.

While I could turn around and block this attack on the spot with the milliseconds I have left, there's a more believable move to make.

I power up my lightning magic and sprint forward using speed nearing that of a level 800-850 hunter.

My body crackles with lightning, and in my split-second decision, the hunter's black blade slices through the illusion of the cloak that I'm wearing.

The crowd of remaining applicants, and some of the guests from the seven regions, begin to chatter amongst themselves as I narrowly miss this attack and turn toward the black swordsman again.

I grin and point my daggers at him.

"Neat trick... But I think I'm a little too quick for you."

In all honesty, I think it is a useful ability. The only downside of it is that my reaction time is far faster than any average elite hunter. Even if he were to use that skill on a hunter with the mana

control and speed I just showed, it's doubtful they could have reacted in time. That is, unless they were double ranked up or have some speed based ranked up buff.

I hear a grunt come from the man, as he is probably thinking the same thing.

It's far more clear how he defeated those earlier applicants with such ease now.

I take a step forward and get ready for our second exchange.

This time, I send long-range lightning crescents his way, not wanting to do the same thing twice.

Every time the yellow static attacks get close, the man disappears and reappears about a meter away, narrowly missing getting sliced in two.

After I send out about half a dozen crescents and watch him dodge them all, I figure out how his skill works.

The only thing left behind every time he disappears is the dark absence of light beneath his feet.

It seems as though he can completely vanish and shift his feet positioning anywhere along his shadow.

My eyes track this phenomenon while I continue to throw lightning at him. I even allow him to get closer to me and throw a close-range attack toward him too.

Once my dagger and body are close enough to him, and our shadows from the large light source above meet, he's able to disappear and reappear behind me just like he did in our first exchange.

I charge my body with lightning magic and make a dash forward to dodge his blade again, then let out a sigh.

As much as I really want this skill, right here and now isn't the place to take it.

There are almost a hundred pairs of high-ranking eyes all over me, and the only way for me to take his skill without actually killing him on the spot involves using soul energy and is quite a flashy technique that I can't use without completely blowing my cover.

So, instead, the moment I get far enough away, I let out the most violent display of lightning magic I've shown in this entire event.

It isn't meant as a pure offensive attack; I use it to cast an even light source all throughout the ring.

Then, at the same time, I send a barrage of lightning crescents from my daggers just like I did before when I was testing out his skill.

Without anywhere to run, he realizes that I've discovered his weakness. I see a dark black mist start to seep from his body, most likely the activation of his ranked-up buff, but six crescents of mana-imbued lightning magic make contact with him from every direction before I get to see what he'll do.

A bright flash of white transportation magic fills the ring, and I let my yellow static energy die down to stop the blinding light display.

The Phantom Region Applicant is defeated, but he's in the top20 ranking, so I'll most likely get a chance to face this man again in the 5th stage of the exams.

Rodrigo announces my victory while I slowly walk back to my room, slotting me in the next round of this event to fight the strongest fighter here.

"That's right! The winner is Ray from the Bedrock Region! That means he will be fighting our number one ranked fighter next round! Two lightning users will be facing off next. I, for one, have never seen two people that share this skill ever fight it out, so I'm sure it will be an exciting match!"

He smiles as I walk back into my transparent holding room and continues to speak.

"But first, let's get to the other matches in this upcoming round. Two fighters from the Apex Region will be facing off. Reynard, the Earth Mage, versus Natalie, the healer with newfound power granted to her by a mysterious Flame Emperor. Please, enter the ring!"

The final member of the six-man squad in the simulation trials enters the ring.

He's shaved bald and doesn't talk much.

He wears armor that looks like it's made of stone and carries a longsword on his back that is almost as long as he is tall.

I can feel immense strength and mana control coming off of him, similar to the Ice Mage ranked number three that I fought a few rounds back.

Knowing this, I grant Nat 10% of my base stats, and 2% of my mana control, along with the extreme fire magic for show.

As she walks into the ring to face the huge earth magic wielder in her midst, the rush of power from my buff flows into her, and her timid expression turns to one of determination and confidence.

She grips both of her daggers and yells for the arena to hear the message I whisper in her ear.

"Those who doubt the Flame Emperor's power will not be saved. For what you see now is a mere spark."

The doors close and the timer starts.

Nat's eyes burst with flames, and the red-hot fire gets darker and darker as it travels through her arms and legs.

The only color left in her figure comes from the shiny silver in her daggers and her bright white hair flowing beneath the flames.

The earth swordsman lets out a deep laugh and lifts his blade, forming mana-dense stone all around it while dozens of sharp spears form around his shoulders and over his head.

He swings it downward before Nat even gets within 10 meters of him, and a barrage of earth blades come rushing forward at the healer.

Her flames grow, and her perception of the arena has improved even more drastically than her last matches.

With close to 10 billion worth of mana control experience coursing through her system, fire-stepping through the shards of moving earth is nothing but a graceful movement, as easy as walking in a straight line.

Her daggers imbued with fire collide with stone as she twists and weaves through the flying maze of mana charged rock shards.

Mana explosions fill the entire blue dome with plumes of fire and shards of rock.

Then, there's a collision in the center of the arena that is shielded from everyone's vision.

So much debris flies through the air that it's impossible to see who just killed whom.

Gasps come out of the applicants, and over half of the Directors get up from their seats to move closer to the dome to get a better look.

The Vice, Veridian, Silca, Raya, and Bedrock Region's leaders all are interested in seeing what happened in the results of this match.

Their eyes widen even more when the only person left in the ring once the clouds of mana and fire clear is Natalie, sitting on a pile of rock, twirling her daggers.

I smile and deactivate my buffs while the arena erupts into discussion about her words before the fight.

"After a display like that, it's certain, The Flame Emperor's power is real!"

"I could feel her mana control rise when she spoke his name! This Emperor... they can grant much more than just fire..."

However, there are some skeptics.

"Don't you think it's odd... the only strong fighter she defeated was from the Apex Region too! This could all be a ploy!"

"Yeah, you heard what this year's number one said. It's illusions... they're both in on it..."

Nat walks back to her room while even more questions arise, but Rodrigo calms down the room with a wave of his hands.

"That's enough! Return to your seats! Get ready for our next fighters to face off. The winner of this next match between Emrie from the Bedrock Region and Callum from the Apex Region will decide who faces Natalie, follower of the Flame Emperor, in the semi-finals."

Rodrigo grins as he slips in a nickname to continue stirring the emotions of the crowd.

He looks like he's enjoying himself, because if anyone would know if there were tricks at play, it would be him. I have a hunch the reason he is playing along with my games is because he knows exactly who is causing this havoc.

I cross my arms and look forward to another exciting match as Ember walks into the ring to face the second-ranked applicant, a water mage from the Apex Region. This element is fire's direct weakness, so I'm curious what kind of show he'll put on to make this a convincing fight.

Chapter 546

The fight between Ember and Callum starts off very standard.

Both of them taunt each other at the start, activating their fire and water magic and circling the ring a few times.

Both opponents have seen the other fight in this tournament multiple times already and know the strength levels are higher than any other competitors they've faced so far.

Callum takes out a massive spiked mace imbued with water magic, coating his whole body in a thick mana-imbued layer of blue fast flowing shielding.

Ember stands with his fists flickering with dark flames, and behind his eyes, I see him strategizing how he'll make this a believable show for the people watching.

I send him a wave of telepathy, then cross my arms and get ready for the greatest fight of the day to begin.

"I need you to win this one, but don't make it seem easy. Everyone needs to know he's the best of the best, let the man shine and show off. If he's anything like Trax, he's going to have a ranked up buff reaching levels similar to a double ranked up hunter. It's time for you to use that fake ranked up buff of yours too, show this crowd Emrie Carter's infinite inferno."

A grin grows across Ember's face and a burst of dark flames cover his whole body as a reply to my words.

At the same time, Callum runs forward and swings his mace to create a wave of dense water magic launched at Ember.

Behind it, the water wielder summons dozens of jets of dense water magic to curve around the central attack to make sure he can't dodge in any direction.

The closer the water gets, the hotter Ember's flames begin to grow.

His whole body burns bright, and I feel his mana control and fire output rise near the levels of a double ranked up hunter.

The heat in the ring rises dramatically and as the wall of water collides with Ember, it begins to evaporate into the air.

He jumps upward and punches through every water jet sent his way while moving closer and closer to Callum with every fire-step.

Instead of being surprised or thrown off by this display, Callum jumps upward to meet Ember in the air and activates his ranked up buff as well.

The density of water magic around his body grows to over 3 times what it was moments ago and it compacts into a secure liquid layer of armor around every centimeter of his body including the spiked mace he holds in his grasp.

Loud hums of intense mana vibrate throughout the dome, drowning out the audience's gasps and looks of awe as the most intense powers of today's fights are being displayed before them.

Ember's fist collides with the water-infused mace, and the twang of mana ripples through the air, followed by the eruption of hot steam filling the blue dome.

A series of cracks and vibrations resound from the dome at multiple beats per second as flashes of blue and red light zip around the ring.

Ember's fists collide with the reinforced mace, and the two of them let out auras that increase in intensity as the battle goes on.



While all logic pushes toward the immense amounts of water putting out the raging flames in the ring, the temperature only rises.

Ember incrementally increases his mana control to match the water user's intensity, and everyone's eyes are glued to the epic battle that rages on.

At a certain point, reaching the mana control of level 1100 hunters, surpassing the power I even saw Trax reach earlier today, Callum hits a plateau.

Ember pushes his mana control just 10% higher, and stops there, slowly breaking the water user down, slipping in hits every few exchanges.

Over a minute and a half passes on the battle clock above the dome before the exchanges slow and the mist begins to clear.

While Callum's expression is stern, and he keeps blocking like his life depends on it, the water user's mana stores can't keep up with Ember's near-endless supply.

Both of them are going all out, but Ember's level is nearly 4x Callum's, and his ability to absorb mana from the atmosphere naturally surpasses the water user by a serious degree.

The battle ends as Callum's ranked up buff forcefully deactivates as his mana stores get too low.

Ember sends him away in a fiery punch that triggers the teleportation magic, proving that both opponents have immense strength, but stamina is what decided the end of this battle.

After some matches, there are stares of bad blood, but this one feels very different.

All directors from the 7 Regions surrounding the ring clap out of respect at their performance while Ember walks back to his room and he's announced as the winner.

Many stand up, and even the Phantom Region Director nods and turns to one of the guards by his sides to give them props.

Ember even keeps the show going, pretending to breathe heavily while he walks back to his room and Rodrigo continues hyping up the next fight.

I smile too, as I watch the live leaderboards shift.

Callum drops to 3, while I hit 2 automatically.

Ember jumps up to 5.

The healer tank from the Apex Region and Marcie approach each other in the ring once it's been cleaned of fire residue and excess water leftover from the last match.

This matchup doesn't go quite as I expected or wanted it to, but without a link of loyalty attached to Marcie, there's nothing I can do about it.

The two are evenly matched in strength and speed.

Even their raw mana control is very similar.

The only clear advantage I see at the start of the fight is the strength of Marcie's spear.

It easily makes scratches and dents in the tank's hammer, and even pierces holes through his armor to land solid hits every few attacks.

The only downside here is, every attack that is landed, once the tank manages to take a step back he heals his injured area entirely like it never happened.

The tank manages to land a few heavy blows to Marcie's chestplate too.

It's strong enough to block the attacks, and at most it just pushes her backward from the pure force of the impact.

One of these hits is what took Dane out in the previous round with this healer.

Marcie manages to withstand 5 by the time there are seconds left on the timer, but she's in much worse shape than the healer.

Her breathing is heavy, she's coughing up blood from the impact shockwaves, and even when both of them activated their ranked up buffs for a 30-second all-out battle, they came out on equal footing.

The tank covered its body in a dense white shielding while Marcie's attack power and speed skyrocketed while her mana manipulation skill created a massive pink extension to her spear.

If we hadn't just witnessed the massive display of fire and water the match before, this battle would have been equally as riveting, showing spikes in mana control reaching close to that of level 900-950 hunters at their peaks.

However, once the timer hits 0, both the warriors are left standing and the decision of this match goes to a vote from the Regional Directors.

Marcie is eliminated from the tournament by a 6:1 vote.

The Talton Region's leader votes for her underling, but all of the remaining regions believe that the ability to continue healing as their opponent grows weaker gives the tank from the Apex Region the advantage if this match were to go on.

She's teleported away in a flash of light after this decision and the tank walks back to his room.

I agree with this assessment, but if the two of them were in a real life or death battle outside of this ring, I have a feeling things may have ended differently. I can't quite put my finger on why, but even though this is the highest amount of power I witnessed her use this entire exam period, it felt like Marcie was still holding something back.

Whatever it may be, no one else noticed, and the sound of Rodrigo's voice announcing the next match rings through everyone's ears.

"What an exciting round. Mack will be moving on! Now! The final match to decide who will be fighting this invincible healer tank in the semi-finals..."

The door to my room opens, and I see a door on the other side of the ring open too.

"Please welcome Ray, ranked number 2 from the Bedrock Region, and Trax ranked number 1 from the Apex Region. Two Lightning users at the top of the leaderboards that will be battling it out.... If you thought the matches before this one were intense, I believe you're in for quite the show!"

The doors behind both of us close, and static yellow lightning fills the ring.

I hold my daggers in front of me while Trax points a long yellow sword my way.

His demeanor has completely changed from before or in any of his other matches, he yells across the ring once the 2-minute timer starts.

"It's all because of you. I saw you at the pre-trials... That's where it all began. You're the one pulling the strings. I don't know how you managed to change your written exam scores to climb this high... And the simulation trials, you're just manipulating everyone. No more games. No more fake Flame Emperor Illusions. No more cheats. Just a pure battle. You versus me. This is my day! My exams! You won't ruin this for me, I'll kill you before you even know what hits you."

He runs forward, not wasting any time and activating his ranked up buff, covering his entire body with electricity and moving toward me with the speed of a level 1200 hunter less than 3 seconds into the match.

I don't react until he's cleared over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the distance between us.

Then, I sharpen my gaze and my eyes meet his.

I let over 4 times the mana control surge out from my body and copy his ranked up buff, surrounding myself in a veil of yellow lightning and lunge forward to match his speed.

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My yellow blades clash against his glowing sword of static energy, arcs of electricity filling the blue dome and shifting the color to an eerie light green visible to the audience.

Instead of being surprised like the last time he saw me move at this speed, his expression shifts to a wide smile, with a battle-crazed look in his eyes.

The clang of our blades echoes throughout the ring as we bounce off each other and zip through the air, colliding over ten times a second as more and more static electricity fills the ring.

"So you really are strong! This proves it. Even a backwater region applicant from the bedrock mines can become A-Rank worthy if they have a lightning skill..."

His sword thrusts grow stronger and angrier with every exchange.

Seconds go by, and I don't respond.

While he is leagues below me in strength, and this is nothing more than a spar or an act to me, when dealing with power that reaches above a double-ranked-up hunter, it never hurts to be cautious.

I continue blocking his attacks and matching his exact speed, then he yells out again.

"It's odd... I could have sworn we got rid of you back in the catastrophe... and there was word that the only lightning user in the Vice Region happened to die during the C-Class exams... There wasn't supposed to be any others..."

He grits his teeth and I feel genuine rage surging out through his blade this time as his static energy ripples through my daggers and vibrates through my body.

At these words, as I counter, I consider what he means by this...

Are lightning users really this rare? Every mention of them today has made me think so even more, and the fact that he's quoting events where the only lightning users in the eight regions I know of have died, it only adds to the case.

My expression shifts to one of wonder as I think, but this only pisses Trax off more as the battle continues.

I allow him to push me back and make my movement speed about 10% slower than his, because it seems when he feels he has the upper hand, he keeps running his mouth to leak valuable information.

"Hey! Are you listening to me? Just because you're going to lose this match doesn't mean we're going to ignore all the tricks you've been pulling to make the Apex Region look bad! I told you I'm supposed to be the only lightning user in these exams. The strongest too! It doesn't even matter if you win or lose this match anyway, I have enough points ahead of you that a second place beating me wouldn't even move me down the live rankings! The Apex Director's full attention will be all mine. Still, since you made my life difficult, I'm going to beat you and send you back to the Bedrock Region without a B-Class license once I get on the board!"

As we clash blades again, I decide to activate *lifesteal* and *plunderer* to a very low degree.

It's so slight that he doesn't even notice when he slashes back again and his sword collides with my blades.

"You know what? All of you, your whole little group in those simulation trials! When I make it to first in this tournament and get a say on the board, you'll wish you never even thought about laying a finger on the Apex Region's business."

He smirks and swings his blade down hard again. I block with both my daggers and let him push me from high in the air where we collide all the way down to the shielding at the base of the ring.

It looks as if he's the one doing damage, but we're making contact with our blood-bonded weapons for almost a full half second, and in this time I drain large percentages of MP and HP away from his status masked by the violent releases of lightning magic coming off of both of us.

Only a few seconds have passed in this match so far, but for those who have good enough perception to see what is happening, it is the most dangerous and exciting fight of the whole tournament.

There are only a few Regional Directors and their B-Class subordinates who can truly see the exchanges taking place.

While bright yellow light emerges from the blue dome in a green hue, it looks like a strobe light show to those who aren't powerful enough to perceive the action.

One thing is for sure, the density of the mana auras seeping out from the dome reaches heights higher than anyone else today.

Another full fifteen seconds go by as I continue to absorb the health and mana out of Trax while he believes he's the one wearing me down.

Instead of every twenty shots, I start to let him hit me every fifteen, then ten, then five; but in reality, I'm making contact with him for longer and draining his life force while not showing mana control or speed outside of a believable range.

Meanwhile, his words earlier repeat in my head.

Of course, I don't want him to win this tournament, because giving an unstable power-hungry menace like him a seat of authority can only lead to bad things later down the line.

I've promised the new allies I met in these exams that I'd help them get their hunter IDs, allowing him to win would put that in jeopardy.

However, what Trax said about a second-place applicant not having enough ranking points to push him down in the live leaderboards could be true...

Some hunters didn't move at all when they were defeated by applicants one or two ranks below them.

So, a new plan comes to mind of how I'll move up the leaderboards while still humiliating this arrogant hunter not only here and now but in the finals again even if I'm not the one fighting him.

My main goal in this exam is to get closer to the upper management of the Association. Making it to this B-Class board myself is possibly one way to do it, but hints about this final selection, and training with the Apex Region's director himself, is more appealing to me.

It's just a hunch, but being the number one ranking on the live leaderboard by the end of the exams will probably give me a better shot at receiving this prize than just scoring first place in a single stage.

I let out a laugh as I'm thrown to the ground again by Trax and I drain his HP and MP even further down as he taunts me with meaningless garbage of him being the chosen elite that will lead the new generation of the Association.

By the time another thirty seconds goes by, I'm letting him push me around the ring all he wants, landing every single hit, but his eyes widen once his ranked-up buff automatically deactivates.

The immense static in the ring stops crackling, and fear comes over his face as there is over a minute left on the fight clock, but this hunter has seemingly used up all of his MP.

By the pale look on his face, and slower motions, it's clear I've also drained his HP to below 20%, making it dangerously close to triggering Rodrigo's respawn item.

I deactivate my buff as well, but in a more graceful and controlled manner to make sure he knows I'm doing it on purpose, then point my blades forward.

The static yellow mana in the ring dissipates and it leaves us facing each other just as we were when the match started.

I yell out for the whole arena to hear.

"Would you look at that... The chosen Elite of the Apex Region blew through all of his mana before the match was halfway over... Not much of a genius prodigy are you?"

His eyes widen more and more, then he yells back.

"How? This is impossible! I was winning! I timed my attacks perfectly, I shouldn't have run out for another full two minutes, this... this isn't happening!"

He reaches into a small pouch tucked into the back of his chest plate and pulls out a pink potion, but I activate my fake ranked-up buff again and throw a lightning blade its way, shattering the MP potion in mid-air.

Some of it absorbs into his skin, but it's a few hundred MP at most.

He tries to pull out another, but this time I crush the bottle with even more efficiency and not a drop of the liquid manages to be absorbed.

Trax yells out as I walk closer.

"No! This isn't how it ends! My legacy won't be tainted! I'm the strongest Lightning Mage in the world! I'll win this match... I'll do whatever it takes...."

He stares back at me with an angry gaze still filled with resolve.

I'm unsure why, but it doesn't matter.

To guarantee moving up the leaderboards to reach the first slot, I need someone of a much lower ranking than me to defeat him.

In the next few seconds, once Trax and the whole crowd realize there is no way for him to win, I'll announce that I surrender this match and allow another member of this tournament to finish him off for good in the finals.

I speak up, pointing my daggers forward and crackling head to toe in my fake ranked-up buff.

"Any last words?"

He glares at me and shakes his head.

With the few hundred MP absorbed from the broken mana potion, Trax activates his ranked-up buff again and reaches into his item box a third time.

I catch his movements and throw a blade of lightning toward the MP potion he takes out again just before it reaches his lips and it shatters while being destroyed by the waves of static that rush through it.

However, there is a small red gem in the palm of his hand that I didn't sense him pull out from the item box.

Even now, as he pushes the shiny ruby-like stone into his mouth, I don't perceive any energy coming off of it.

To all of my enhanced perception skills, it just looks like an ordinary red rock.

He swallows it, then I hear a wave of telepathy come from Ember watching from the sidelines.

"Surrender right now. If you attempt to fight him in the form he's about to take, our cover is blown."

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The instant the red gem is swallowed by my opponent, his eyes begin to glow the same crimson shade.

Next, the static yellow energy that surrounds his body shifts to the same shade of red.

It looks extremely disturbing, and even intimidating, but the odd thing is that I can't sense any extra mana coming off of it.

However, with Ember's warning fresh in my ear, now isn't the time to question whether it's dangerous or not to continue fighting him.

I jump back and avoid the red arcs of electricity that start to grow and pulse out of Trax.

A devious grin comes across his face, and when his mouth opens up all that can be heard is a mind bending shriek.

It doesn't even sound human. His body still holds the same form, but the red light coursing through it makes his skin ripple and vibrate.

I yell out while putting my hands in the air, continuing with my original plan while listening to Embers warning.

"That's it. I surrender! Match over! Get me out of here—"

I'm cut off by an extremely large red thunderbolt that travels up Trax's blade and comes shooting toward me with the speed of a level 1400 hunter.

With enough time to see it, I decide to spin out of the way, narrowly avoiding the attack, but the outer bits of the crimson charge nearly hits my left side.

As the red energy whizzes past, I hear a very familiar faint ringing of a bell, and a vibration ripples all around my body as, for a fraction of a second, a small portion of my true mana control leaks out from my divine limiter.

My heart skips a beat at this realization. However, it's unlikely anyone noticed it, considering the main attraction right now is the massive red lightning bolt that narrowly missed me is now piercing through the blue dome at the top of the ring.

I still can't sense a drop of mana within his attack, but it's tearing through the blue barrier around us like butter and surging up high into the air.

Another bolt flies out from his blade at the same speed, hitting the velocity of a 1500 or even 1600 hunter now. His attacks are getting even faster.

I begin to look back and forth for a way to dodge again that seems to be within the realm of possibilities for the level 600 hunter Ray Anderson, but all feasible escape routes from this close-range blast do not seem likely without releasing a noticeable portion of my full power.

Right as I'm about to cause another scene and release enough mana control to dodge this attack, I feel the sensation of two sharp golden eyes staring down on me from above.

I stop what I'm doing as the bottom of the black box with the Apex Region's members inside of it opens up and two beings float out.

The bottom of the box shuts fractions of a second later, and the overwhelming aura that was watching me vanishes. The golden eyes disappear from my senses.

However, there is still a massive red lightning bolt surging my way.

The two figures that float down from the box above catch my attention, and their levels read [Lv. 2759] and [Lv. 2840].

They're both well built middle aged men, and stare down into the ring with bored emotionless expressions. The lower-leveled one wields wind magic along with countless blood-bonded A-Class items, while the higher-level one is a fire user with many enchanted pieces of gear too, rivaling some of the 500-600% enchantments of my own unique items.

Their necks are covered in golden soul energy, and in the blink of an eye, two massive golden orbs are formed around both myself and Trax by each of the men who emerged from the black box.

The soul energy surrounding me is so dense that it feels almost on par with the shielding around the Crimson City.

If I were to release my full power and use my greater form, I could break out of it, but it wouldn't be easy.

Both of them use soul energy from the Sun God that surpasses anything I felt from Rodrigo in our brawl.

It feels very similar to that of the level 3000+ mountain king I battled in the Vice City Labyrinth weeks back.

Despite this surprise, I know that I'm not the threat they're attempting to contain right now.

The shrieks that echo out of Trax become muffled by the orbs of soul energy, but his erratic releases of energy only increase in volume and frequency. The red light in his eyes overtakes him, and it gets so bright that I can't even see his body's outline anymore.

The red lightning bolts collide with the golden soul energy surrounding him, and some even break through the first hunter's orb and scatter in many directions throughout the arena, but the second A-Class hunter contains the weaker releases with large amounts of his golden light.

Many of the arcs of red electricity that break through the first orb collide with the orb that I'm inside, but none of it is strong enough to break through a second time.

Hundreds of violent charges of red energy pour out of Trax, but none of it can be sensed with my perception skills. It just looks like a harmless pretty light show, but I'm positive that these looks are very deceiving.

About 60 full seconds go by as these red charges erupt out of the fighter, and the two A-Class hunters continuously pulse with golden soul energy to contain this blast.

Meanwhile, many B-class Association workers start to mend the blue dome-like barrier around the ring while discussion erupts from the Regional Directors and guest hunters by their sides.

The entire room fills with questions, laughter, streams of excitement, and many hunters leaning in to get a closer look at the action. The talk is not that they're scared of the results; they all want to know what the powers they're seeing in front of them are and many want to try whatever that red gem was for themselves.

It's hard to make out exactly what they're saying, as the dense golden soul energy around me acts as a noise and energy suppressor.

All I can do is wait and watch the red energy bursting out of Trax wear down and stop after about 90 seconds pass.

Once it does, he collapses onto the arena floor, and the two A-Class hunters glide upward while taking away the golden soul energy barriers.

They float back up and out of the large hole in the top of the blue dome, then the opening in the black box allows them to go back inside.



The dangerous golden eyes I felt before aren't there. Whatever was watching the match with such intensity before has lost interest.

The doors shut, and Rodrigo yells out like nothing out of the ordinary happened.

"The winner by verbal submission of this match is Trax, from the Apex Region! Congratulations, you will be moving on to fight Mack the battle healer in the next semi-final round! However, we will have a quick intermission while our shielding dome is repaired."

I watch Trax cough and shake while he pushes himself up off the ground slowly.

There are small wisps of red light coming from his mouth and eyes, but it dissipates quickly, and it's clear that all the power from that display has left his body. His movements and mana control aura feel human again.

Then, I feel the respawn item around my neck begin to rattle and pulse with energy.

Moments later, after a flash of white light, I find myself in a white room with 15 other people.

There's clear mana reinforced glass in front of me, and about 200 meters away, looking down from above the makeshift stadium, I see exactly where I was just fighting.

On the other side of the ring, I see another box similar to this one with about 40 other applicants in it; they all look down on the match too with similar looks of awe.

Dane's voice hits my ear as I watch Trax walk back to his room in the ring.

"I thought you had him there. I've never seen a fight like that!"

The wind user from the Silca Region walks up next to me with his arms crossed, and I turn around to see all of the other applicants in the top 20 ranking that were eliminated out of the tournament in earlier rounds behind him.

Marcie's eyes meet mine, and we both give each other a nod, but I turn back to the fight ring and reply to Dane.

"Yeah... You're right. I haven't seen anything like that either..."

The violent display of red lightning repeats in my mind over and over, and the feeling I felt when one of the attacks nearly collided with me continues to eat away at the back of my mind...

Somehow, the attacks that came out of that gem reacted with my divine limiter. I'm not sure how or why... but one thing is for sure, I want to figure out what that red gem was that Trax ate to give him all this power.

I even witnessed the red lightning bolts pierce through soul energy barriers dozens of times more powerful than any mana attacks he was throwing during that match.

The A-Class hunters that came to control the situation didn't look bothered by the display at all either.

Whatever this power is, it isn't foreign to the higher-ups of the Apex Region.

The only conclusion I come to while staring down at the arena as the dome is completely mended is that somehow, that crystal allowed Trax to tap into some kind of Divine Energy.

It was hardly controllable, and from the state I still see him in, shivering and curled up in a ball on the floor of his private room; it was definitely not safe for him to consume.

After the second lightning bolt he threw, the hunter turned into a ball of incoherent rage. The A-Class hunters that glided down to stop the match didn't even attempt to talk with him, they just let him use up all of the red substance that coursed through his body.

So many things still don't make sense about all of this, but Rodrigo's voice echoes through the ring to make me concentrate on the immediate task at hand again.

"Thank you all for waiting! As you know, all cursed items and hidden powers are permitted in these fights. We only intervene to provide safety when an applicant surrenders his right to fight back."

The ring is silent.

Many other Regional Directors and their subordinates are in awe of the display that was just shown.

Not only the mana-less lightning, but I'm sure many of them are impressed by the golden orbs of light the A-Class hunters used. Soul energy isn't a well-known resource either, so there are most likely too many oddities for the average B-Class hunter to comprehend in this ring.

Rodrigo reads the room and continues with a smile.

"The show must go on! Our first semi-final match of the night is about to begin. A fight between Natalie Sterling, the follower of the Flame Emperor from the Apex Region, and Emrie Carter, the extreme flame summoner from the Bedrock Region. One applicant has gained their flames tonight, while the other has had them all his life. Who will come out on top?"

At these words, the fighters step out into the arena.

I open up two telepathy links, sending messages into Ember and Natalie's minds, then the fight clock above the arena begins counting down.

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The other applicants in the smaller viewing area become restless as the match begins.

They whisper to each other about both of the hunters in the ring as the two-minute timer starts to count down.

Their comments are either guesses about whether the Flame Emperor's power is real or just some hidden artifact Natalie is using to scare her opponents.

Others comment on how well Emrie, the Bedrock applicant, fought in his last few matches.

The confusion and concern in the voices of the Vice, Veridian, and Apex applicants that talk about this cements the idea that the Bedrock Region really is a weak region.

The fact that two of their fighters are actually within reach of claiming a B-Class license is apparently a big deal.

There are four armed guards at the back of the box we stand in, their levels all between 800 and 999.

One of them is the wind user I met at the gate when I first entered this exam site, another is the long-haired healer with dead eyes that tried to heal me before this tournament, and the other two I don't recognize, but they are of similar strength.

They stand unmoving, watching all of us, not paying attention to the fight that's about to begin; most likely tasked with making sure no applicants here get into quarrels.

Silence fills the room as both fighters in the ring receive my telepathy message, and I apply my ranked-up buff to Natalie, sharing 1% of my base stats and 1% of my mana control with her.

She looks up to the sky, pretending to pray, then her whole body erupts into flames.

Ember stares back at her from the far side of the ring, putting his hands up to fight, and bursts into far less powerful flames, using mana control hardly 10% as powerful as the aura Nat gives out.

He grins, then looks up to the sky and yells.

"Hey Flame Emperor, grant me power to make this a fair fight!"

Nothing happens, and his dull-looking flames pale in comparison to the hot ball of fire burning around Nat.

He yells again.

"Just this once. I swear my loyalty to you, and will follow you as my leader... You can grant this power to anyone who believes, can't you?"

Silence fills the ring.

A full 5 seconds go by, then people start to whisper and laugh in the crowd.

Ember continues to stare up at the sky, putting on the act I asked him to.

More words of doubt begin to spread as nothing happens, and people start to yell out and complain.

"See, she's been faking it!"

"It's all a facade! See, why wouldn't the Flame Emperor do it again if they could? Especially for a fire user!"

"It has to be some kind of trick, an artifact!"

"Yeah! That's right, she's from the Apex Region! We can't forget what the number one fighter said, they're just playing us!"

Then, a wide grin appears on Ember's face as he opens up his limiter and allows a growing amount of power to leak out.

Over the next 3 seconds, everyone's chatter and words of doubt cease as the flames around Ember grow to match Natalie's, looking almost identical.

Both of them run forward at each other and the entire blue dome is filled with flames while dense auras of mana clash.

The vibrations of mana that ripple through the arena now cannot be faked by mere illusions; it's the raw mana control that is being released in each attack. All of the Regional Directors stand up from their seats, similar to the time they did the first time Nat showed this power.

Then, chatter fills the stands again with a very different tone.

"It's real..."

"His mana control increased by over ten times in a few seconds... I've never seen anything like it..."

"Just like the Apex Region girl in the first round! It's replicable..."

"It looks real... Even if this is an artifact, I must have it!"

Cracks and twangs erupt through the ring as Ember's fists collide with Nat's daggers.

If you discover this tale on Amazon, be aware that it has been unlawfully taken from Royal Road. Please report it.

I secure a telepathy link between both of them so they can coordinate their attacks.

In the last matches, when I gave Natalie enough mana control to win, she only managed to do so by overpowering her opponents with brute strength and a large perception increase.

Now, I want to give her the chance to get used to fighting with these heightened powers for longer periods of time while managing her MP output and increasing the density of her mana shielding to the proper level.

Even now, with perfectly matched mana controls, I can see that her daggers are being batted away by Ember's bare fists.

The timer hits 1:45 remaining, and I increase her control and buffed stats to 2%.

Ember matches it immediately, and the intensity ramps up even further.

The flames that fill the arena grow darker, and the waves of mana that seep out into the crowd are far more deadly than anything any of these Regional Directors are even capable of producing.

I smirk while watching Nat's blades clash with Ember's fists with more confidence now.

In just a few dozen exchanges and a rapid telepathic conversation between the two of them, her technique improves with every exchange.

Every 10 to 15 seconds, I increase her output by 0.5-1%, bringing them to about 6.5% of my mana control by the time the timer hits the last 30 seconds of the match.

By this time, the radiation of mana bursting out of the dome is overwhelming for some visitors.

All of the Regional Directors watch in awe, and even the guards that stand at the back of the display box here take a step forward to witness the incredible exchange taking place before them.

I send another wave of telepathy into their minds.

"Alright, that's enough. Wrap it up."

By now, Natalie is far more accustomed and confident using these extreme levels of power; so her flash training exercise is complete.

Now, it's time to follow out the strategy to finish up this tournament.

I smile and cross my arms while red flashes of light reflect off the glass in front of me onto my face from a distance.

Ember's perceived mana control output begins to dwindle and it appears as though Nat is landing more and more hits on him than she did in the beginning.

As the seconds tick down, their apparent gap in strength grows wider.

Ember throws himself around the ring while Nat lands attacks from long and short distances, throwing crescents of flames his way.

The last 10 seconds are the most brutal. It's almost hard to believe they're acting, which is perfect.

As the timer hits zero, Ember is still standing; but his concealment cloak portrays a battered and beaten hunter from the Bedrock Region that collapses on the ground without any flames left to burn on him.

Nat goes in for a finishing blow, but the timer runs out and Rodrigo's voice echoes throughout the ring.

At the same moment, I release my buff and take away Nat's flames and power.

"That ended our first semifinal match! Another unexpected chain of events! It seems the Flame Emperor will bestow its power to anyone who calls its name... They just have to believe...."

He grins, turning to all of the Regional Directors.

"Nonetheless, this match has ended without a kill. We will count a vote from our Directors to find out who has won!"

After about half a minute, the votes come back with Natalie being the winner 6:1.

The Bedrock director voted for his applicant even though it was clear he had no hope of pulling out a victory in the end.

I whisper under my breath.

"An expected turnout..."

Dane stares wide-eyed at the dome that still crackles with flaming residue.

"You... expected that...?"

A flash of white light brings Ember away and into the room we stand in about 5 meters to my left, and immediately I watch the healer at the back of the room approach him.

I can't help but let out a small laugh at the reactions of other hunters' surprise when he refuses her heals, then walks over to us covered in burns and sear marks on his cloak.

He stares forward at the ring just like me, crossing his arms while I give Nat Self-Regeneration and she walks back to her room.

He speaks to me through our link.

"I hope you had a good reason for all of this. I wanted to take a crack at that lightning user too... I wonder where he managed to get a divine fragment. Even if it was a weak one, mortals shouldn't be playing around with power like that. Especially at this low of a level, that easily could have killed him."

I raise an eyebrow and reply to him through our link while the arena is cleaned up to prepare for the next match.

"So it was divine energy... It messed with that concealment item you made when one of the bolts got close."

"Yeah, it might have even completely unraveled the barrier if it was a direct hit..."

My eyes widen, but I continue to stare forward with a blank expression.

"What do you mean unravel? What are those things? What is divine energy anyway? I can't even perceive it. If I wasn't already suspicious, and didn't see the light show that followed, that stone looked like nothing more than a red rock."

He grunts and shrugs, looking over his shoulders then back toward the arena as the apex workers leave a shiny brand-new arena behind.

"It's more complicated than just simple energy like mana or qi, or even demonic energy. It shouldn't even be manifested in such a rudimentary form on this world... Something is very wrong about all of this."

Ember's face twists a bit, and I can tell he's genuinely in deep thought.

Meanwhile, Rodrigo speaks up and two more fighters enter the ring.

Trax limps his way to the center of the arena, and Mack, the battle healer, walks in to face him with a confident stride.

I reply to Ember while their room doors close and the fight clock starts to count down.

"I'm going to need more of a response than that... Now isn't the time to be withholding information. However improbable it may be, it just happened. You saw how unbothered the Apex Region was after that light show, didn't you? Those golden eyes... I know you felt them too. Are you sure the Sun God isn't one of you Divine Beasts?"

He shakes his head and continues to stare forward.

"I'm sure of it, he isn't."

At the same time as these words hit my mind through our link, I witness the healer from the Apex region walk forward and place both of his hands on Trax's chest and a blinding series of light pulses fill the ring.

It's not teleportation magic, it's healing skills being activated.

Seconds pass and the lights fade.

Trax is now the one standing tall with a determined and evil smirk across his face while Mack falls onto the ground pale, sweating and shaking just as Trax looked moments ago.

A whisper escapes from his lips.

"I- I surrender. I've done my duty."

He's teleported out of the ring and into the finishers stands right behind us.

Trax makes a slow walk around the ring while Rodrigo yells with an excited tone to the crowd.

"That settles it! An unorthodox win, but Trax is now moving onto the Finals to face Natalie. Two applicants from the Apex Region will be facing each other in a final bout. The self-proclaimed strongest Lightning Mage in the world, and the follower of the Flame Emperor. Who will claim this year's prize and win it all?"

Chapter 550

The tension in the air is impossible not to notice.

Both inside the viewing room above the stadium, and down below in the Regional Director's viewing area too.

No one speaks a word, but their silence and wide eyed stares into the arena from everyone waiting to see what happens next says it all.

Two anomalies have shown themselves during this 4th stage of the exams.

This whole event is supposed to be a simple display of what the new talent from all 8 regions can do.

A competition to give not only the 12 applicants that pass after the exams are over a bright future, but also the 50 or so others that have come out here this year a chance to display their fighting talent to be hired for various jobs by other Regions.

It's certain that special contracts have already been drawn up and planned to be sent out to some of the promising talent in the ranks of 21 to 40; and many in the top 20 too, but not as much as there could be.

Everyone is distracted by the two Apex Region applicants that stare each other down in the center of the arena waiting for the final match to begin.

One is a healer that shouldn't have the combat prowess to have even made it past the first round on her own, but has now been blessed with great power by some unknown entity calling themselves the Flame Emperor.

The other is an Elite at the top of his class with one of the rarest combat elements awakened. He was nearly bested by a lesser region applicant in the last round. However, using a special gem, he was able to release power that even broke through unknown spells cast by the Apex Region's A-Class hunters.

It is an understatement to say every soul in this arena is looking forward to seeing what happens in this final match to come.

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The fight clock starts and a flash of yellow light burst through the ring as Trax pulls the same move he did when facing me. He's activated his ranked up buff to go all out from the start.

Nat's body fills with power as I give her the same amount of mana control that she had at the peak of her spar with Ember while upping the shared base stats to their max, imbuing 10% of my own stats into her while keeping her shared mana control at 6.5%.

The increase in her basic speed and base strength is not enough all by itself to contend with the massive boost that Trax's buff gives him; however, the mana control coursing through her veins

increases her perception and mana shielding density enough that she can interpret and predict every one of Trax's strikes before they're dangerous.

Despite her being slower than her attacker, every time the lightning mage's yellow static sword comes flying down at her, a massive wall of impenetrable shielding covered in dark flames blocks it from making contact.

Her eyes track his movements and the formation of mana barriers are just quick enough despite her physical body lagging behind.

The lightning user's movements look like a blur of yellow light to everyone in the crowd, but Nat's movements are a little easier to see with their less honed eyes; however they still seem incredibly fast.

The density of mana that collides in each attack can be felt when the releases of energy vibrate through the ring. It's made clear to everyone that the walls of fire are much stronger than every attack of lightning by a very high degree.

This is the only true way they can judge the fight taking place when the exact movements are too fast for some to perceive.

However, those that are able to perceive the entire fight realize that it is even more impressive that she's able to block these attacks even when her speed and base strength is at such a disadvantage.

The mood in the arena shifts and words between the Directors and their guest hunters in the stands spread. It becomes easy to overhear them down below in the ring.

Trax's face twists with anger and he yells out for all to hear as he continues to send a barrage of attacks at the healer with his full power.

"It's impossible! I trained with you trailing behind me for almost half a year before these exams! You were never a fraction of this strength! I don't believe it's possible to gain such power from a prayer. This is all a trick! I won't be the butt of a joke! I won't!"

His anger grows and grows while Nat's eyes stay calm to track his movements and the fight clock ticks all the way down to show only 1 minute remaining.

I feel the lightning aura pour out at even more extreme frequencies than when I fought him in the ring. He's burning through his MP supplies much faster in a desperate attempt to try and catch her off-guard.

Even so, as Trax forcefully increases his speed and power by another 30%, Nat adjusts her movements and blocks to continuously keep him at bay.

At any point during this match, Nat could release waves of fire that stretch to all edges of the dome and take Trax out in less than a second, but I'm waiting to give her the order for the perfect strike.

I want to give the crowd a show, and at the same time, see if Trax does anything rash again.

The audience is all standing up from their seats again in awe, looking down into the ring and continuing to discuss their theories on how the Flame Emperor's power could work.

Even the applicants in both viewing areas are leaning up against the mana imbued glass to get a closer look.



The pulsing light show of yellow static and dark flames goes on for another full 30 seconds before Trax's movement speed starts to slow down.

Despite throwing everything he has at the healer, not a single shockwave makes it through her flaming mana barriers. His face grows almost as red as the flame residue flickering throughout the ring.

Trax looks up to the sky, staring directly at the black box and yells out in anger.

"You know what? I don't care if it kills me. If I lose this match in front of everyone here and now I'm already as good as dead. I'm the strongest Lightning Mage in the world, no one will ever defeat me as long as there is breath still in my lungs!"

He grits his teeth and his movement patterns change.

Instead of constantly attacking Nat, his lightning step patterns start to shift further and further away from her.

He yells at her while reaching into his item box beneath his armor.

"Your friend might have gotten lucky, but nothing can stop what's about to come. If you get to artificially boost your talent with some hidden artifact, then so can I. Say your last words!"

My eyes widen when I see another stone come out of Trax's pouch, not even trying to hide what he's about to do.

This time, it isn't the same ruby red color as the one before, but a shimmering vibrant orange.

I still don't sense a drop of energy coming off of it, but Ember's words in my inner ear kick me into action.

"That one is far stronger... He could obliterate this entire arena if the guards cannot control it."

The twisted smile on Trax's face and single focused mind for showing others that he is the strongest makes me believe he'd do it without thinking twice.

I still don't understand the power in that gem, but if ember says it's stronger than the last one that competed with the power of an A-Class hunters soul energy, it's best not to test my luck in finding out what this one does.

So, in response, I instantly shift my ranked up buff's numbers and give Nat 10% of my mana control maxing it out, while shifting her shared skill from fire summoning to mythic grade extreme speed.

"Kill him, now!" Is all that I yell in her inner ear as the yellow glowing mage brings the glossy orange stone to his lips.

Nat speeds forward in a blue flash of light from her new skill through the leftover waves of flame residue, slashing her daggers across her body with the newfound mana control and increased speed stats added to her status.

Everything in the ring slows down in my perception as I watch the exchange unfold frame by frame, debating whether to let all of my power loose and burst down there to stop it myself.

I wouldn't be considering it so seriously if the Apex Region's box opened up, but Nat never surrendered; so they're allowing the fight to go on without interference.

My heart beats loudly in my ears while the orange gem touches Trax's lips. At the same time, two crescents of pure mana rocket out of Nat's daggers and collide with Trax's neck and heart in perfect unison.

The collision results in a massive flash of white teleportation magic; both in the ring and right behind me inside the viewing area.

My eyes widen and my full body turns to face the danger as I activate my own lightning magic to mask the speed and power that I'm about to release.

Despite Nat killing him and taking him out of the ring, the respawn item brought him here unharmed, and this fighter's killing intent and overflowing mana control has not wavered one bit.

I feel all 4 of the guards in the back of the room begin to react while activating their ranked up buffs to stop him, but from the fact that the orange gem has already made it into his mouth and they're all over 5 meters away; I'm positive I have to take things into my own hands.

I run forward at him while releasing static all over my body and pull my daggers from my fake item box, not hesitating to send a slash of dense mana his way over twice as strong as anything I released in the ring.

It rockets toward him over 4 times faster than his top speed in the arena, and out of the corner of my eye I watch Ember charging up a fist full of flames right behind me.

My curved crescent of lightning magic collides directly centered on Trax's face, and I use my new mythic grade telekinesis skill to curve the attack making sure I carve out only the portion of his lower jaw and the front half of his face that has the orange gem inside.

Half of his right eye is melted away and the rest of the downward moving attack slices through his flesh like butter taking off his shoulder and arm too.

I let the static energy vibrate and flow out of control while activating conceal at long range skill to give the appearance of his flesh dissolving while in reality I open up a small spatial magic portal and let the gem fall inside.

Simultaneously, a fiery fist from Ember collides with his stomach, sending the hunter's mutilated body flying backward into the outstretched arms of the Apex Region guards at the back of the room.

Fire spreads all over his body as the force of Ember's blow pushes all of the guards that catch him back to hit the furthest wall of the viewing room.

Next, there is a loud crashing sound, then an abrupt deactivation of my lightning magic. It leaves nothing of his partially lost face and limb behind, putting the whole room in a panic.

The healer woman with emotionless eyes begins work on the lightning mage right away before he bleeds out while Callum activates his skill to start putting out Embers flames with large amounts of water.

I let out a sigh and turn back to the stadium below to see the residue of flames and lightning still fading away.

The room is full of angry yells, and glares of confusion and rage hit my back, but all I see is the winner of the tournament standing tall in the center of the ring.

Nat smiles as I talk to her through my link and watch the shifting live leaderboard overhead bringing Ray Anderson, the Bedrock Region applicant up to 1st place while the loser of this match drops down to 2nd in the rankings.