

D. Diver 581

Chapter 581

The waves of gravity grow more intense, and the red aura surrounding the two A-Class hunters glows brighter.

While the levels of all three of my body doubles are quite similar to these two, the fact that they're A-Class hunters and more than double Rodrigo's level makes me certain they have powerful Soul Energy that will likely overpower my body doubles' pure mana control.

The wind user speaks up after I remain silent in response to their threat, he pulls a bright white bow out of an item box and holds it by his side.

"Where is your leader? The Flame Emperor. Bring them to us now so we can accept ownership peacefully. Refuse, and your barrier will fall."

The bright green and blue flashes of light grow brighter below me. At the same time, the fire wielder pulls a large red glowing axe from his own item box and stares down at me like I'm nothing but a grain of sand.

I smile inwardly at their overconfidence as I sense another pair of blue and white energies coming from the guildhall, zipping directly toward the canyon of dungeons—likely Lydia and Fisher retrieving the army from their training.

With these thoughts bolstering my confidence, I finally respond.

"You're looking for the Flame Emperor? Well, you're talking to him right now. I assure you, surrendering this city isn't going to be an option I'll accept."

Theories rush through my doubles' minds as I try to figure out why the Hunter's Association would show up here of all places and use that name.

They even mentioned the B-Class exams...

My main body must have a plan in motion, and the higher-ups in the Association have already caught on and are trying to stop it.

This city's population has grown to over 1,000, and the number of traveling traders that visit the outer village has reached as high as 4,000 on some busy days.

Word has been spreading fast among Dark Continent cities, and the currency I've created has been used and accepted in Solara and Valor City on many occasions already, thanks to Lith and Chester's help in my expansion.

Solara is still a very large city with business influence rooted in the 8 Great Regions. Chester is only the Sector 4 underground trade leader; he doesn't have direct influence over the entire city just yet.

This leads me to believe there must be many Association workers hidden in this city, and it would be extremely easy to investigate further, considering the Crimson City's outer trade villages are open to the public at any time.

If my main body revealed itself or forged new alliances during the B-Class exams to gain more powerful allies outside of the Dark Continent, I can see how the Association leaders wouldn't like this rapid expansion once they put all the scattered clues together.

They see my City's exponential growth as a high potential threat to their control over this vast and profitable Dark Continent land, so they must extinguish my influence before it's too late.

The angry yell from the wind user makes far more sense once I realize what exactly is going on here. He creates an arrow of white wind in his bow and points it down at me.

"Well then, give us your decision! Surrender and submit, or die by the hands of the 8 Great Regions. This is not optional, this is an order. We have been ordered to eliminate any growing threats that endanger our country. Your actions place you high on our immediate disposal list."

I think to myself as the gravity waves of red energy increase in strength again, and I feel a mental attack pushing down on my psyche, while the air around me thickens.

However, I still respond calmly.

"I am just a threat to you? A weed growing too large to keep in this tidy garden of a kingdom of yours?"

The fire user smirks as his axe charges up with dark flames.

"You're a smart one, aren't you? I don't know what kind of artifact you managed to use to make a barrier this strong, but I can still sense your mana control through it. You don't have what it takes to challenge us. We'll kill every strong hunter that stays loyal to you, if you don't surrender now. We are the law; you can't ignore it."

As he says these words, I remember when something similar happened in the past.

On my first big mission into the Dark Continent, as a brand new honored Elite Hunter of the Association, there were unexpected results.

My team of hunters managed to clear a labyrinth and came in contact with Demonic Energy, something the Dark Continent leaders and the Association were very keen on keeping for themselves.

So much so, that they worked together, putting bounties on our heads and ensuring that we were all dead. This was just to make sure they got more money in their pockets and their recruits, who were growing too fast, were eliminated from the picture.

To the higher-ups, this may have been just another day of business as usual.

Killing off the weak when they discover valuable information or grow faster than expected.

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

Eliminating dangerous outliers works well to keep a functioning system in line, but one mistake can be the end of it all.

They never managed to kill me or my teammates off then, and now they're coming back to try it all again. Even though they likely don't know our true identities, it feels all the same to me.

I let out a sigh, looking down below me as the blue and green flashes of light grow bright enough to fill my entire vision. Then, I look back at the two men and reply.

"If it's a fight you want, I'll give it to you. Just don't expect mercy from me when this is all over, because that is not something you granted me."

As I finish speaking, Maria flashes by my right side, covered in visibly dense royal blue Soul Energy.

She pulls her ice-imbued, blood-bonded sword from her item box and swings it, her eyes locked on the enemies. Her eyes glow bright blue, and I watch her body grow larger as she activates her greater form.

Abby flies by on my left. Her double ranked-up buff is activated, making her entire body glow with a bright green aura.

From what I gathered the last time I saw her in this form, it was impossible for her to attack, but she was also immune to any physical or magical attacks.

It seems her new training sessions have caused a shift in her innate abilities, because I see six large spears of summoned stone rotate around her body. They are all so densely infused with Soul Energy that the spears almost glow as bright green as Abby herself.

Both of them leave trails of Soul Energy behind as they phase through the Crimson City's defenses and face the two A-Class hunters alone in the sky.

Now that I get a better look at them, both of the women are above level 2,500 after training in the Labyrinth, but there is definitely something different about their Soul Energy auras.

Looking back on the memories that flash through my mind, I can tell that the two months of cultivating Qi beneath Valor City in the dense-aired mines have paid off.

The thick plumes of dense Soul Energy surrounding both of their forms are magnitudes higher than they were in the last major battle we had against the Lich King. They're reached an entirely new level of power, possibly even stronger than my main body was when I left for the B-Class exams.

As the two A-Class hunters see this happening, they reflexively go into attack mode, and I watch shimmering golden Soul Energy surround their bodies from the collars around their necks.

Around this golden glow, the same red light I saw before gives their bodies an aura of dense gravity that makes it seem as if their presence is heavier, rooted deeper in reality.

The fire user yells out loud, letting plumes of golden and red flames erupt from his hands and surround the fiery axe as he lifts it above his head.

"You have sealed your fate! I hereby declare The Flame Emperor an enemy of the 8 Great Regions! All threats will be dealt with; there will be no exceptions."

He swings the axe downward, and a dense wall of flames comes flooding out.

At the same time, the wind user's bow becomes flooded with golden light, and the wind arrow pointed down at us is packed with the same energy now covered in a red and golden glow.

He speaks out loud too, as he makes the arrow grow in size, filling it with golden light and releasing it down toward us.

"So long, you will not be remembered."

Looks of disgust cover both of their faces, like they're stepping on ants that crawled in front of their footsteps on a morning walk.

However, this quickly changes as Maria's Goddess-like Ice form, completely imbued with Soul Energy, sends a massive wave of royal blue ice upward at the incoming wall of flames.

It makes contact with the heavy red and golden mass of heat. Both attacks collide, making the entire desert shake, making the clouds in the sky part.

An ear-shattering crack ripples outward that can be heard for hundreds of kilometers.

Less than half a second later, Abby sends out her charged earth spears to collide with the golden arrow of wind that comes her way.

A series of gravity waves, cracks, and violent explosions ripple through the air as her spears collide with its tip, holding the wind manifestation back from falling down and piercing the dome below.

It all happens extremely fast.

Maria continues to activate her full-ranked up buff, letting more and more Soul Energy out from her seemingly endless supply within her core.

The overwhelming wave of ice envelops the golden fire. The ripples of red light tear through her ice, making the flames hotter and heavier, but the sheer amount of soul energy imbued ice that continuously pours out of the bottomless pit that is Maria's Qi and Mana stores suppresses the flames.

The fire user retreats as his attack is completely nullified. Shock and dread fill his eyes as he can't believe the sight before him.

Abby and the wind user stay at a standstill, appearing to be on equal footing at first. However, once Abby deactivates her Immortal Energy Form Buff, seeing that there will be no threat of a sneak attack, she's able to channel all of her available bright green Soul Energy into the six sharp spears.

They looked as if they were about to crack and shatter to pieces moments ago, but now the spears vibrate with energy, mending their own weak points, and pierce right through the arrow of wind, dispersing it into a meaningless energy in the air.

The spears fly forward, and the wind user is filled with terror as he tries to dodge the deadly incoming barrage of attacks.

Two whiz by his head, while the others just barely missing his vitals as he uses red and golden light imbued wind magic to push his body out of the way with milliseconds to spare.

He retreats higher into the sky too, utterly baffled by the fact that his ultimate attack was somehow matched in power.

The flashes of green and blue light grow even brighter as they follow the two A-Class hunters high into the sky.

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Down below, surrounding the outer city, I sense the few dozen level 900+ hunters shift their battle formation completely.

At the sight of their leaders letting out powerful attacks, they assume the barrier will soon be lifted and now begin their march toward the base of the dome.

Based on their levels and perceived mana control, I find it very unlikely any of them could possibly force their way inside.

However, there are 10 members within their ranks that all use the same golden Soul Energy collars around their necks.

Based on the battle I had with Rodrigo months back, I come to the assumption that these select few will be extremely strong. Of course, not nearly as skilled as the A-Class Hunters in the sky, but they will not be average B-Class Elites either, I'm sure of that.

I don't want any innocent citizens getting caught up in the middle of this crisis, so I plan to end things as fast as possible.

In the same moment that I sense their forces moving in, I sense my own moving out.

The Crimson Army, consisting of dozens of level 1,300-1,500 hunters, bursts out of the canyon of dungeons with two body doubles as well as Lydia and Fisher guiding their lead.

I send out a pulse of telepathy to talk to all of them at once as an announcement, explaining the situation exactly and assigning their roles based on their power levels.

Within seconds, the entire dome is surrounded by the Crimson Army as well, split up into small battle formations to take on strong hunters.

My doubles, Fisher, and Lydia are tasked with holding off all enemies with golden light, while all other army members are ordered to steer clear of special Soul Energy wielding opponents like this and focus on the other Elite B-Class troops.

On this peaceful sunny morning in Sector 2 of the Dark Continent, an unexpected all-out war with the Association has begun.

Chapter 582

All three of my doubles fly into formation, surrounding one side of the dome to face off against five golden-collared B-Class Hunters.

Fisher and Lydia burst with blue and white light, getting into their own battle stances and releasing a wave of energy brighter and more powerful than anything I've ever felt from them.

Both of them surpassed level 2000 while training in the Labyrinth, and when they activate their energy forms, it isn't just reinforced with Qi like in the battle against the Lich King's army. Now, the desert shakes beneath the weight of their new Soul Energy awakened forms.

Instead of their usual battle styles using swords, I watch both of them put their fists out in a fighting stance as if they're going to take on everyone with their fists.

The style looks extremely similar to Monk's technique when I first saw him in the arena, which makes perfect sense because they have been training with him in his monastery on their time off when he is not treating patients.

The only difference is that instead of pure Qi, they have immaculate manifestations of their fully awakened Soul Energy covering their bodies.

Fisher looks as if a massive blue water serpent stares down the approaching Association Hunters, ready to strike and kill on sight.

Lydia's entire body glows white with a unique Ice magic imbued Soul Energy, and her greater form's White Tiger manifestation lets out a roar as the entire desert floor beneath them turns to white ice.

Fisher activates his mythic-grade intimidation skill that I gifted to him, and a wave of energy floods through the approaching enemies, stopping them in their tracks as a feeling of fear ripples through them more dreadful than they ever imagined.

A snake and a tiger tower over them as dozens of other double-ranked-up hunters speed through them all, activating their various buffs, and showing that all of them have elemental skills too.

On my side of the dome, my doubles do the same, letting out three waves of intimidation, specifically aimed only at our enemies as half of the Crimson Army spreads out to cover this portion of the outer circumference of the dome.

The Association's level 900 hunters are all matched up with level 1300-1500 fighters in an instant.

My doubles constantly send out bursts of telepathy, giving the exact positions and status callouts of all the enemies that need to be immediately subjugated.

Their fire users are matched up with our water mages, their wind awakened are matched with our earth types, and those with speed abilities are thwarted by our long-range hunters.

Not only are the Crimson Army's troops given these positional advantages, they're also all double-ranked-up, hundreds of levels higher than their opponents, and have mana control that makes these Elite B-Class Hunters seem like worms being preyed on by birds.

The entire attack formation of the Association is decimated in seconds. None of them even knew what hit them.

They may have just been following orders, but that kind of logic doesn't matter to me at all...

These hunters should think for themselves, and receive punishment for their own actions no matter what authority told them to do it.

There are thousands of merchants, villagers, and innocent bystanders nearby, and their activation of high-grade destructive skills is actively endangering everyone here.

I yell through my group telepathy to immobilize every one of them without hesitating.

"I want them all unable to harm any weaker citizens in the area. If they resist or try to damage my property or my people, kill them without remorse. Those that survive your initial attacks and surrender; strip their gear, item boxes, and ensure they cannot escape. We will question them after we secure the safety of the area!"

Flashes of bright skills light up the ground and air surrounding the crimson dome, creating an immaculate light show that is intense but extremely brief.

Many of the B-Class hunters are frozen in fear from the intimidation waves, and some are even knocked out.

Those that resist and push through are met with attacks they have no hope of defending against.

All three of my doubles pull out manifestations of the Flame Emperor's sword and channel the densest possible crescents of flames while eyeing the five golden-collared hunters I'm tasked to take out.

I remember when sparring Rodrigo, even when my mana control was far less strong than it is now, I was able to hold off his Soul Energy with pure brute force.

The warriors that look at me now don't even seem like a challenge compared to him.

Soul Energy in nature is far more powerful than just plain mana alone; however, when the mana control is tens of times greater in strength, the difference in the energy's innate ability can become meaningless.

The five hunters all cover themselves in a golden aura, pulling out Soul Energy swords, hammers, and bows; but when I release my dark fiery crescents at them, their golden aura is broken through with ease.

Not even a quarter of a second after sending out three fire blades, my doubles send another barrage.

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Mythic grade Telekinesis ensures my hits never miss their target.

Their limbs are severed, and their worthless blood-bonded weapons are burned to ash before their eyes.

No one can believe that the indestructible power of the Sun God is being overthrown by mere mana alone.

On the other side of the dome, Fisher and Lydia take on their golden warriors in the same manner.

The two are almost three times the level of their opponents, so their base stats trump theirs by incredibly noticeable amounts.

Flashes of blue and white light are all these Elite favorites of the Sun God see before they're met with punches that pierce through their Soul Energy defenses like they were never even there.

Once the white and blue fists pierce the yellow golden light, their armors are shattered to pieces, and waves of Soul Energy that isn't their own circulate through their bodies, burning them from the inside and leaving them motionless on the ground after each attack.

The three remaining don't even get half a second to think once they see their teammates fall; they too are immobilized before they can even raise their weapons to defend against the monsters they've attacked.

In less than five seconds after sending out my orders, the entire Association's B-Class Elite army has been subjugated.

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Above the Crimson dome, even more powerful forces are battling it out.

After the initial shock of having their Soul Energy imbued, Divine Energy-aided attacks pushed back with ease by unknown forces they were not briefed on, the two A-Class Hunters retreat in fear.

Even though they're battle-hardened hunters and have faced many ruthless double-ranked-up monsters in their pasts, neither of them has ever seen Soul Energy so pure and dense other than the Sun God itself.

The fire wielder is the first to yell out at the violent display.

"Who are you? Where did you come from? There's no way hunters of your strength would follow such a weak leader! There's no way! L-Let us settle this amicably, please, let's negotiate here, we want the best for everyone—"

Maria doesn't take long to listen to his cries of nonsense and sends another wave of ice, now in her full Ice-goddess form.

Her deep royal blue Soul Energy expands outward, filling the air with its presence, lowering the temperature above the desert by dozens of degrees every millisecond that passes.

At the same time, Abby manifests two massive spears of stone in front of her body as she flies forward through the air, following the wind mage that flees with even faster airsteps than the fire user.

She releases the deadly pointed spear of rock, full to the brim with a large portion of her Soul Energy, and lets it fly forward to surpass the wind mage's top speed in an instant.

Abby and Maria follow the mages that flee, and they diverge, following their targets many kilometers away from the dome into the open desert before the attacks land.

The fire mage cannot simply dodge the incoming wave of ice, so he tries to channel every last bit of his flames, golden Soul Energy, and use of his red divine core to let an ultimate attack out through his axe.

Once the unstoppable wave of ice collides with him, he instantly realizes that his hopes will not be a reality.

The axe clashes with the ice, and the golden Soul Energy that surrounds his body begins to be enveloped in the wave of blue.

The flowing energy begins to act like solid matter, freezing in the air, shattering, and falling off of the fire user's body uncontrollably.

He diverts his momentum and tries to fly downward, but the massive attack of ice-imbued Soul Energy is too vast to outrun.

His axe is the next point of contact that is consumed by the endless power.

It glowed bright golden red moments ago, but now freezes over, and its flames extinguish.

Before the hunter can let go, the spreading blue Soul Energy reaches his hands, then crawls down his arms, and the A-Class hunter feels fear unlike anything he's ever felt in his life.

An unbeatable goddess towers over him with blue eyes, making his reality turn cold.

The hunter knows he's lost...

A few kilometers away, rocketing through the desert, the wind user desperately airsteps away from the two rotating, glowing green spears that gain distance on him with every passing step.

He's always been the fastest hunter in the entire Association.

There's never been a monster that could dodge his arrows or counteract them with such strong Soul Energy either.

The anomaly chasing him down is not something he ever dreamed he would see when coming here today.

The displays of the Flame Emperor's power during the B-Class exams were impressive, bringing a barely-ranked-up hunter's strength up to match some of their lower-ranked B-Class Elites.

However, the impossibly high power levels, and use of Energy like their boss, the Sun God, is not something he knew was even possible.

One of the spears tracks the hunter from above while the other follows him right at the rear, making it impossible for the speed-based wind archer to do anything but continuously move toward the desert floor.

Seconds pass, and as the eruption of Ice collides with his partner in the air, he has nowhere left to run. He's less than 100 meters from the ground now, and has to face the green spears head-on.

The archer grits his teeth and makes another arrow, pooling all of his Soul Energy while covering it in as many divine threads as he can, then turns less than a dozen meters before colliding with the sand to let the shot off upward.

There's an earth-shaking series of thuds and explosions as the arrow is released from his bow, and the green spears of Soul Energy collide with its tip, piercing through it instantly, shredding the golden manifestation into three parts.

The spears continue traveling downward, colliding with the archer's bow hand, shattering the pristine white blood-bonded weapon and pinning his shooting hand to the ground as it pierces through his shieldings and flesh with ease.

The second spear collides with his opposite leg, pinning him to the desert floor again and spraying blood all over the sand as a crater of the double impact sends shockwaves through all of the dunes for kilometers.

At that development, the fire user uses his last spark of Soul Energy to pull a transport crystal and a small silver device from his item box around his waist, bringing it up toward his mouth, and yelling out loud.

"We've lost, we're being overpowered! I believe the Hunter's Association has made a grave mistake—R-Retreat!"

This message is broadcast into the wind user's ear.

His scared voice, admitting defeat, echoes throughout every single one of the transmission tablets that haven't been crushed in the aftermath of battle that are scattered around the Crimson Dome.

The wind user and the fire user both crush their teleport crystals and vanish from the desert with wounds that cannot be healed.

A few of the B-Class Elites manage to crush their teleport crystals and retreat as well in sorry states, missing limbs, or vitally wounded on the edge of death; while others have been knocked out cold, killed, or have their gear confiscated already.

All ten of the golden-collared Elites remain behind and are conscious in custody, while over 35 of their basic B-Class Elites are also captured, unable to retreat in time.

My doubles give out more orders after the new developments as well, making plans for a secure interrogation base away from the city to get what we can out of these prisoners while I wait for my main body to return.

The Army is tasked with cleanup and making sure all citizens that were caught up in the battle are safe and compensated for any material losses.

Then lastly, I send out a wave of telepathy to Abby and Maria to get an update on their battles, and devise plans for a citywide speech to explain what the Association has done, and why there was such a disturbance today.

This all occurs within ten seconds of the message of retreat.

The Association's attempt at subjugating the Crimson City ends in their undeniable instantaneous total defeat.

Chapter 583

Thousands of kilometers to the north, an old man with long white hair and a beard speaks under his breath, just loud enough for his two disciples to hear.

"This new growing nation is strong. The Association and Demons may not be the only forces we need to keep on our radars. We should watch out for their growing warriors once the throne awakening becomes active."

They sit atop the tallest mountain in the area, covered in snow, surrounded by hundreds of mountains that look exactly the same in every direction.

The two younger men at his sides, with serious expressions on their faces, watch a replay of the battle of Crimson City on repeat, using bright blue recording crystals.

One of them, who appears slightly older and taller than the other disciple, replies to the old man.

"Teacher Sil, I have a question. The fighting style used by the serpent and tiger warriors... It is very similar to our own. How could they have learned it?"

The old man's eyes glow with a bright yellow light, and the same energy intensifies in his chest as the air around them grows heavier, as if bending reality.

"That is none of your concern. However, it seems I'll need to visit the desert temple soon. There must be a reason for this."

The two disciples' eyes glow with orange light, their entire bodies radiating with pure white Qi. It blends in with the high-speed winds and heavy snow atop the mountains as the older man turns off the recording, and the three of them return to meditating and continuing their training.

Thousands of kilometers south, a woman floats high in the sky above an active volcanic region.

Below her, hundreds of C and B-ranked dungeons form and break, as it is an everyday occurrence here.

She rides atop an enormous Earth Dragon, watching the same video on a recording crystal play in her hand.

Both her eyes and the dragon's eyes glow bright yellow, shimmering off the metallic Hunter's Association badge on her shoulder.

She whispers under her breath with a smile as she zooms in on the two A-Class hunters being defeated in seconds.

"The 8 Regions Branch has grown soft, hasn't it...? Our A-Class hunters could have handled that battle... But it's clear that wasn't even their true leader... Who and where are you, Flame Emperor?"

The woman grins while putting away the recording. An eruption of a volcano goes off in the distance, and she activates a stealth skill, making herself and the dragon she's riding invisible in the same moment.

Half a minute later, she flies over dozens of fortified, castle-like military bases hidden in valleys between active volcanic mountains.

Meanwhile, back in Sector 2, my body doubles compensate merchants that have damaged goods and clean up the city while giving a speech, showing that the real enemies of this attack are the 8 Great Regions.

Public sentiment is already heavily anti-Association here in the Dark Continent, so with the small amount of proof I have, showing citizens the confiscated badges and the ear and eyewitness accounts of the surrender message from the transmission tablets is more than enough for word of today's events to spread.

So much so, that over the next week, the city's growth skyrockets, adding over 500 new members to the links of loyalty.

Word of the new trading hub in Sector 2 offering jobs, monetary aid, and the military ability to fend off two A-Class hunters with ease travels far and wide.

All of these memories come rushing into my mind as the same A-Class hunters that attacked my city search me with their battle scars visible.

The wind user pulls a glowing red fruit from the item box I provided him, and everyone in the room focuses on it with confused and mixed expressions.

When he looks me in the eyes, I can see they're far different than they were for the brief second I saw him during the 4th stage tournament.

Then, he may have looked disinterested in the mundane weaklings fighting for their B-Class badges, but behind those cold eyes was unwavering confidence.

Now, he stares ahead, and I feel an aura of unease about him.

The wind user speaks up while holding up the large circular red fruit with his only good remaining hand.

"You were meant to collect fragments. This is all you've managed to bring back? What is this? Explain yourself."

He's clearly able to see that this fruit is made out of divine threads, and the question comes out with a genuine tone, even though there is confusion and a hint of anger in it.

I smile inwardly but shrug and reply to him as if I have no idea what he's talking about.

"I don't know. All I recall before this test started is that in the video, it stated if we found any artifacts that didn't resemble the red, orange, or yellow stones, we would receive a minimum of 1000 points. Was that a lie?"

He immediately responds.

"Well, that video was... um..."

Then he stops himself from speaking further.

As a red core himself, he knows that the fruit in his hand is not valuable at all compared to what this 1000-point exception to the rule was supposed to be.

My guess is that it was reserved for the off chance that someone made it higher than the yellow core zones.

Seeing his pupils shrink and the head of the fire user turn my way makes me want to smile even more.

This fruit stores roughly the same amount of energy as one red fragment, but according to their own rules, it is going to be worth far more.

I'll be able to move up the leaderboards while simultaneously keeping all of the extra farmed divine energy in my storage for myself.

As these thoughts race through my mind, the two A-Class hunters receive a transmission in their ears.

They look down at the floor and silently listen. Then, after a few seconds, the wind mage responds to me out loud.

"Yes. It seems, you... are correct, this in fact is a unique item, and our rules did state that all unique artifacts would be graded separately starting at 1000 points... However, we will require an explanation for how you managed to get this fruit."

I shrug again, even with all eyes on me, it doesn't feel like there is any pressure on me at all.

After witnessing multiple higher lifeforms inside that construct that could have killed me by merely breathing their same air makes the threats in this room seem meaningless.

To top it off, these two cowards tried to take over my city while I was gone and ran from their allies when they were in a compromising position without a second thought.

Making their lives more difficult right now is exactly what I plan to do.

"Oh, well, I was just standing at the bottom of this massive mountain, and it fell from the sky."

I shrug again, putting my hands in the air.

My mana control ripples out of my body constantly, as if I'm excited, but the control readings are barely reaching that of a level 700 hunter to keep my facade going.

The A-Class hunters look even more confused at my statement, so I continue.

"You two were in that simulation before, right? It was just at the edge of the jaguar forest. I was about to climb the mountain, but the fruit just fell from the sky... Tons of birds covered in red light were chasing after it. It must have fallen pretty far... I just managed to put it in my item box and run away. Once it was out of sight, they seemed to become disinterested, and I-

I stop talking once the A-Class hunters hear another noise transmission come through their earpieces, and the room goes silent.

The name Ray Anderson shows itself on the leaderboard as number 1, holding 1000 points.

I show a visible smile now, and speak again.

"That's about it..."

I shrug and point to the Lich King by my side.

"Emrie climbed the mountain afterward, but we didn't want to push ourselves too hard. Making it out through the rift was more important than risking getting eliminated for more points. It seems this strategy worked out best in the end."

Emrie crosses his arms and nods along, then the two guards get a transmission in their ears again.

They finish patting us down quickly and give us back our item boxes without the divine artifacts inside.

A door opens in the side of the room, and the fire user speaks up as they both walk out.

"Everyone, stay put. We're glad you've all made it out of the simulation safely, but this is an unexpected abrupt end to the exams. Please allow us a moment to talk things over with the Director."

The door shuts just as he finishes talking, and the room fills with chatter.

I walk over to Nat, Marcie, and Dane; and tell the manifestation of Emrie to follow with telepathy, filling him in on the fact that we're inside a testing facility, outlining orders to follow while he's in his command mode.

The three of them greet us while the healer makes their rounds to all of the newly transported applicants, but considering we're all being watched, they receive a telepathy message to stay quiet too until this is all over.

After a few minutes pass, the same door that the A-Class hunters left through opens again. To my surprise, Rodrigo steps through it with an amused smile across his face while holding a large silver tablet that resembles a clipboard.

"If your name is not lit up on the board, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the room... I'm afraid you have not made the cut."

At the same time, seven hunters walk in through the door that Rodrigo just entered through.

The first three that enter are hunters that I expect: the two Vice Region applicants, and the Phantom Region's single applicant.

However, the next two are the Battle Healer, Mack, and the Water Mage Callum, who were eliminated early in the construct by my teammates.

The final two are the two applicants from the Veridian Region that managed to get their hands on one red core each during their time in the construct. Bright smiles light up their faces as they realize why they're being brought into this room.

The remaining B-Class Elite helpers escort everyone that has failed the exams out of the room.

They were most likely at the top of the leaderboard before this event, and it seems there have been healers and an appraisal skill user that have already checked on Trax's condition, even though he's passed out.

Forces behind the scenes have already determined that he is a far less valuable asset now, and have adjusted the leaderboard accordingly.

As the last of them leave, the door closes, leaving only Rodrigo and the 12 of us that have passed in the small mana-shielded cube. The leaderboard screen shown on the ceiling disappears completely, and a video appears.

It shows a dark, empty room with a single oval table in the center of it.

One figure in a dark cloak sits on one of the chairs, while all of the others are empty.

The video pans closer to the figure as he raises his head, and a pair of golden eyes look through the screen.

An eerie pressure fills the entire room as they glow bright golden with visible Soul Energy, as well as a clear addition of heavy yellow light aiding his power.

Shadows cover the rest of his face, and the dark cloak makes the rest of his figure unknown other than the fact that he's abnormally tall.

A yellow core is visible glowing in his chest, but the golden eyes are the main spectacle as they stare down at all of us through the screen.

His low monotone, almost robotic voice echoes throughout the room.

"It is a pleasure to meet you all, future B-Class Hunters of the Association. I am the Director of the Apex Region, but starting now, you may call me Mr. Freeman."

Chapter 584

The golden eyes glow brighter, and it feels like pressure is pushing down on us through the screen.

Yellow threads of divine energy even leak into the room straight through the mana shielding, and I see other applicants start to sweat and shake.

The gravity in the room increases slightly, and the Director continues to speak.

"It appears our stage 5 simulation room has been prematurely terminated... This was not within our expectations... There have been many oddities popping up lately...."

The pressure increases, making the room rise in temperature, the air thickens, and the gravity multiplies again. All applicants fall to their knees, holding their hearts, struggling to breathe.

I barely would have noticed it if it wasn't for their reactions.

After plunging deep into the aura of the green serpent for days on end, allowing its divine energy to tear my body down and saturate every cell in my being repeatedly to farm its energy; the light tendrils of yellow energy that fill the room feel like nothing more than someone turning the temperature up by a few degrees.

I send a telepathic wave into Emrie's head, and we both fall to the ground to play the part.

A ripple of minor amusement comes through the yellow energy.

It's doubtful it is noticeable to anyone else, but ever since I met the purple entity at the top of the construct, my ability to feel others' emotions through their energy output, that would otherwise be hidden, has seemed to have awakened.

The same monotone, almost static voice echoes through the video again.

"What you have all witnessed within these exams is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to power in this world. Every one of you has been chosen to become a part of the new B-Class Elites."

There's a pause, and I feel a ripple of anger come through the divine energy that leaks through the walls of this room.

"In addition to this, I will be choosing four of you to train exclusively with me, and become the new future A-Class hunters in the 8 Great Regions. Due to the increased nature of high-grade dungeon breaks out in the Dark Continent these past months, I've decided to double the number of fighters at our highest rank of Military Power. Other nations to our north and south will likely be doing the same, so we must match them in strength."

I think about his words carefully, and realize he's lying straight to all of our faces.

There were some dungeon breaks last month during one of the surges, but my doubles and army members handled all the severe ones personally with ease.

The real reason he wants to train more A-Class hunters is to strengthen his own military power in order to handle me, the Flame Emperor, as a growing threat in the Dark Continent.

While I think this over, three figures walk onto the outer edges of the video screen, and at the same time, the growing pressure of yellow divine energy in the room subsides.

A few of the applicants cough and gasp for breath. I stay down on the ground for a few seconds before standing and looking back up at the feed, then tell Emrie to do the same.

I watch the three figures on the screen surrounding the Apex Regions Director activate white light from their hands. I'm nearly certain these are healing skills, most likely the same [Soft Heal] skill as Nat and the battle healer in the room.

Ember's words about the Director most likely needing treatment for a sickness come back to me, and I come to the conclusion that he's probably right...

Using this Divine Energy seems to take a lot out of him.

While he's being healed, the mysterious man speaks again.

"I've contacted all of your Regional Directors, as we will be having a congratulatory ceremony for all of you. Your future contracts will be negotiated with any region that desires your work. It shouldn't take more than a few hours to have all of the Directors with us to begin the event."

My heartbeat speeds up at this statement.

The ceremony itself isn't what makes me nervous, it's the fact that it's going to take a few hours for all of the Directors to arrive.

The Lich King mentioned that his limiter, holding in all of his mana control, will only last an hour. If this is the case, there may be a major issue in hiding the identity of Emrie Carter.

If he's exposed, then my identity of Ray Anderson will be far more suspicious by association.

It isn't out of the range of possibilities to just leave right now back to the Crimson City and forget investigating any further. However, the Director's words of strengthening their forces and creating more A-Class hunters is something I still want to learn more about.

My mind races for more ideas to get us out of this new situation, but the Director speaks up again to disturb my train of thought.

"While we wait, I'd like to speak to each of you individually. I will give you all time to rest, but I have a few questions for each of you and would like to hear your personal thoughts on the results of the exam this year."

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The three healers leave the Director's side after this statement, and a very light flow of yellow Divine Energy comes back in through the room.

It isn't nearly as strong, but a door opens beside Rodrigo, and it's clear that down the hall that it leads, the intensity of this heavy pressure in the air will get stronger.

Without warning, the video above the room cuts off, and Rodrigo speaks up, looking down at his silver tablet.

"Alright, looks like we're going up the list in order starting with you."

He points at Mack, the battle healer in 12th place on the leaderboard.

He nods and walks through the open door without hesitating.

We're all left to stand in silence as the door closes, and the 11 of us are left in the empty mana shielded room with Rodrigo.

No one wants to speak up, and many of the applicants are still shaken by the immense pressure they were exposed to moments ago.

I even see Marcie, Nat, and Dane a bit shaken up by the events that just took place.

About 3 minutes later, the battle healer walks back into the room, and Callum is called by Rodrigo to go through the door for his meeting next.

My eyes widen when I see a golden collar around the healer's neck, and a new buff beneath his status called [The Sun God's Curse Mark] burning with golden yellow soul energy on his status.

My heart rate speeds up with a mixture of excitement, curiosity, and a hint of fear as well.

When Callum comes back into the room a few minutes later, these emotions only grow because he too has the curse.

Both of the Veridian applicants that passed with a single red fragment come back with bright smiles on their faces, and golden collars to match them.

No one else in this room can channel Qi, so I don't even know if they're capable of seeing that their fellow B-class applicants have this curse attached to them.

To be honest, I don't even know if they themselves are aware they've been inflicted by it yet.

I can't sense where these meetings are being held without sending out waves of my aura that would reveal my true power.

All I can do right now is wait.

Emrie walks through the door next.

I've briefed him on everything he should know about his role as the Bedrock Region hunter, and he knows not to expose anything about his or my true identity.

Sending him into the room with the Director alone will be the litmus test to see if it is safe for me to do it too...

As he disappears behind the door, and it closes, the next 3 minutes that pass by seem like an eternity.

I wait silently in anticipation, and when the doors open again, I'm even more surprised to see him in perfect condition without a golden collar around his neck at all...

My mind races for answers, but as the Phantom Region's applicant leaves to go out and meet the Director alone, I open a link with the Lich King and he tells me exactly what happened.

As he recalls these events, they don't seem like anything out of the ordinary. It seems this Director really only asked questions about what kind of future Emrie wants for himself, what Region he's looking to contract with, and asks what it was like using the Flame Emperor's power during the fighting tournament of the 4th stage.

He answers without going off script at all, detailing how he only signed up for this exam to get extra funding for the Bedrock Region and have access to B-Class dungeons back home.

He explains that he didn't know of the Flame Emperor before the tournament and that he only called out to use its power to have a chance in that matchup against Nat. He explains that as soon as the match was over, he never got that power back at all once he left the ring, and that it showed up on his status screen under buffs as [The Flame Emperor's Curse Mark].

This last part is a total fabrication, as even the real power users don't receive any visual status changes when they use my granted power.

I want to throw the Director as far off the scent as possible. If he believes that the power only worked while Emrie was in the ring, the possibilities of a traitor messing with the B-Class results could have been anyone that was present that day.

Hundreds of visitors, ranging from C and B class hunters were present in the crowds with the other Regional Directors. There were also over 60 other applicants watching the fights as well.

The final questions are about his time in the construct, and he retells the same story that I told the guards when they questioned me about my red fruit.

At the end of their meeting, the Lich King explains that the room was filled with an immense amount of yellow divine energy and golden soul energy, but his limiter blocked the effects of an odd mental attack that was meant to hit him.

The Director grew tired and had to be healed by three people as he left.

As he finishes up his explanation, the shadowy figure from the Phantom Region comes back. He too has the golden collar on when he walks in the room.

The two Vice Region water wielders walk out, then come back in with golden collars too.

After hearing this, I'm less worried about myself. If the Director bought Emrie's disguise and was unable to overpower him, I believe I'll be just fine.

The only issue I'm concerned about is the other three teammates in the room that I've formed alliances with.

I quickly message them all through telepathy to make sure they won't spill the fact that I helped them in this 5th round.

They all agree, and I make sure to ensure that Nat's experience with the Flame Emperor is the same as Emrie's, using the extra detail about the status change in her story if she's asked about it. She agrees without any hesitation.

The three of them enter the room one by one, and each time about half a minute before they come back, I get the same message pop up in my mind's eye on my Rising Emperor's Domain interface.

[Attempt to Sever Link of Loyalty]

[Failed]

[Attempt to Sever Link of Loyalty]

[Failed]

[Attempt to Sever Link of Loyalty]

[Failed]

Three times in a row this occurs.

I feel an odd pressure on my heart each time it happens, and watch the vitals of my teammates waver during the process. Each time it does, I channel dense Soul Energy within my own body aided by the power of my yellow divine core to flow through my heart and make this external pressure subside.

Every time I manage to fight off the pressure successfully, the three of them walk back into the white room unharmed and without golden collars on their necks.

Each of them recounts their stories of their time in the room, and they all sound very similar to the Lich King's explanation.

The only difference is that when the yellow energy entered their body at the end of the meeting, each of them passed out on the floor and was revitalized by a healer.

None of them are quite sure what happened in the few seconds they were unconscious.

Rodrigo looks up from his silver tablet to me.

"Ray Anderson, you're the last one on the list. Please, walk this way. Good luck."

As I smile and walk by, we meet eyes, as Rodrigo is the A-Class hunter that managed to get me into these exams.

His aura emanates worry and is filled with uneasy nerves.

He's unable to see pure Qi, or inactive Soul Energy; so he doesn't know that some of the applicants today have not fallen under the Sun God's Curse.

As I walk past down the dark hallway, the door shuts behind me, and I see a single black door at the end of a long hall at least 30 meters long.

With every step I take, the aura of the Sun God gets thicker.

There are too many emotions flowing through it to count.

It's furious, impatient, devious, anxious, but also extremely calm and confident in its own overwhelming power. Uncertainty fills the air as I prepare to put on my act and finally meet Mr. Freeman face to face.

Chapter 585

At first, my confidence that I can handle whatever is behind that door is at an all-time high.

The dark purple ring around my finger is a reminder that I've already witnessed beings far more deadly than any yellow core could possibly aspire to rise to.

However, with every step closer I take, the feeling of this being's unwavering confidence and desire to control and destroy everything that stands in its way washes through me.

The pressure of threads in the air isn't too intense, as if it were, applicants wouldn't be able to make it down this hall, but I can feel that I'm getting much closer to the source, and it is being heavily suppressed.

Small hints of its true power leak out in pockets of the aura that ripples through the mana-shielded walls with no resistance.

The threads are interwoven with golden Soul Energy, and every time I believe I have a solid gauge on the power output of the being producing these threads, another pocket of energy catches my attention, and the depth of its power grows more profound.

I make it to the end of the hall, standing right in front of the door, and pause for a few seconds.

There's a light clicking sound, and the rectangular cutout of the wall in front of me slides open to reveal the same dark room that I witnessed in the video moments ago.

Two golden eyes stare through me from behind the oval-shaped table at the back of the room, and the raw essence of the sun god can finally be seen without any boundaries in its way.

A far thicker series of waves of yellow and golden light flow through the air, but none of them are hostile or attack my senses in any way.

They're more curious, and most likely residual energy that leaks off this man that can't be held back.

His voice speaks up again, and I don't hear any difference in the monotone static sound identical to the one coming through the video before.

"Welcome, Ray Anderson of the Bedrock Region. It is a pleasure to meet you face to face. Congratulations on placing number one of the B-Class applicants this year. It is quite an honor. I believe this is the first year a Bedrock applicant has reached this height."

As I take a few more steps forward to stand at the other edge of the round table, the door closes behind me with another light click, and I'm left face to face with the man I came to these exams in the first place to find.

I respond, looking him straight into his golden eyes.

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Freeman."

The energy that hits my barrier perfectly replicates the sensation and visual of it passing straight through my body to outside watchers. While this happens, I take in the sight before me with awe, struggling hard not to show any reaction to the mind-bending sight.

It's still hard to calculate his actual strength just by the energy signature he's giving off alone.

Some of the waves of light that come off of him feel as weak as a hunter that just ranked up for the first time, while others feel stronger than ten of the golden lizards combined that I faced up in the obsidian forests.

It makes me shiver, as even with my enhanced senses, I can't figure out his true power.

My inspect and appraisal skills activate soon after, and they bring back readings that make the gears in my mind turn even faster.

In bright blue text at front and center in my mind's eye, [Lv. 9017] burns into my consciousness as its the highest level rating by far I've ever scanned.

He speaks up again while this is the only thing on my mind.

"Let us start with the basics, please, Ray, do explain to me how you managed to get so strong in the years after your C-Class exams and the Catastrophe in the Bedrock Region a year ago. All of our records say that you were dead, yet you managed to pull yourself out of it and even best some of our best trained Apex Region Applicants."

His questions register, but my mind is more focused on scanning through all of the other details that my appraisal skill is signaling into my brain.

This man's equipped items are full to the brim with 12 one of a kind artifacts, all holding three or more enchantments each, special attributes, element stones, and none of the items equipped have below a 500% buff on any of their readings. Some unique pieces even have buffs that surpass 1000%.

This means they were all crafted by a Mythic Grade Craftsman, most likely the old Sector 2 leader. They are all powerful enough to be considered national treasures, and most likely couldn't even be

sold on auction because no one in the 8 Great Regions has enough power to comprehend their value but the Director himself.

I don't want it to seem too suspicious that I'm thinking this long, so I finally respond to the Director's question with a reply that aligns with what the Lich King's answer to this question was too.

"After the catastrophe, I was shaken by the possibility that an event like that could happen at any time. I didn't have friends or family to come back to in the Bedrock Region, so I decided to get stronger on my own terms."

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I smile inwardly while explaining my next part of the story.

"I hope you don't think differently of me for this, but I used many of the Bedrock and Vice Region's underground dungeon networks to train in private. After seeing some of the raw power of the mutants in the C-Class breaks, I knew there was more to being a strong hunter than just leveling up. I spent most of my time over the last year following what the Association thought of as my death to train my mana control in isolation. Every spare mana crystal and potion I could find went into honing my lightning ability in the abandoned mines of the Bedrock Regions and the isolated forests of the Vice Region. I may have been missing on record, but I was truly just trying to become strong."

The aura of Soul energy and Divine Threads that ripple through me feels amused and curious now.

The golden eyes before me glow a bit brighter as he asks his next questions.

"You really brought your strength to the level it is alone? You truly had no backers? And in only a year...?"

He pauses, but adds onto this right after.

"What are your plans for the future then? Do you wish to join the Apex Region and climb the pinnacle of strength further?"

As he's speaking, the words hit my consciousness, but my active mind is elsewhere scanning the rest of his status; taking in the skills and buff sections.

[Active Skills]

Combat Magic [Superior Light Summoning]

Appraisal [Legendary Grade]

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Swordsmanship [Legendary Grade]

Soft Heal [Legendary Grade]

[Active Buffs]

Master of Illusion [Hidden Ability]

The Sun God's Curse Mark [82/100]

At first, the long list of skills looks daunting, but I quickly piece together in my mind that the bottom four skills on his status are most likely not permanent skills.

Just like the other Directors, they all have similar legendary skills like this, and I know exactly how it's done thanks to the old books I read from Bri's old workshop. If enough blood of a skill user is siphoned while using their ability, it can be merged with an item even without a mythic grade skill.

With the potential help of a mythic grade craftsman, and the number of subjects the Association has in their control to do testing on, the possibilities are endless.

This brings me to the conclusion that most likely, the superior light magic is the Director's actual original skill.

Before thinking too deeply into his buffs or the fact that he himself has a healing skill, I answer his next question not to leave the room in silence for too long.

"My plans for the future? I'm not quite sure... If you say there are really breaks in the Dark Continent that require more A-Class hunters to handle, then I want to get stronger by any means necessary to protect myself and others from an event like the catastrophe again from happening..."

The aura around the Director grows in intensity for a moment, and the pressure in the room starts to drastically increase.

I feel it reach and surpass levels of heat and gravity beyond the example shown in the other room when he first revealed himself.

To play the part, and not out myself on the spot, I drop to one knee and gasp for air, holding my head to show that I'm in agony to play along.

It grows to become almost five times as intense as before, likely bringing even some double-ranked-up hunters to their knees.

He speaks up, seeing that I still haven't fallen all the way to the floor yet.

"Fight it, activate that ranked-up buff of yours. I want to see how strong you truly are."

I grit my teeth, covering my body in lightning and using my conceal skill mixed with my divine energy and limiter to manipulate reality around me to show the exact images of what Trax's ranked-up buff could do back when I saw it up close.

Just from standing in front of this man now, my urges to get in an instant fight with him have nearly all subsided.

Not only is he fully equipped with gear that surpasses mine, but he's almost three times my level, and I can't even perceive his full power.

While I can make educated guesses, and predict that the extended training I went through inside the green aura of that divine serpent possibly brought my own yellow core up to a high level; a single line I heard from Celia at the top of the construct echoes in my mind.

She spoke of a young man with light magic that reached the yellow core height within her construct decades ago.

There's a very high chance that exact man is sitting before me right now.

With decades of fragment farming within this divine rift, and more time to consolidate and master his power than I've even been alive; there's no telling if he's actually showing me his full power or not.

The small pockets of energy he's letting out could all just be a test to see who can perceive his power or not, and the one foolish enough to challenge him will see the real monster he's holding back.

All of these suspicions hold me back from doing anything rash right now, but I still want to give a good impression and see how far I can take this persona of Ray Anderson.

I give off the showing of what a ranked-up buff would look like, and increase my mana control output to that of a 1200-1300 hunter, erupting with static electricity to fill the room.

The aura of amusement and now a hint of greed coming off of Mr. Freeman fills the room as the heat and pressure subsides.

"Very good. I like what I see... In our induction ceremony, once all of the Regional Directors arrive, I will be putting up a contract offer for you to become part of the next A-Class team within the Apex region. You do not have to decide now, but I believe telling you now is better than to surprise you in front of your peers."

The man coughs, and hunches over after his words, holding his chest.

For the first time, his golden eyes leave their straight line of sight, and three doors open up from the side of the room as three workers, all above level 990 with legendary [Soft Heal] skills on their status, rush over to the Director.

He raises his head while their white light covers his chest.

"My apologies, I hope you don't mind if we have some company while I finish up your interview."

I wipe sweat from my forehead and get up from my kneeling position to continue my act, but I can't unsee what I just saw.

For a split second, the elusive shadowy featureless figure of the Sun God sitting at the back of the oval table wavered.

My mind tracks back to his buffs list, and I recall seeing one called [Master of Illusion].

While the person before me is certainly not weak, and the energy readings I feel and see are not a lie, the images before my eyes are what are really not what they seem.

I haven't been tricked like this in a while...

Before me, the image of a sunken-in face of an old man, hooked up to dozens of wires and tubes flashes in my mind.

Some of the tubes are filled with mana, pumping magic-dense blood through the man from floating containment cases. Other wires are attached to his arms, legs, chest, and neck, transmitting vitals into a large blinking metallic device.

Portions of his skin are cracking and disintegrating away, yellow divine threads constantly eating away at his flesh and bones.

The combined effort of the machinery, the three nurses, and his own healing skill activating manages to reverse the effects, mending the deteriorating body back to pristine health. It looks as if the man's age reverses back in time 30 years in just a few seconds.

Chapter 586

The waves of energy that flow off him now ripple with newfound strength. After being healed, the aura in the room feels like its coming from a whole new person.

The Soul Energy feels pure, and the Divine energy permeates through it with precision and strength that makes me begin to understand the Director's power.

While he may be sick and seem to be on the brink of death, that does not mean he is weak.

A desperate man is at his strongest when he is close to victory, yet wavering on the edge of losing it all.

The man before me has trained for decades, building an Empire around him to suit his needs and extend his power, even while in such a debilitating state.

All thoughts of trying to end our silent feud here and now leave my mind; this is a meticulous enemy who, on paper, has higher stats, better items, and even possibly more refined energy control than my own.

Risking a fight on his home turf just because of a minor advantage I believe I have after he's exhausted his power is a fool's move. I need to study him more, learn the ways of the Association, and dismantle it from the inside out...

As these thoughts race through my mind, he speaks up again, continuing our private interview right where we left off.

"What are your thoughts on the exam this year? As the number one ranked applicant, I would like to know what you think highly of, and what you believe should be changed for next year's trial."

I think for a moment, feeling a bit more focused now that I've decided I won't be getting into a life-or-death battle in the next few minutes, and answer this question truthfully.

"I think it's quite a well-designed exam. From the moment we entered the site, those who wanted to rely on luck alone were weeded out pretty quickly. Having a trial to see who could look through the veil and problem-solve their way out of a situation where the odds were clearly against them set a good tone for the entire exam."

I nod to myself and continue.

"The physical, written, and simulation trials were an excellent mixture of testing raw talent, creativity, and teamwork. I think the first three stages of the exams were flawless; there isn't anything I would change there... but the fourth stage... the tournament, I believe the interference of an outside party made things quite unfair. Even if it ended in my favor, I don't think it showed a true display of what the rankings could have been."

I feel anger ripple through the man's aura.

Now as I look at him, all I see with my actual senses are golden eyes and a shadowy black cloak, but his past imagery is still fresh in my mind as he responds.

"I would agree with you, it was not our intention to have an intruder like the Flame Emperor present. That threat will be dealt with in time. Did you ever come in contact or receive any information about that intruder during your time here?"

I pretend to think for a moment, then shrug and reply.

"Nothing more than anyone else present. All I know is what Emrie told me. He said he looked into the crowds and called out to that being, in order to have a fair fight against that healer. The Flame Emperor granted him power, and it felt like extra mana control was surging through his body; then once it left, he couldn't use the power again. It must be some kind of long-range temporary buff."

The Director nods, as I've said nothing he doesn't already know.

After a few seconds of silence pass, I move on.

"The fifth stage, though, I didn't really understand it. Considering the proctors had to ask what happened inside, I guess that means the simulation wasn't being monitored? -And that fruit that I brought back, it damaged my hands to hold it, yet I felt no mana coming off it. What kind of special technology was used to make that place?"

I pause for a moment, as I don't expect the Director to answer any of these questions, so I feed him another piece of false information just to turn things in another direction.

"And what was with that purple wave of light? Emrie and I were both minding our business near the blue portal to leave after we both had enough points to pass, and the sky turned dark purple... It was like the entire simulation turned into these purple threads and was disappearing before my eyes. I assumed I counted the days wrong and you were turning it off early, so we jumped through the portal to leave before the sky completely fell."

The golden aura permeating through the room ripples with excitement, and Mr. Freeman leans forward in his chair.

"Purple... Did you say purple?"

I smile inwardly as I respond.

"Yeah, the air got hot and heavy, kind of like your own aura, but from hundreds of kilometers away. It made me feel like I was not welcome there anymore, like I was stealing something I shouldn't have. Maybe it was just my mind playing tricks on me, but that's what I vividly remember it felt like."

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The Director turns his head and whispers in the healer's ear by his side. She starts tapping on a silver tablet after pulling it from an item box on her waist.

The excitement in the air increases, and the Director whispers under his breath, "The others said it was black, but they didn't leave the rift naturally. Their minds could have been altered... So I was right... There really was a creator..." He murmurs more, not caring if I hear him or not, and the aide to his side continues to type things down on the tablet, most likely recording what he's saying.

After a few seconds pass, he turns back to me and responds directly.

"That is very interesting. That stage five is a work in progress, after all; it was a gift from the Association's central branch. We didn't create it."

The aide by his side nods and puts away the tablet, then the other two stop their healing. They all leave the room through the three doors they came from. One of them stumbles and is caught by the nurse by their side as yellow threads begin to overpower her body.

It looks exactly like the time Nat absorbed red threads from her teammates inside the construct. If they were not ejected quickly, her body would start to decay from the inside just like this nurse here.

The nurse is carried out by her coworker, and the doors all close again.

It reminds me that the man in front of me may speak with a confident tone and offer me power, but everything he does is for himself.

The Director speaks up.

"Well, that is all the time I have. Here is your final test. Try to stay awake as long as you can, and I will see you again during our induction ceremony when the rest of the directors arrive."

As soon as these words leave his mouth, I feel the heat and pressure in the room increase again.

I activate my version of the lightning buff to increase my mana control as yellow and golden energy expands from his body.

It feels like dozens of yellow-cored lizards are using their observation aura on me at once.

I could withstand it if I wanted, but I fall to the floor and use my conceal skill to make it appear as though the shockwave of energy made me pass out.

Golden tendrils of Soul Energy emerge from the Director, and his body lights up in its aura, making the dark room as bright as day.

His [Master of Illusion] buff deactivates completely, and I see the old man's face still hold onto its strong features, displaying thick white eyebrows and a full head of hair. His piercing golden eye's emit power and light that have been with him through thousands of battles.

I see now why this man is called the Sun God.

His cloak that was previously black glows bright yellow, making him seem like he's a pure energy being for a moment.

The Soul Energy erupts from his back and reaches over the table, and I prepare to fend off The Sun God's Curse Mark.

All of the stories from Nat, Emrie, Marcie, and Dane all said the same thing, this is the point where the Director tried to put the golden collar around their neck.

I feel my purple ring vibrate, and it sends out a pulse of calmness and control, letting me know that there is nothing to worry about. The consciousness of the purple lifeform may be dormant, but it still interacts with the outside world in a semi-conscious manner occasionally.

As the golden light mixed with countless yellow threads hits me, the ring pulses, sending a wave through my body that makes me shiver. A surge of additional purple threads flows from the main source through me.

I feel the barrier grow thicker and ripple as all of the divine energy strengthening the Sun God's attack is stripped away and devoured by the invisible purple tendrils.

I'm still struck by the pure and powerful golden Soul Energy, but I cover my vitals with my own Soul Energy and yellow threads within my body.

It feels like immense heat and pressure attack my cores and consciousness, tightening and trying to break through; but it feels just the same as it did each time my teammates were attacked in the same manner.

My physical and mental barriers are far too strong to let unaided soul energy alone through.

I can feel its raw power, but my own Soul Energy is being amplified by divine threads, and all I have to do is focus on brute force defense.

About twenty seconds pass, and the pressure subsides.

The room dims, then goes dark again, and the golden tendrils fall back into the Director's body.

He coughs a few times, then shakes his head and mutters to himself while pressing a button beneath the table.

"Another failure... How unexpected... The interference is back. This year's class is full of oddities. I'll have other chances to capture them once I rest. This is fine, he seems loyal and driven to grow. We are still on track to secure the throne..."

Only two nurses come back into the room and heal up the Director again.

He speaks to one of them, describing the sensation of his divine threads being suppressed, and the buff not activating once they reached my core just like the other four applicants. She notes down what he says in the silver tablet again.

The pressure in the room is completely gone, but I don't stand up to my feet until the other healer comes to rejuvenate me.

I allow her white healing energy to enter my body and climb to my feet after a few seconds.

The same door I entered through opens behind me, and the Director nods.

"You did well, I will see you again soon."

A minor aura of confusion is hidden in between his confident ripple now.

I give him a single nod, then turn and leave.

His veil of illusion fell again for a moment while he was being healed, and it seems like this massive display of power gave the Director the same amount of fatigue and injuries as the lesser display did earlier.

As the door closes behind me and I make it back into the waiting room with all of the other applicants, I think over what just happened with a realistic outlook.

His base level of Soul Energy is far stronger than my own, I would still most likely be unable to combat that raw strength even in my greater form if there was Divine Energy Aiding his attack.

It makes me wonder if this was even his true power still. If the same amount of damage was done on a weak display and this stronger one, the odds aren't zero that he was still holding back.

The advantage I had was the fact that he was trying to do a very intricate task, and all I had to do was use brute force defense.

I look down at the dull purple ring on my finger and feel no sign of intelligent life permeating from it now. It used up a lot of its active energy to make that attack easier to defend. Its passive limiter still works as before, but I get the feeling it won't be able to help me again from an identical attack.

There is a dying higher lifeform on my finger, a sleeping dragon in my storage, and the Lich King's limiter is most likely about to decay within the next ten to twenty minutes. I have no idea where I am, walking through windowless mana-shielded hallways into an equally isolated mana-shielded waiting room. Once I step through the sliding door to see Emrie and my teammates again, I have one final task on my mind.

I need to leave the Apex Region the next moment I get.

Chapter 587

I walk back into the waiting room and flash Rodrigo a small smile.

His expression doesn't change, but I can tell he's both confused and relieved at the same time as he speaks up, and the door behind me closes.

"Now that all of your personal meetings are complete, please, do take time to rest while the regional directors make their way to the Apex Region."

A door on the opposite side of the room opens up, revealing a well-lit hallway.

It has numbered doors on the sides of the hall labeled 1-12, and at the end of the hallway, there is an open door leading to what looks like a wide lounge area with a bar, long couches, and tables.

"Take your time to relax in private or at the lounge. Congratulations, B-Class Hunters, welcome to your next chapter of life here at the Association. I will notify you all once the ceremony is soon to begin."

At his words, my mind is still elsewhere, thinking about the intense meeting I just had with the Apex Region's Director.

My only thoughts are on keeping my head low and getting out of here with my identity intact before the Director has a chance to try that again.

I send a wave of telepathy to the Lich King and command him to follow me to the room with the large number [1] on its door.

I don't bother talking with any of the other contestants. Some head straight for the bar at the back of the far room, while others, including Dane, Marcie, and Nat, all go to their private rooms to rest.

Once we both get inside, it seems like a similar replica of the resting room suites from earlier in the exam.

There's food, potions, a couch, a bed, a bathroom, and all the essentials for taking a load off after a long exam.

I ignore all of it and stare the manifestation of Emrie in the eyes and send him another wave of telepathy.

"How are we going to stop your limiter from decaying... I'm so close to the finish line. I just need to have you concealed for a little longer..."

There's a long pause before he responds.

"There is no way. I would need months to recoup the energy lost from my core. Using immortal divine energy isn't as simple as it looks."

We stand in silence, and many more ideas flash through my head.

The possibility of de-summoning him and substituting him for a body double crosses my mind, but that wouldn't solve anything. Their mana control is even higher, as it's just a one-for-one clone of myself.

Feeding the Lich King my remaining Qi pills to make a barrier wouldn't work either. We will surely be in the presence of the Director again.

His Soul Energy is his own, meaning he cultivated Qi and merged it with his mana to become the source of its power, unlike all of the other guards under his spell. He can see pure Qi, so it would be a useless disguise.

I begin to pace around the room, thinking of more and more possibilities, but nothing at all comes to mind.

It makes me conceptualize even further how valuable the purple ring on my finger really is.

One of the main weaknesses an enemy can have in battle is showing their opponent how strong they truly are.

It is always more beneficial to have your opponent underestimate you than to be fully prepared for everything you have.

This is one of the major drawbacks of possessing high levels of mana control, Soul Energy, or even a divine core. In this world, there is always someone stronger lurking around every corner. Your enemies can always see the power you hold, and will surely nip your growth at the bud by any means necessary if you grow too fast.

While I do feel grateful for this ability to deceive my enemies, the time still ticks down as an ally is going to be the thread that unravels all of my hard work.

On one of my laps around the room while I'm deep in thought, my shoulder brushes Emrie's as he stands motionless, waiting for another command at the side of the room.

Instead of just brushing by, I catch the sensation of thousands of invisible purple tendrils of energy reaching out from my barrier and trying to attach themselves to the Lich King.

The instant that I take another step away, the reaching threads retract, but it sparks an idea.

I turn around and place both my hands on Emrie's shoulders, and the same sensation of purple threads that make up my barrier start to cover Emrie as well.

In a matter of seconds, his body is completely covered, and it looks no different.

The only reason I can feel it is because I'm connected to the ring. If I wasn't, it wouldn't seem like anything has changed.

I release my grip and all of the purple threads retract in an instant, flooding back around my body.

I message him through the telepathy link.

"This could work... As long as we're making contact, the barrier seems to view you as an extension of myself."

It makes sense, as the Shadow Summon before me is created out of a manifestation of my own Dark Magic mixed with the skeletal remains of the Lich King.

Over the next ten minutes, I test out the barrier more and more.

From the eyes of the surveillance system, on the screen of whoever is watching these tests take place, it just seems like we're standing in silence and Emrie is making odd hand gestures while I tap him on the shoulder over and over.

Once the natural barrier created by the Lich King fades away naturally, I've mastered the ability to keep a light barrier around him at all times.

Over the next few hours, I do even more tests.

While the barrier is made of pure energy, it does in fact have a half-conscious mind subconsciously controlling it.

Even after it's expelled power from protecting me from the Sun God's attack, I still feel faint emotions whenever the barrier wavers.

The more I manipulate it, the more it aligns with my thought process, and I'm able to move the purple threads just slightly by myself.

It may be slow, but after hundreds of trials, I'm capable of forming what looks to me like a small puddle of invisible divine energy on the floor, connecting my own feet to Emrie.

We're able to stand about a full meter apart for a few seconds at a time and the barrier stands.

I'm confident I could raise this distance further if I had more time, but a loud ding echoes through the room as a familiar face shows up on the ceiling's video display.

Rodrigo speaks and the doors open on all the resting rooms.

"I hope you all enjoyed your rest. The Regional Directors have all arrived, please enter the hall and follow the white arrows."

His video shuts off, and we both walk out the door and do as he says.

There are white arrows on the floor that lead in the opposite direction of the lounge area, leading us back the way we originally came.

All of the other applicants follow these orders, and we all walk back into the dark shadowy room with the oval table in the middle of it.

Now, all of the chairs are full.

All 8 of the Regional Directors sit before us as we line up to face them in a straight line parallel to the back of the room.

Their faces are simply lit by the golden rings around their fingers and the golden eyes of the director that sits in the middle of them all.

In a half-crescent behind all of the directors, about a dozen B-Class Elites stand on guard. In front of them, the three A-Class Hunters of the Association stand behind Mr. Freeman.

The golden-eyed man speaks up in his loud static monotone voice.

"Congratulations, new B-Class Hunters of the 8 Great Regions' Association Branch. You have all worked very hard to make it here today..."

The Apex Region's Director goes on, talking about strength and honor; growing from an E-Class Hunter, climbing the ranks, and putting our lives on the line fighting life-or-death battles. He then explains one's need for strength, problem-solving skills, and innate talent as well, showing that we have risen above all of our peers to make it here today.

The old man tells stories of old B-Class exams and points out excellent hunters in the room today, putting on a show that must be tradition for an event like this.

All of the present Regional Directors politely sit and listen.

Finally, he pulls out a stack of cards from beneath the table and calls out my persona's name.

"Ray Anderson, of the Bedrock Region, step forward."

I do so, taking one step while keeping the limiter attached to Emrie.

Golden light fills the man's hands and next a card comes floating my way, with a single tendril of energy flowing from behind it.

I sense no malice in the soul energy strand, so I catch it.

The moment it touches my fingers the energy fades away, and I see a new Hunter's ID with Ray Anderson's face, the Association logo, and a large [B] in the corner of the card.

"Congratulations, you're now officially a B-Class Hunter."

All of the Directors and hunters behind them clap slowly, then I take a step back.

"Natalie Sterling, of the Apex Region, step forward," are the next words out of the Director's mouth.

I see the white-haired healer a few people away from me in line step forward and get awarded her license in the same manner.

One by one, each hunter is given their ID cards and congratulated by the most powerful people in all of the 8 Great Nations.

Emrie receives his card as well. I'm straining to keep the limiter stable while he stands over a meter away from me for almost a full half minute, but I manage it; grabbing his shoulder and congratulating him visually to everyone the moment he steps back.

Everything has gone to plan, any minute now, I'll be able to leave this region and return to the Crimson City.

While this thought is on my mind, Mr. Freeman pulls small blue mana-filled crystals from the bottom of his desk.

They look similar to recording crystals, but when mana is channeled into them, they're each passed to the Directors in the room one by one.

Most of the Directors pull out papers and scribble down notes when they see the crystals for themselves, and my curiosity only grows the longer they keep passing the gems around.

After about 3 minutes pass, the gems are finally all passed back to the center of the table and the Apex Region's Director speaks up while using 12 light tendrils of soul energy to lift them into the air.

"As new B-Class hunters of the Association, you are all a far more valuable resource than you were just one month ago. Here are the contract offers you've been given by each of the Regional Directors."

The gems all fly toward the hunter they're meant for, and the Director speaks again.

"Four of you have been offered a path to become A-Class hunters, directly training under me."

Then, he looks at Nat.

"One of you won the 4th stage tournament and may create a contract offer back to any Region you desire."

His golden eyes then sweep across all of us.

"The rest of you may counter the offers given by the Regions that see interest in you, but if a Region has not sent you an offer, you're not authorized to send them a formal offer until one year of service to the Association is complete."

His words cut off at the same time that his Soul Energy does, and the blue crystals stay floating in front of everyone's faces, showing countless manifested screens with timed contracts, conditions, and payment details.

[Apex Region Offer][A-Class Fighter Recruitment][Expand More Details]

[Apex Region Offer][B-Class Elite Guard][Expand More Details]

[Vice Region Offer][3-Year Dungeon Exploration Contract][Expand More Details]

[Vice Region Offer][2-Year Dungeon Farming Contract][Expand More Details]

[Veridian Region Offer][2-Year Dungeon Farming Contract][Expand More Details]

[Veridian Region Offer][1-Year Director's Guard Duty Contract][Expand More Details]

[Bedrock Region Offer][4-Year Director's Guard Duty Contract][Expand More Details]

[Bedrock Region Offer][2-Year Dungeon Control Contract][Expand More Details]

[Bedrock Region Offer][1-Year Mining Contract][Expand More Details]

[Phantom Region Offer][2-Month Dungeon Exploration Contract][Expand More Details]

Ten offers flash in front of my face, and as I press expand on some of the options, I see the detailed conditions that need to be met for all of the offers before me.

Above the extended details, there are 3 more options: [Accept][Decline][Counter].

The payouts range from 100 gold coins total for a 2-month exploration through the Phantom Region to discover and mark their unknown dungeons in dangerous unexplored areas of land, to hefty 15 platinum per year salaries from the Vice Region to do basically the same thing.

Many of the guard duty offers include premium housing, free Region-wide transportation, and 5-10 platinum per year salaries.

Still, above all of them on the list, the Apex Region's Offer of [A-Class Recruitment] looks to be the most interesting of them all.

While the salary of 10 platinum per year, free housing, and transportation among all 8 of the Great Regions is just about on par with all of the other contracts, the mention of access to dungeons and labyrinths to increase the signer's level to above 1000 within the first month of signing catches my eye the most.

This means that there are means to train up hunters within the Apex Region to these heights, and the Director wants to train up 4 new A-Class fighters as fast as possible.

The thought of a potential training ground that is similar to my own back in the canyon of dungeons interests me. The fact that the Director doesn't seem worried at all about his strongest hunter's crushing defeat makes me think he's still hiding incredibly powerful secrets behind the Apex Region's closed doors.

Chapter 588

Many of the applicants looking at the manifested contracts in front of them press down on options, pushing a finger into the fragments of blue crystals.

I watch the holograms of text fold back into the floating devices, and the crystals shift their form slightly into compact cubes with data swirling inside of them before they float back to the oval table at the center of the room.

A majority of the crystals hover back toward the Apex Region's Director, while Dane and Nat's fly toward the Silca Region and Veridian Region's Directors respectively.

The only people who still look at their contract options in the line are Marcie, Emrie, and myself.

Marcie speaks up in the silent room.

"I'm not interested in signing any of these, am I free to go now?"

She pushes the floating crystal back toward the table without making any counter offers. In the same motion, she makes the move to put her new hunter's ID in her item box, but misses it on purpose.

It falls to the floor next to her feet, making a noticeable sound as it settles onto the hard mana shielding below us, then she just crosses her arms and waits for a response.

I feel auras of shock and confusion come from many of the Region Directors.

However, the Talton Region's Leader emanates pride and a bit of amusement from this display.

The other new B-Class hunters in my line are worried about what Mr. Freeman's reaction will be, but once he speaks up, it's clear he expected something along these lines to happen.

"We're happy to see our long-lasting agreement with the Talton Region is still producing strong warriors. Of course, it's not mandatory for you to sign. You may leave with your Director once our conversation here today has finished."

He pauses, then in the same instance, all of the blue gems are sent flying back from both him and the other two directors to their hunters.

"For those of you that have sent offers back, or wish to think things over longer; you will have 5 days until the yearly contract terms begin. So, I hope we can settle things by then. You may stay here in the Apex Region; we will happily accommodate you while you think about your future."

I think about his words and continue reading over the terms of many of the deals in front of me as the blue crystals are sent back and forth between hunters and directors.

Some of the blue crystals stop glowing and stay in their consolidated cube forms once agreements are settled. They all stack in a pile in the center of the table.

The only two people left in the room who haven't decided on their future are Emrie and myself.

The thought of spending time here in the Apex Region is partially appealing because I want to gain access to whatever facility is used for training A-Class Hunters, but at the same time, there's no way I want to be alone in a room with Mr. Freeman again before I can return to the Dark Continent and think up a plan to secure my victory in overpowering him without any unforeseen risks.

I send out a telepathy channel between all of my teammates during this exam and talk to them one by one, detailing the fact that I have a long-range communication ability and will be reaching out to them in the near future.

Dane has signed a 4-Year Guard Duty Contract with the Silca Region Director, while Nat has signed a 1-Year Dungeon Exploration Contract in the Veridian Region.

Marcie responds to my telepathy link with a message I expected to receive, but it is still a bit sad to hear it come from her.

"It was a pleasure working with you, whoever you are, but my loyalties still hold true to my leader. I thank you for the help, and hope to see you again soon."

She looks forward at her leader in the room, and I feel our link of loyalty slowly disintegrate.

It feels cold, like I'm losing a small part of myself, but she did tell me this would happen when we first started.

I smile inwardly, replying to each of them.

"The pleasure was mine; I'll see you all very soon."

Then, both Emrie and I push our crystals back without accepting, countering, or declining any deals.

I speak up to the board of Directors in front of us.

"None of these contracts seem very appealing to me either."

Emrie talks next, echoing the words I tell him to speak.

"We do hope that the presence of two Bedrock applicants passing the B-Class exams this year positively impacts our Region's funding. I wish to come back to a prospering home Region as a result of all my hard work. I have to agree with Ray, none of these contracts suit my needs."

Director Maylack smiles at these words, dimly lit by the golden light of Mr. Freeman.

He speaks up while catching the two dormant contract gems with light tendrils of energy.

"Very well, based on your performance, the Bedrock Region's funding will increase by 20% this coming year. If you'd like to privately negotiate for better terms in your contracts I'm happy to have a meeting set up for us while you rest in our facilities. Making such a life-changing decision deserves some time to think."

His aura emanates with more pressure now, like a wild animal staring down its prey.

I don't react to the instant change in his tone and aura, nodding slowly while replying with a cool and calculated tone.

"You gifted me a transport crystal back here to the Apex Region during the trial period of the exams. Emrie and I will use that to return here in 5 days if we've changed our minds."

The Director's aura completely shifts to one filled with confusion and unease.

"That is true, but if you could at least give us one meeting to talk things out. What is it that you want more than guaranteed access to a labyrinth that will bring you up to level 1000 within a month?"

The whole room's eyes shift toward me, as it seems these terms are one's they all envy.

The golden collars around Callum, the battle healer, and the Phantom Region's B-Class hunter all pulse golden, invisible to everyone in the room that doesn't wield Qi. They all step forward in unison as the Director speaks again.

"You have been given the chance to join your fellow applicants here on the path to an A-Class hunter, to join us in an upcoming war in the Dark Continent. This opportunity is once in a lifetime, what else could you possibly want?"

I think for a full 3 seconds, looking up at the dark ceiling before responding, then smile.

"You know what? There is something I want."

I look over all the seats of Directors before continuing.

"I want you to appoint me publicly as a Regional Director. If I'm going to be such a valuable A-Class hunter asset in the future, I want the world to know."

Gasps fill the room, hunters and Directors included, as I continue looking all of the Directors up and down, pretending to make my decision, but I already know exactly what I'm about to say.

My finger hovers in front of the Bedrock Region's Director for a moment, but he's never done me wrong; if anything, he's been the most helpful and pure-hearted one here.

At the last moment, before I speak again, my pointer finger lands right in front of Brutus, the Regional Director that ordered me to be killed in the Dark Continent, being the catalyst to my entire unorthodox methods of growth and journey back here.

"I want to be the Director of the Vice Region. Give me his spot..."

Inwardly, my smile is stretching ear to ear, but I only let my lips curve upward a crack to make my decision seem less targeted.

The room goes silent, as this wasn't expected at all. Requesting a position like this is far out of the realm of reasonable asks for a mere newly appointed B-Class to demand.

The dimly lit faces of all the Directors, and hunters behind them can't believe the words that just came out of my mouth.

After there isn't a response for a full 5 seconds other than more gasps and whispers, I decide this is more than enough to keep them talking and suit my short-term needs.

I shrug and speak again while putting a hand behind my back to reach into my fake manifestation of an item box to grab a teleport crystal out of my storage.

"Think about it. I'll be back in 5 days to take a private tour of these A-Class facilities you say can bring me up to level 1000 and then we will discuss the salary and contract time frame. If you won't accept this first simple term, then our negotiations end here."

Before there is any time for a response, I crush the fragile shimmering gem in my closed fist.

A flash of bright white light brings The Lich King and me back to the underground bunker beneath the Crimson City.

Chapter 589

The room is left with just ten new B-Class hunters standing in a line, and the Regional Directors stare at the empty spot where Emrie and I just left.

Brutus, the Regional Director of the Vice Region, is the first to break the silence.

"Is this a joke? He may have come in first place in this year's ranking, but to become a Regional Director at such a young age? What kind of demand is this?"

More whispers fill the room.

"Wouldn't he just be happy with the opportunity to become an A-Class hunter? That position is given out once a decade at most, and he's throwing away a priceless position!"

"A backwater Region brat gets a taste of power and thinks he is owed the world..."

"Unacceptable, that position should have been offered to a Vice or Veridian applicant in the first place..."

"What a disgrace..."

The insults and whispers are silenced by Mr. Freeman's next words.

"There is no need to worry, Brutus. It is a preposterous demand, and I will work out a reasonable deal with him once he returns."

The tension in the room dissipates a little, but there is still an air of mystery as the Regional Directors bring their applicants back to their home regions using teleport crystals one by one. Everyone with a golden collar stays in line, preparing to settle into the Apex Region to soon begin their B-Class Elite and A-Class training.

I materialize onto the transport platform beneath the guildhall in the Crimson City with the Lich King by my side and immediately un-summon him.

Due to the sacrifice of his remains and the contract of the ritual, I feel his presence in my shadow. At any time, I can reactivate my Dark Magic, and he will appear in the same exact condition as before.

I plan on utilizing his knowledge as a Divine Beast in the near future, but I have a few more pressing matters to attend to.

Once I make my way out of the bunker and into the guildhall, I change my appearance to that of an unrecognizable ordinary citizen.

The workers who see me come out of the bunker know that only authorized personnel in my close circle have access to those crystals, and I make sure to alert my nearest body double on duty that I've made it back in one piece.

I do a scan of the city and am happy to see Bri is just one floor above me in a brand-new office inside the guildhall. She's started doing blood-bonded imbuelements and special orders for wealthy clients and Crimson Army members.

My body doubles power-leveled her far past level 2000 in the Labyrinth while I was gone, upgrading her craftsmanship skill to mythic grade. While her mana control is not up to par with the level she's grown to, that isn't necessary in this line of work.

Instead of checking on her or any of my teammates, I head straight to the canyon of dungeons to catch up on lost time from the month that I've been gone.

While my doubles have been able to farm new dungeons and acquire new skills for me, they don't have the capabilities to produce skill orbs. Just in case any of these unique dungeons in the Talton Region or Sector 3 break soon, I want to stock up while I can.

Zippping through dungeon after dungeon, making orb copies of these new skills takes about an hour of my time. In the process, I visit other dungeons with more common skills like body hardening, swordsmanship, dagger mastery, and all of the elemental skills to make a small stockpile for a new business venture idea that's been floating around in the back of my mind.

It is a simple process to use my lifesteal skill and activate my mythic grade absorption perk while channeling soul energy into the activation to create an orb. As the process is rather repetitive, I begin to go down my list of new skills to test them now that I have the time and open space to do so.

I open my status to look over the ten newly acquired skills.

[Imbuelement][Mythic Grade]

[Barrier Creation][Mythic Grade]

If you spot this tale on Amazon, know that it has been stolen. Report the violation.

[Flight][Mythic Grade]

[Area Buff][Mythic Grade]

[Mind Palace][Mythic Grade]

[Astral Spears][Mythic Grade]

[Flash Step][Mythic Grade]

[Call of The Void][Mythic Grade]

[Crystal Creation][Mythic Grade]

[Heavy Hand][Mythic Grade]

A few of them are self-explanatory. [Flash Step] is a movement speed buff that works in short bursts, granting up to 255% speed and agility similar to extreme speed.

[Area Buff] is a team buffing skill, giving a 150% all-stat buff to up to 10 teammates within my mana control's aura.

[Barrier Creation] allows me to create far thicker walls of mana shielding, boosting my defensive ability to a high degree. [Crystal Creation] is very similar, allowing me to summon semi-transparent pink gems that increase in hardness depending on how much mana I imbue into them.

[Heavy Hand] and [Astral Spears] work well together as a more offensive combination. While [Heavy Hand] increases the gravity in a small concentrated area of space dependent on my mana imbued into the skill and the cubic space I exert this pressure on, [Astral Spears] allows me to create invisible spears for long range stealth attacks.

They have very high potential to be useful tools once I practice strengthening them with Divine Threads.

[Flight] makes my feet surge with magic, making it far easier to mana-step through the air. While it isn't necessary when I already use wind magic to fly, it makes the lift-off much faster and mana efficient.

[Imbuement] is a skill I've seen used before in Valor City, when the owner of the Moon Bar I visited after arena nights would craft mana-rich items and increase the potency of mana inside food. I'm excited to see what perks this will add to my [Craftsmanship] skill because it appears to be a very profitable addition.

[Call of The Void] is a very unique skill I obtained from a dungeon full of slow moving creatures living in a dark cave-like dungeon. Their auras send out waves of energy that appeal to the psyche of lower level creatures in the area.

I activate it a few times while monsters are nearby, but in these dungeons, regular mobs are already programmed to be attracted to humans that enter their domain. I don't see any major differences in their behaviors with or without the skill activated.

It is rather underwhelming, but my curiosity is piqued to see how it will work on other humans.

Lastly, I activate a skill called [Mind Palace].

There is a condition on it, showing that it can only be activated one time every 24 hours.

This only grows my curiosity about it further.

While in the middle of a dungeon, farming Turtle Monsters in a swamp dungeon to stack up on their legendary body hardening skills, I feel as though half of my mind is transported to another world.

I'm less than 20 meters from a swamp turtle charging my way as this ability fully consumes my thoughts.

If I wasn't already familiar with the feeling of splitting my consciousness with body doubles and long-range communication recently, the sensation would be very disturbing.

One half of my conscious mind feels as though it's moving at a far quicker rate than reality outside.

I can picture a version of myself sitting on a pure white throne in my inner mind.

Around it are empty bookshelves that go on further than I can see, and there are endless rows in every direction.

The more I focus on it, and the more mana I push from my body to use this skill, the slower reality around me seems to move in relation to my mind within this construct.

The image of the swamp turtle getting closer to me is visible like a whisper in the back of my consciousness, but it looks like it is frozen in time. My full conscious mind is here inside my mind palace.

I stand up from the throne and walk over to one of the empty bookshelves.

My mind is not very focused on anything at first, but then memories, facts, dungeon data, status sheets, and various snippets of information I haven't thought of in ages all begin to stream into the center of my thoughts.

A book materializes on the shelf at eye level, and as I turn to the row behind me, more and more books start to manifest on the shelves in organized patterns the more mana I imbue into this skill and concentrate on past events in my life.

Everything is scattered and fuzzy at first, but the more I think, the more I can recall in perfect memory.

From my first day awakening my skill in a goblin dungeon, to joining a guild, and being contracted with the Association, then my adventures through the Dark Continent.

The most vivid memories are from building up Crimson City these past months and passing the B-Class exams.

It feels like hours are passing as I think back to all of these events, and the rows and rows of bookshelves around me grow with more books and align themselves in a more organized manner.

As I walk down the white halls and let my finger tips glide across the new books that act as manifestations of my memories, it makes it far easier to process my thoughts with newfound clarity.

I start to formulate a perfect plan for what I need to do to expand the city in response to the blatant failed attack from the Association. While the public opinion is still negative of them, it's time to use this to my advantage.

Next, I create a crystal-clear mental list of countless ways I can gain more power in the next five days in order to bring myself to a level where I'd be comfortable confronting the Sun God alone, unaided by any external forces.

Smiling, ready to take on the world with a whole new vision, I walk back through the white bookshelves full of brown and black books to the throne and sit down.

Once I do, this palace in my mind dissipates, and all I have left in front of me is a charging swamp turtle just over ten meters away.

Only a second at most has passed in the outside world, yet what felt like hours passed in my mind.

I stop the turtle with a single finger against its forehead, draining its HP with lifesteal while it flails around, then take its skill orb.

Next, I summon a new body double that already knows exactly what to do.

I give it all of the excess common and elemental skill orbs that I've farmed today, and it uses one of my transport crystals to head back to see Bri in her new 2nd floor workshop at the guildhall.

Meanwhile, I crush a teleport crystal to Valor City, looking forward to seeing my teammates who saved our growing empire from destruction while I was gone.

Chapter 590

[Body Double POV]

I accept the pile of skill orbs from my main body and teleport back into the guildhall.

While I witnessed the memories of its new renovations, seeing it now with the old version that was partially built just a month ago fresh in my mind makes everything here all the more impressive.

There are six full-time workers buying loot from hunters who farm in the dungeons, selling potions, standard gear, and necessary monster hunting items.

There are very organized listings, lines, and the positive atmosphere is creating a thriving business. It's clear that many employees and customers have settled into quite a nice groove over the past months of this guildhall being open.

I make my way upstairs to see a workshop about four times the size of the one back in Vice City. Bri has her own sectioned-off office in the back third of the large floor, while the rest of it is full of magic items being crafted and sorted.

I walk through the rows of basic, special, and legendary grade craftsmen, and knock on the office door that has scheduled times for clients that want special blood-bonded and high percentage stat boosting items created.

Any of my doubles could do exactly the same thing as Bri, but she has far more experience in the field, knows proper pricing, and even has existing clientele that have carried over from her workshop in Vice City.

We've essentially merged our businesses, and she's been managing 25% of the gross revenue to pay her employees while using my resources to farm materials.

I'm making 75% of the profit now without being as hands-on, but granting her access to these resources and connections all over the dark continent, manpower to farm loot, and massive orders from across the major powers of two large continents.

Bri opens the office door after my knock, and all I can think at first is that a double rank-up has done wonders. She looks curvier, has healthier skin, longer hair, and somehow an even more confident stride as she greets me and gets right down to business.

"A double, huh? I delivered the second round of orders to all of the sectors and regions earlier this week with Lith. We can go over the exact numbers if that's what you came here to see. We already structured the new farming quotas with the new down payments—"

I smile and walk into her new office space, then she closes the door behind me as I respond.

"Sure, let's look over the numbers, but that isn't entirely why I came. I have a new branch of business that I want to start up."

We both sit in the middle of the office on a very comfortable couch to look at all the numbers together, and I'm pleasantly surprised.

Her new imbuement and special order crafting business has already brought in an additional 103 platinum this month in profit. While she only took clients pre-approved by my doubles and members of the Crimson Army to ensure that overpowered gear isn't being sold to our enemies, it's still a substantial amount of extra income.

There was roughly 800 platinum that came in from the payments for goods being delivered on the new order of shipments this month.

In addition to this, 660 platinum was received as the 25% down payment for next month's orders, keeping the growing trend line for order volume steady— well over two times last month's down payments. That will create over an additional 2,000 platinum in pure profit once the special orders for each region and additional guildhall profit are calculated.

The cost of basic aid, including food, water, and housing for new residents that come into the city is negligible. The total cost is a few platinum a month at most. The excess funds that have been allocated for construction this coming month are 200 platinum to expand the outer city to create room for even more outside trade. Plus, there will be a vertical expansion of towers in the city, both for businesses to rent out office space and for more wealthy citizens to start purchasing and renting luxury housing options if they wish.

Overall, this is the first time since this entire city's creation that I'm finally seeing more money come into it than is leaving it in a single month.

At first, I funded everything out of the winnings I received in the Valor City fight arena to bet on the future.

The cost of constant expansion and scaling up the dungeon farming business was not profitable month to month to do at first, but now that the volume of transactions is reaching a level that is beyond what one person can do alone, and the exponential aspect of scaling has slowed, I'm finally seeing the fruits of my labor.

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After all expenses needed for this full month of expansion, there's going to still be over 1000 platinum in the city's business vault and my main body's storage combined.

Bri smiles as she flips to the final page of all the accounting notes.

"That's everything. We still have to expand into Solara in Sector 4, The Silca, Raya, Phantom, Veridian, and Apex Region. There is still room for massive growth once the trade influence grows in these parts of the two nations we're currently established in."

I would take longer to think, but I already planned everything out when I had an epiphany using my new skill [Mind Palace].

"Perfect. I should be able to secure a meeting with over half of those regions soon. I made some new connections while away at the B-Class exams."

Bri's eyes widen and she leans in closer to me.

"You made it back? Did you pass? W-What? I thought this was just an old double... You should have told me earlier!"

I laugh, then run through the details of the exams quickly, leaving out parts about the divine construct and a few other details that would take far too long to explain, but assure her that Rodrigo is still safe.

"Basically, to sum things up, I passed and got all of the information I was looking for. I met the Apex Region's director, and now I have five days to get strong enough to face him again and not fall under his curse. There's a way to get your brother back, and I have a plan to do so while gaining far more than just that."

I grin while opening up my item storage and pouring hundreds of skill orbs onto the center table.

"They attacked my city and think I won't strike back with everything I have? It's time to dismantle that crooked organization from the inside out and create an Association of my own... These skill orbs right here are where we begin."

—

[Main Body POV]

Meanwhile, I teleport into the lobby of the Galeheart Tower to see two lobbyists greet me from across the room that I haven't seen in quite a while.

They welcome me back and tell me I can wait for Lith to return to town later tonight, but I politely decline as I'm here for other reasons.

I leave out into the streets of the Royal Coin district of Valor City.

It's still extremely quiet, and only a few of Lith's guards stand outside a few buildings in the area. Other than that, everyone else still believes the Dark One holds ownership of the entire city.

Not much has changed at all here.

Other than the double-layered mana shielding requested on my tower that leads down to the Qi mines, everything in Valor City has stayed exactly the same.

I do a scan of the entire city as a whole all throughout the silver, gold, and platinum districts too, and business seems to be running just as usual.

I send long-range transmissions to Abby and Maria to meet me at the surface, while sending another wave to Lydia and Fisher.

Just as I finish my leisurely stroll through the empty black streets toward the massive tower, all four of my teammates are here to greet me.

My body doubles have been in their presence the whole time I've been gone, but meeting them again in my real body feels very different.

I can feel their powerful auras ripple through the air from far away.

It's clear that Fisher and Lydia's Soul Energy has truly awakened. The colorful display I saw in my memories hinted at it, but the true raw combination of Qi and Mana seamlessly flowing through their cores proves it to me now.

Abby's aura feels sharp and concentrated; like every particle of energy being manipulated is focused on with close precision.

The images of her spears slicing through the limbs of an A-Class hunter with a red core of divine energy flash in my mind as she gives me a smile while crossing her arms.

Maria's aura is immensely powerful, giving off the sensation of an endless abyss of dark royal blue energy; ready to absorb everything in the atmosphere but also capable of unleashing the power trapped within.

Her bubbly smile and wave from a distance give the illusion of a far different hunter. If one doesn't have their Soul Energy awakened too, it's impossible to see the true extent of her battle might.

I can't help but smile ear to ear as I give each of them a hug and start recalling the events of my time in the Apex Region.

From the moment I stepped into the exam site, through the trials, meeting new allies, learning about divine energy, and even the demand I left the board of Directors with in the end; I tell them everything.

I use a divine energy imbued [Hush] barrier to ensure none of this is overheard.

We walk around the empty streets together to tell the stories of our last few weeks.

Fisher seems just like his old self, battle hungry and wanting to prove his new skills to me in a spar. Apparently, Monk has been teaching them a whole new style and array of techniques in their private training sessions.

Lydia is very focused on her explanations, telling of her experience training with Monk, and even helping with a large number of the patients that need rejuvenation from the Lich King's Curse during her off hours.

All four of them give me their renditions of the attack on the city.

Abby is the first to give her words.

"Like I said when you contacted me earlier, there are definitely more eyes on this battle than just the 8 Great Regions' branch. I used to work for the Association far before you were involved with them. After yearly contracts renew, the central branch always did check-ins on the lesser nations. They are definitely keeping track of the A-Class hunters, and if they don't already know, they're going to have many questions about the battle scars we left them."

Maria nods and chimes in.

"So that red light that both of the A-Class hunters were using with their borrowed soul energy, that was Divine Energy? The stuff that was being farmed in the construct?"

I nod.

"Yeah. Your Soul Energy was strong enough to overpower it from raw strength alone. However, the Apex Region's Director has far more powerful Soul Energy and Divine Energy than me..."

I pause my sentence and my stride to turn to all of them.

"If you say there are even more powerful eyes on us now, we're going to need to get another step ahead; in both gathering information and building our strength."

I grin while thinking about what we're about to do next.

"Let's head out to the new prison that was created to store the captured B-Class Hunters of the attack last week. We're going to need to train more, that's a given. But right now, it will be best to learn more weaknesses and secret information only held by Elites of the Association, why not take it from the source?"