

World 231

Chapter 231: Taking The Blame

"How many coins do you get for going through this plan anyway?" Jack asked.

"I'm not sharing my income," John said.

"I'm not interested, I'm just curious."

"I was given 15 gold coins deposit which was also to cover any expenditure for my operation. Once the mission is completed, I will be paid another 15 gold coins."

A total of 30 gold coins, Jack was amazed. Saint Edge was a rather wealthy guild from the look of it. They should be the same as White Scarfs and Death Associates, competing to build a Guild Base. And yet, they could still afford to spend so many coins for this covert operation.

"So what now? Are you going to their place to cash out your reward?" Jack asked.

"That I am," John answered. "After that, I will go to White Scarfs and sell this Recording Stone."

He took out the Recording Stone that Jack had given him prior.

"What's the point? They are not involved in this conflict. Why would they want that Recording Stone? It would just implicate them."

"That's why I said you are a newbie," John said while giving Jack a condescending look. "The three guilds are sure to know that a force is behind this incident. Who do you think the three guilds would suspect most? Saint Edge or White Scarfs?"

After hearing John's words, compared to Saint Edge who had not shown any aggression, he did think that the three guilds would more likely suspect that it was White Scarfs who had messed with their plan. They were the only large guild that was not invited to the meeting. It was also the dominant guild in the capital in terms of quantity of members, which made them the most likely to not want the three guilds to grow surpassing them.

But after a glance at John and remember which guild he had represented, he blurted out, "Why does it have to be those two guilds? The most likely that will get blamed is the guild you represented, Handy Craftsmen!"

"Oh, that guild just recommend us. Same as those other guys that came to the meeting with me, they are actually from Saint Edge. After this, they will lay low for a while. Which is what I will do as well."

"The Handy Craftsmen allow you to use their guild for this plan? Aren't they afraid of the aftermath?"

"They can easily deny any knowledge of this. They will say this is an independent act of their rogue members, which they had severely punished and expelled from the guild. They will proclaim that our act has nothing to do with them."

"Aren't that a bit too simple? I don't think the three guilds will still let them off that easily with that kind of excuse."

"It doesn't matter to them. They are Handy Craftsmen, they are a special group that focused on their non-battle auxiliary skills. They can stay forever behind the safety of the capital's walls. The three guilds won't be able to do anything to them."

"But what's the benefit of them going with your plan? As you said, they aren't competing with the other guilds in the conventional way. There is no impact at all for them whether the three guilds succeed or not."

"Same as me, Saint Edge's order. Oh, in my case, it was more like a request than an order."

Jack was bewildered by the statement. "Why would they listen to Saint Edge's order?" He asked.

"Well, unknown to public knowledge, Handy Craftsmen is actually the subsidiary guild of Saint Edge."

Jack thought about this piece of information, and thought back to his experience in past VR games. In the past, these two guilds indeed had a pretty harmonious relationship. But at the time, he only thought of them as good business partners who supplemented each other. He didn't know that there was more than what was shown on the surface.

"So the Handy Craftsmen never had anything to worry about," John continued. "Even if those three guilds tried to get in the way at them for procuring rare materials for their auxiliary jobs, they could still get their supply from Saint Edge. And even if the three guilds didn't believe in Handy Craftsmen's innocence, they would still think there is another player behind them. After all, Handy Craftsmen is just a specialized medium-sized guild. There is no way that the three guilds will believe that this guild will dare to stand up against them on its own. And the history of White Scarfs' relationship with Handy Craftsmen was also not so bad."

"I see... so Saint Edge had set up for White Scarfs to take the blame."

"That is one way to see it," John commented.

"Wait, White Scarfs could also deny that they have no connection to all this," Jack said.

"Are you truly that naïve? it was still reasonable to do that under normal circumstances. But their enmity with one of the three, Death Associates, was already public knowledge. As I mentioned, they will be the first one that the three guilds will suspect, the same as any other players who know of the current guild politics. If they deny it, it will only make them seemed as if they are afraid of the three guilds. Handy Craftsmen have no problem admitting their inferiority to those three guilds. However, it will be a different case for White Scarfs. Rather than appear timid, the most likely move they might take is riding the tide, and strike while it's hot. That's why I'm going to offer them this recording stone. They can use it to sow more disservice to the three guilds' reputation."

After thinking for a while, Jack took out another recording stone. It was the one that he had been using to record the meeting. "If you are going to give them that, might as well add this," Jack said.

"I'm not giving them, I'm selling it to them," John corrected as he accepted Jack's recording stone.

"What's in this one?"

"It was the recording on the meeting proceeding."

John inspected the stone before looking at Jack silently. He didn't utter any word, he stored the stone in his inventory.

"Don't charge them too high a price," Jack said. He was originally planning to give the recording stone directly to Silverwing, but since John was going to give the other stone, he should just let this one tagged along. He had also been considering messaging Silverwing and let him know about the possibility of a spy inside his higher-ups. But after some thoughts, he decided against it. If he had some clues regarding the spy's identity, it would be a different story. But if he was just giving vague info like this, it would instead cause disharmony amongst the guild's higher-ups. Silverwing would be suspecting everyone and didn't know who he could trust. It would instead cause him more harm than good.

Perhaps Earmouth leaked this info to him not because he was being careless, but he wanted to use this chance to check if Jack was someone that could be trusted. Even if this info leaked, it would not be a problem for them. Instead, White Scarfs would suffer due to this info. Hence, Jack decided to just keep this info for the time being.

"Don't worry, I know you have a good relationship with them. I will give them a reasonable price," John said.

"That's not the only reason," Jack said. "They are currently competing to be the first to build a Guild Base. If you charge them too high, they might instead refuse to buy it."

"I see."

"And I want 70% of the coins you got from them."

"Wow, and here I thought you are not interested in coins."

"Those two stones are mine. I just don't like it that you are the only one profiting from them."

"You've given them to me, so they are technically mine already."

"Give them back to me!"

"Didn't you hear it is not polite to ask for things that you have given out? I will give you 50% of the profit from these stones."

"60%."

"Can you two please not haggle like women buying vegetables at a street vendor?" Flame interjected.

"What she said. 50%," John said.

Jack didn't argue further, he was not too interested in taking the profit anyway. He was just irritated by the guy's profiteering mindset.

"You know, I was actually planning to include you in my plan from the start," John said.

"Me?"

"Well, I didn't know it was you at that time."

"What do you mean?" Jack was puzzled by John's words.

"The player who put an end to the robbers," John said. "If you bother to hang around with other players more, you would find out that you were rather famous. Many rumors have been circling around regarding the robbers and how they were defeated by a single player."

"That was you?" Fierce Flame uttered with surprise.

Jack just shrugged.

Chapter 232: The Courage To Break Away

"I was planning to recruit the player who was responsible for it. After all, the player had already offended Corporate United due to that robber incident. I figured that the person wouldn't be too reserved to go up against the guild again. But the player was too mysterious, I couldn't find out about the identity. Until you gave me this Recording Stone."

"Wait, you already know they were connected to Corporate United before the meeting?" Jack asked.

"They are?" Flame joined.

"Don't lump me with you lot. My intel network was something you two can only look up to."

"Pah!" Flame spat. "What intel network? I bet it was only spending time with scoundrels in the bar for cheap rumors."

"There is no hope for you unbelievers," John said as he stood up. "I'm heading back to the capital to get my rewards. What are you two going to do?"

"I will go monster grinding," Flame said.

"I will go back to the meeting place, I'm still curious about the rest of the meeting. They still have something up their sleeves after you left," Jack said.

John nodded. "Let me know if there is any juicy tidbit. Good luck to you two," he said. He then took out a Town Return Scroll and activated it.

After he vanished, Jack also bid Fierce Flame farewell before heading in the direction of the meeting. Before he came out of the rock formations, he looked for a secluded place and transformed to become Unrivalled Arcaner.

He also took his time to check on the Container of Souls, previously there were 271 souls. Now there were 541 souls. Killing players despite granting no experience, would still yield souls. But comparing the degree of difficulty, he could still farm more soul points from grinding monsters. Probably when mainstream players become higher level and higher-class, killing players for the soul points would be more effective. Not that he planned to just randomly went around killing players just to collect their souls though.

He had no time to tidy up the fifty common equipment he had gotten from John, so he just left them in his bag. He closed his inventory system and headed towards the direction of Starlight Ruin. If he was lucky, the last phase of the meeting could still be ongoing. But there was a chance that he could be asked to use the Shackle of Vows before he was allowed to rejoin the meeting. He wondered what he was going to do if that happened. Well, it didn't matter, it was fine if he was allowed to stay as a

member of the guild, it was no problem if he was chased out as well. He didn't plan to spend too much time in Death Associates in near future anyway, he had to focus with his own development.

While Jack was having a chat with John and Fierce Flame. The last phase of the three guilds' meeting was still ongoing, Scarface was the one making the speech for this part as the content was closely related to Death Associates. At the back of the stage where the rest of the three guilds were gathering, Selena was having an argument with Queen Magenta.

"Using strength to control others is one thing, but striking them for rejecting our offer is crossing the line," Selena said with a stern voice.

"Keep your voice down! You are embarrassing our guild," Queen Magenta uttered as she dragged Selena to a corner.

"We are already embarrassing our guild with this action," Selena shot back.

"Might is right! As long as we are strong enough, why does it matter what we do? They can only blame themselves for being weak and not appreciating our kindness when we gave them the choice to join."

"You should know that there are some in our guild that didn't agree with your decision. If the leader..."

"The leader is not here!" Queen Magenta cut Selena's words crudely. "Who knows which town she was thrown to, or if she was even in this world. For now, I hold the highest authority, so what I say goes! If there are those that don't agree with me, they are welcomed to follow Jeanny's footsteps and leave this guild!"

Selena frowned at the mention of Jeanny. Even though she was not especially close with her, Jeanny was one of the few in the guild which she thought of highly. The girl was driven, caring, and responsible. She was good at working with others. Selena was not the only one who thought that way. In fact, when she left, a few of her closest friends had chosen to quit the guild as well and follow her.

When Selena heard of her quitting, she had looked for her to try to persuade her to change her mind, but the girl was determined. What the girl said at the time had notably stuck in her mind. She had told her that their current lives had changed. They could not treat it the same as what they had been doing in past games.

In the past, games were secondary, despite some of them spending more of their time inside the games because they were doing it for a living, Selena was one such person. Now, this was their real lives. They were not bound by the past guilds anymore. If the guild was not against their own moral compass, then they should not force themselves to stay in it. What they did now would be the foundation of how they live in this world for the rest of their lives. Thus, they should think carefully for themselves about what they should do.

Selena had been working in the gaming industry since a teenager. She had been an employee of the company who was behind Wicked Witches guild for a long time. She couldn't imagine working as anything else. As fate would have it, her expertise as a gamer had become the main qualification to thrive in this new world.

However, she still could not imagine herself away from the guild or company she had already been involved with for so long. She admired Jeanny's courage to break away from the guild. Despite the girl

had not been with the guild as long as she, her connection with the guild was actually deeper, due to her family being one part of the company behind the guild.

Seeing that Selena did not argue any further with her, Queen Magenta was about to walk away. However, she was only a few steps before she came to a stop.

"No, that's not possible," Selena heard her muttering.

She was about to ask when she received a message from one of the teams that were sent to intercept the departing guilds. She opened the message and was stunned by its content.

Jack took his sweet time as he made his way back to the Starlight Ruin where the meeting was held. After some thought, he didn't place too much hope of finding out about the last phase of the meeting. He walked leisurely and eliminated the monsters that came his way, he didn't bother to avoid them.

On his way, he met some group that had gone after the other guilds. A part of this group who were members of Death Associates approached him when they saw him alone.

"Aren't you that Unrivalled Arcaner?" A ranger from the approaching group asked. "I saw your initiation test, you are very impressive. By the way, aren't you with the main team? Why are you going back by yourself?"

"I was separated from my team," Jack simply answered. "How goes your side?"

The ranger made a gesture that had his thumb moving around his neck, imitating a throat slash sign. "There is no way those bunch of losers can stand the combined might of our three guilds," he said. "I am just regretting not getting picked into the main team. I would love to see the face of that arrogant fool, who is his name again...? Oh, yes, Saint John! I would love to see his face before he was cut down. Tell me about it, will you?"

Jack made an awkward laugh. "Well...," he was not sure how to respond.

"Hm? Something has gone wrong?" The ranger asked.

Jack looked down and remembered that he was currently in the Unrivalled Arcaner persona. He should act more arrogantly! He gave the ranger a disdainful look, and bellowed, "why do you want to know? My report is for Scarface only. Why do I have to tell a lowly-nobody like you anything? Now, go away! Do not bother me."

Jack strode forward faster, leaving the guy with a bad taste in his mouth. The Starlight Ruin was already coming into view not far in the distance.

Chapter 233: Still Alive?

When Jack arrived at the outskirt of the Starlight Ruin, he could see several groups hanging around the place chatting among themselves. Some could also be seen departing away. It appeared the meeting had ended. The people who still hanged around reminded him of the socialization after a reception.

Jack sighed to himself, it appeared there were still many guilds that would be cooperating with the three guilds. They would be a force to reckon with. He would need to hurry and strengthen himself if he were

to survive. After that skirmish in the rock basin, he had officially become an enemy to all three guilds. He doubted it would only be a cold war from now on.

He went into the innermost courtyard where the meeting was held. The guards stationed at the perimeter only looked at him without hindering his entrance.

The courtyard was still full of people, but they were mostly from the three guilds. Jack could hear them discussing things quite heatedly amongst themselves. The situation appeared rather tense from the looks on their faces. He figured they had all learned about the failure of the main team who went to ambush John. Good then, save him the time from explaining.

He saw Scarface amongst the crowd of Death Associates, he went towards him. He was hoping to probably still learn something from him about the last phase of the meeting. When he was a few meters from them, he stopped abruptly, because he recognized the person next to Scarface. Someone that shouldn't be here.

Earmouth?

Jack used his God-eye monacle for a scan, making sure he didn't recognize a different person. Apart from his level was 16, which was one level lower than the previous, his name's description clearly stated Earmouth. He didn't recognize wrongly.

But how could he still be alive? He clearly killed him out there in the wilderness, yet the penalty he received was as if he was killed within a safe zone. Not to mention people who were killed in wilderness would be stuck in a place called Limbo for half an hour before they revived in the safe zone. He estimated the timing. The only safe zone nearby was capital Thereath. For Earmouth to arrive back here before him, meant he was immediately brought back to life after he died and directly came to this place without pause. Did he have something that allowed such a resurrection function similar to his Immortal Soul skill?

While he was pondering, Earmouth noticed him and immediately pointed at him and screamed out, "you...!"

Earmouth seemed to be at a loss for a moment with his finger continued to be pointing at Jack. He finally managed to continue, "you left us! You completely deserted us to fend for ourselves. You are a disgrace to our guild! I demand him to be punished!"

Though Jack was given a fright by his sudden hostility, he kept his calm and maintained his indifferent attitude. After Earmouth's ramblings stopped, Jack said nonchalantly, "Please take a breath, you will scare everyone. I have just got back here, please don't suddenly throw accusations at me."

"You still have the gal to speak?" Earmouth shouted. "Where were you when our brothers and sisters getting slaughtered? You clearly left us all in order to save yourselves."

"Is that true?" Scarface asked with a grim face.

Several Death Associates members took position behind Jack. Though he couldn't see them, he could see their positions on his radar. He did not doubt that if Scarface gave a sign, they would take action against him without hesitation.

He was now in a difficult position. Not to mention Red Death was also there beside Scarface. If he had to break out forcefully, he would have no choice but to reveal his real identity. He slightly regretted that he had decided to come back here. He should have just left and had nothing to do with this guild anymore. But he had learned from experience that anguishing on what had happened was of no use, what's important was focusing on dealing with matters at hand.

Even when his heart was beating intensely, he continued to keep his indifferent attitude. He looked at Earmouth and said, "dude, if I remember correctly, we are in a pinch. And I have discussed with you about me going to the back to flank the enemy. How can I know you lot will crumble so easily once I left? And you are blaming me for your own incompetence?"

"How dare you slander us? It is you who was weak! You know we are at disadvantage, so you decided to use the excuse of trying to flank the enemy to bail. That landscape is so confusing, if it's so easy to get behind the enemy, don't you think we would have done it already? You clearly have run away once you are separated from us! I have known that you are not to be trusted the first time I lay my eyes on you!"

Jack frowned. Before he ambushed Earmouth's people from behind, he had made sure they saw his copy on the other side. He had also heard them discussing it. Earmouth had clearly seen him, but he was acting as if he had not. The others that were with him at the time had died, so they were not here and could not testify for him. But Jack doubted that they would speak up on his behalf even if they were here, after all, they were Earmouth's underlings.

"Fellow guildmate, do not frame me. I know you clearly had seen me fighting with the five fighters at the other end. There were five of them. It took me a lot of time to deal with them. I have even almost lost my life. By the time I came back again, all of you have mostly escaped or killed already. What do you suggest for me to do? Fight valiantly till my last breath? For honor? Do you think this is a drama show?"

"Huh, I've seen no such thing," Earmouth stood firm on his statement. "You have escaped, leaving your comrades behind. That's what had happened."

"I know there is something not right with you!" Bigarm exclaimed out, gleeful expression was evident on his face. The guy was not good at hiding his emotion. "I believe my brother has told the truth. As such, this coward who left his comrades behind has to be punished. I vote for death punishment!"

Brother? Was he referring to Earmouth as a real brother or brother as in good friend? Anyway, the two seemed close.

With two of the high-ranking members of the guild singing the same song, the others started to join in the tune. Especially those who stood behind Bigarm. They looked to be his gang. They were very passionate as they shouted demands for Jack to be executed.

Jack didn't waste his time trying to explain anymore. His words as a new member against the words of two veteran members, even a fool could see where the wind would blow. His hand touched the magic staff hanging on his waist, prepared to use it at a moment's notice. His mind also went into his inventory, preparing to bring out even his Storm Breaker sword if necessary.

Everyone turned to Scarface, awaiting him to deliver the verdict.

Jack could feel Scarface's stare. His face was cold and unsympathetic. Jack could not guess what was in his mind.

When Scarface's lips parted and his words were about to be spoken, a feminine voice sounded out from outside the group, "he was telling the truth."

Everyone turned to the source of the voice and saw a female Rogue wearing a red color leather armor, an elegant crimson dagger was sheathed on her waist. Jack recognized her at once. She was Slim Blade, the Wicked Witches member who had given him a difficult time during the battle back at the rock basin.

"The mage was telling the truth," Slim Blade repeated her sentence. "I and my sisters saw him engaging the Fighters hiding behind the plant wall spell."

Earmouth and Bigarm's pulled a long face upon hearing Slim Blade's words.

"This is our internal matter! Outsiders are not allowed to butt in!" Bigarm yelled out with displeasure.

Slim Blade glowered at the man after she heard his scolding. "What's the matter with you? Do you have a grudge against him or something? I thought that you might have missed seeing him so you have this misunderstanding. I'm being generous seeing our guild as allies, so that you don't have infighting within your guild. Is this how Death Associates operate? Fighting amongst yourselves? Well then, go ahead and fight. Let's leave these clowns, sisters."

She strode away after giving a piece of her mind. Jack must say the girl had quite a character. He was grateful for her interference. Now that she had spoken up for him, Jack was no longer resentful of her annoying harassment during their fight in the rock basin.

Everyone turned back to look at Scarface after Slim Blade left.

Chapter 234: Keep Your Enemy Closer

"You can't seriously believe that girl, boss?" Bigarm pleaded.

"Silence!" Scarface chided. "You are embarrassing us."

He looked at Jack, then turned his stare at Earmouth, before looking back at Jack again. He said, "what that girl said is not wrong. Whatever the reason is, if the other guilds see us fighting among ourselves. It will give them a bad impression on us."

"But..." Bigarm wanted to interfere but Scarface gave him a hand signal that shut him up.

Scarface continued, "accusations on one of our own carry large implications. It is not something to be treated lightly. Since there is another party confirming Unrivalled's story, I will say that gives him the benefit of doubt. After all, Earmouth did mention that he was at the furthest end of where Unrivalled was flanking the enemy, he could probably have missed him. And I also see no reason for that girl from Wicked Witches to lie to us, unless all of you think this man is a spy sent by their guild?"

The others nodded. If Unrivalled was a woman, then that was still possible. But Wicked Witches was a guild comprised only of women. There was no way the Mage was one of them.

Earmouth was dissatisfied, he was not willing to let it go, "but we can't just let him..."

"I have spoken!" Scarface said sternly, cutting him from making any further argument. Earmouth could only turn away in a displeased manner after giving a bitter glare at Jack. Bigarm huffed and followed after Earmouth. The others slowly went away as well.

Scarface approached Jack and said, "I'm sorry. It's not easy to manage a group of people. Everyone has what they want. It is impossible to satisfy everyone."

Jack nodded at him, then haughtily said, "if you think I am bringing disharmony to the guild, you can just expel me. I don't mind. It's no point anyway if I am surrounded by people that don't trust me."

Scarface chuckled, he wasn't offended by Jack's arrogant tone. He said, "there is no need for such hastiness. You have the pride of an expert, I understand it well. Give the guild some time, I believe you will come to feel at home."

"In that case, fine, I will try to bear with it just a little bit more."

The aides standing behind Scarface were just about to speak out due to Jack's ungrateful manner, but Scarface had pre-emptively given them a sign for silence.

"What's that last part of the meeting anyway? I didn't know about it since I left before it started," Jack decided to try his luck for obtaining the information.

"There is no need for you to worry about it. Our core members are handling it. If there is any need for assistance, we will ask for your help," Scarface replied with a smiling face.

"All right, just let me know if you need any help," Jack said with a bland face, but in his heart, he was feeling down by the reply.

"Another thing," Jack added. "I will still be available tomorrow if you need anything, but after that, I will be absent for quite a while. I have gotten a quest that might take a long time to complete, so I will be focusing on it."

"Oh? Sound like a grand quest. Do you need our members to assist you on the quest?" Scarface offered.

"It's fine. The quest was meant to be done in solo," Jack refused.

"If you say so. I will leave you to your matter then, I still have some issues to be discussed with others," Scarface said.

Jack nodded. As Scarface left, he could finally breathe a sigh of relief. That was a close one, he thought. He was not confident if he had to fight his way out from this place, even if he exhausted all his trump cards. After all, there were the main members of the three guilds here, with some of their allied guilds still lingering in the vicinity. The prospect of fighting all of them and survived was rather unsettling.

He glanced in the direction of the Wicked Witches. He was thinking if he should go there and thank Slim Blade, but decided against it. The other Death Associates members might interpret it as there was indeed something going on between him and the Wicked Witches. Earmouth and Bigarm would surely not letting go of the chance if that happened.

Red Death approached Scarface after he left Jack. "You don't trust Earmouth?" She asked.

"Which part?" Scarface asked back. "If you are talking about whether he was telling the truth about Unrivalled leaving them behind, I think he was lying. But if you are referring to his claim that Unrivalled was not to be trusted, I agree with him."

"Then why do you let him go?"

"Because fighting here will indeed give our guild a bad impression. Some more there are people from another guild that testified that he is telling the truth."

"You can at least expel him since you agree that he cannot be trusted."

"I can do that, but haven't you heard the saying, keep your friends close, but keep your enemies even closer? Whether the guy can be trusted or not, he is undoubtedly an expert. Even though he is indeed a spy sent by another guild, we can easily deal with him by controlling the amount of information he received. We simply keep him as an outer member, and just use his muscle for grunt works. We can monitor his movement and also deprived an expert of contributing to the other guild. With him registered as our member, he could only receive guild quests from us. That way, we kill three birds with one stone."

"I see that you have thought this through," Red Death nodded. "On another topic, what about that Storm Wind? Do you believe the report where he fought against over fifty players all by himself?"

"The report mentioned that he was helped by two ranged players," Scarface corrected.

"Those two were only supports. The report said that all our side focusing on was Storm Wind alone, and yet they still failed to kill him and ended up getting defeated instead."

"The reason he managed to defeat them was simply due to a powerful magic scroll."

"Still, being able to survive from getting surrounded by so many players..."

"You can't do that?"

Red Death was silent by that question.

Not dwelling on it, Scarface asked another question, "what do you think of these incidents?"

"What do you mean?" Red Death said.

"It was clear what that group from Handy Craftsmen did in the meeting was intentional, they had come with the intention of causing trouble. More obvious after they ambushed our main team together with Storm Wind."

"Are you saying that they are working together?" Red Death asked.

"Handy Craftsmen wouldn't have had the guts. I'm saying there is another big force in play."

"Who?"

"That's what we need to find out. And this Storm Wind was clearly working together with them."

"Could it be White Scarfs? Storm Wind was known to be close with that guild," Red Death gave her guess.

"Possible," Scarface replied. "But I was more worried about the report regarding what Storm Wind had said before he killed Earmouth."

"Which part?"

"The part where he mentioned Shackle of Vows," Scarface said.

"How did he know?"

"Exactly."

Red Death pondered for a while before saying, "are you suspecting the force he was cooperating with has a spy among us?"

"That is most likely," Scarface nodded. "The Shackle of Vows was top secret even amongst the Corporate United. Only during this meeting that it was revealed to the public. If Storm Wind had found out about it, it either means he had a spy that had penetrated deep into Corporate United higher-ups, or he has someone that stayed during the last part of the meeting who feed him that information. Either possibility is alarming, especially the former."

"Will this affect our plan?" Red Death asked worriedly.

"No, we will proceed as planned. Everyone that heard about the plan had been bound by the Shackle of Vows. The other side might find out about the Shackle of Vows, but the information protected by the artifact should be safe."

Red Death nodded, then asked, "how should we deal with Storm Wind?"

"Now that he had openly made an enemy out of the three guilds, we should be able to deal with him more directly with the other guilds' help. This should also allow us to fish out the force that is behind him. But we still need to focus on the preparation of the plan. We will deal with him once we are done with our preparation."

Red Death did not oppose this arrangement. Her eyes glinted with excitement. She wondered if her improvement was enough already for her to go toe to toe with that man.

Chapter 235: Amulet Of Rebirth

Jack didn't hang around for too long around the three guilds. He tried asking around some more regarding the last phase of the meeting without trying to make it too obvious, but everyone was tight-lipped about the subject. It was probably because they had been bound by the Shackle of Vows. He gave up after a while and departed from the ruin.

When he was out of Starlight Ruin, he asked Peniel, "do you have an idea how Earmouth only lost one level despite being killed in the wilderness?"

"I have," she answered.

"How?"

"He was wearing the Amulet of Rebirth."

Hearing the name, he could more or less guess at the function. "I reckoned this amulet allow the wearer to reduce the penalty of being killed in the wilderness to the same as being killed inside a safe zone or dungeon?"

"That's correct?"

"So lucky for him to get himself such a rare item," Jack commented.

"What rare? The Amulet of Rebirth offers no bonus other than the rebirth skill, and it can be bought," Peniel informed.

Jack was walking while he was conversing with the Fairy, he stopped abruptly after hearing Peniel's last words. "What do you mean? It can be bought? As in from the shops in the capital?"

"More like any city that housed the Church of Creation. This amulet can be bought from that church."

"Why didn't you inform me of this important information before?"

"What's the point? You have that Immortal Soul inherent skill, it was much better than the Amulet of Rebirth."

"Still, such information was kinda crucial..." Jack said with a helpless expression.

Peniel who heard Jack's tone, felt dissatisfied, she uttered, "I have much important information. If I have to share with you everything, I can't cover it all even if you do nothing but listen to me for an entire month!"

"Okay, okay, no need to get work out over it," Jack said, he felt defeated. "So everyone can just buy this amulet from the Church of Creation? Is there any special requirement for buying it?"

"No requirement, you just pay and you will get the amulet. Same method as any other shop."

"How much does this Amulet of Rebirth costs?"

"1 gold coin."

"For an item that can allow you to keep most of your level and equipment. That was absolutely cheap. If everyone can buy it, it kind of eliminates the risk of death in the wilderness."

Peniel made a smirking sound, "1 gold coin is for the first time purchase."

"What do you mean?" Jack asked with a confused look.

"This amulet is special equipment. It used a special method that connected the user's soul to the church's secret magic formation. So the amulet that one buys can only be used by said person, it can't be traded. Each time the amulet is activated, the rebirth spell was exhausted and will destroy the amulet. A new amulet with a new connection has to be established if the user wishes to be protected by the Rebirth spell again. But repeated application required double the energy from the previous

application. Hence, if one buys the Amulet of Rebirth the second time, they will be required to pay 2 gold coins. The third time, 4 gold coins, and so on."

Jack made some calculations, if one died ten times, they would need to pay 1024 gold coins for the next Amulet of Rebirth. That was an astronomical sum. He guessed most individuals might only afford to purchase it three or four times. Any more would be too expensive already. For large guilds, however, the higher-ups might be able to abuse their position to use their guild's coffer to supply for this safety. But still, such a large expenditure would just cripple the guild's advancement if they spend too much to accommodate their top brass safety via this Amulet of Rebirth.

With this thought, he was not too worried about the Amulet of Rebirth anymore. If his enemies had it, all he had to do was simply killed them a few more times. Furthermore, wearing the amulet would instead weaken the wearer. Since the amulet provided no other bonus, wearing it meant that the wearer was sacrificing their pendant slot, which will put them at a disadvantage against others who wore a pendant that increased their combat power.

"Now, before you accused me of withholding information again, I'm going to let you in on another information," Peniel said.

"Oh? What is it?" Jack asked.

"That long-range communication device during the meeting which showed projection from another city, it was not a unique device that can only be found in that ruin."

"Really? But I don't find that strange. That White Death dude said he found a similar device in the ruin near his city, so there will be such devices in other ruins as well."

"No, I didn't mean it like that. What I'm telling you is that the device is actually a common tool that can be found in most large cities."

"What?"

"Yes, those guilds made it sound like such a big deal. They will be dying from shame when they found out that you can simply walk to the Remote Communication Office which was a common building in most large cities, and asked to use the same long-range communication device. Of course, you will be charged coins to use the service. These devices can also be found in some adventurer hubs in the wilderness, which supply facilities that cater to their needs when they were far away from a city. That Starlight Ruin might be one such hub in the past."

Jack chuckled after hearing Peniel's information. He did want to see the face of the three guilds' leaders when they found out about this Remote Communication Office. Nevertheless, this information about long-range communication devices was pointless to him as he did not need to contact anyone from other cities.

He spent his time killing monsters as he made his way back to the capital. He only changed his appearance back to Storm Wind after reaching the capital to avoid clashing with the forces from the three guilds, as some of them were also traveling back to the capital. He was not afraid of them, he simply had enough excitement in one day. Clashing with those guilds again would just be tiresome.

Back in the capital, he used the Transformation Box to merge the common equipment he got from John. Combined with the leftovers common equipment he had gotten from the robbers incident, he got eight uncommon equipment. Out of the eight, he used four to combined with the other uncommon he had, producing one rare medium armor chest and one rare medium armor pants.

He checked on the stats of the new rare equipment. Comparing them with the ones he was wearing, they were not better. So he just stored them back into his inventory bag.

The next day, Jack helped Death Associates on their monster hunting quests to collect coins. He could just leave them alone now since his original purpose of infiltrating the guild was done. However, he figured he might need to infiltrate the guild again in the future, so he kept up with his pretense for another day. If he just disappeared the day after the meeting, people who disliked him like Bigarm would speculate bad things about him again.

He took his time during the hunting quests, didn't try to perform too well. White Scarfs was also collecting coins to buy the plot of land for their guild base. This was the least he can do for them.

He met the other Death Associate teams as well during his hunting quests, but oddly, they seemed to travel with much caution. There were also more members in their team than usual. After some thought, he assumed this must have something to do with himself. He had threatened to hunt their members to hinder them from collecting coins, and he had also attacked their members yesterday. So it was safe to say that they were very much on guard against his ambush at the moment.

"What are you smiling at?" Warpath asked. This guy had been assigned back into his team for today.

"None of your business! You just focus on the task I gave. I will dock your coins portion if you annoy me," Jack replied.

"Huh!" He turned away indignantly.

They ended up doing two runs for the whole day. He passed the amount reserved for the guild before going away. He had also leveled up his Mage class after the two runs. His Mage class was level 17 now. While his Warrior class was closed to reaching level 19.

Chapter 236: An Invitation

On his way back to Amy's Bakery, he thought about what to do for the next day. He decided to ask Bowler, Fierce Flame, and The Man out again for monster hunting quests. Probably they could journey further this time. The day after tomorrow, he would visit the Adventurer Associations to see if he could find any high-level quest.

During his walk, he also heard players discussing Corporate United as the mastermind behind the robbers incident. The robber incident had caused a lot of grudges to many independent players and small guilds. Now that rumor of the culprit had surfaced, it had become hot gossip.

It seemed that John had passed the orbs to White Scarfs, Jack thought.

When he arrived outside Amy's Bakery and was just about to open his message interface to send Bowler and the other a message to meet tomorrow, he saw Silverwing's group not far away.

"Have they managed to buy that plot of land?" Jack wondered. He went over and approached them.

Silverwing noticed him and greeted him with a smile, "good evening, Mr. Storm Wind. You have made quite a name for yourself, and also made several new enemies at the same time. Your courage is truly admirable."

"Don't be so smug about it, all of them will think that you are behind me," Jack teased back. "So we are in the same boat actually. We need to take care of each other."

The two of them laughed from the exchange.

"Could you two cut that out? It's distasteful," Bluedaze said with disgust.

Sinreaper chuckled, "but it's rare to see master Silverwing expressed himself so freely. It seemed that our master had considered you a true friend."

"Well, I'm flattered," Jack said.

Silverwing made an awkward cough. "Enough you two," he then said to Jack, "that Saint John is a rather interesting friend of yours."

"I say it was more like irritating than interesting," Bluedaze commented.

"That's him all right," Jack agreed with Bluedaze, "so how many coins did he squeeze out of you?"

"We are in need of coins for buying this plot of land, so we said we will buy his information at a later date."

"Oh? I heard the players talking about the Corporate United and the robbery incident. That's not your guild's doing?"

"That's us all right," Silverwing said.

"But I thought you said..."

"That friend of yours said he trusted us, so he gave us the two recording stones and said he will pick up the payments when we have coins to spare."

"Oh, I wasn't expecting that from him."

"Well, our guild did have a good reputation, so I didn't find that strange."

"Nah, trust me. This guy always has an angle. You had better settled that debt once you can."

"Wasn't him your friend? You don't sound like you believe in him much."

"It's not like he is a bad person. It's just that he always seemed to have a way to use the people around him to his advantage. Additionally, I am not too close to him. Our paths crossed a few times and we worked together, that's it."

"I see, sort of like us then, but we can be considered friends, right?" Silverwing said with a smile.

Jack smiled awkwardly. "I will treat you as a friend if you treat me as one," he said, then tried to change the subject, "seeing you guys here. I assumed you have managed to buy this plot?"

"Yes, we have just completed the transaction. Now we just need to collect a little bit more coins to build the guild base."

"So you guys manage to beat Death Associates after all."

"Thanks to you! Our intel in the guild had indicated how wary that guild of you. They had trodden very carefully, afraid that you will ambush them in the field, which caused them to slow down their coin gathering activities."

Jack laughed at the comment and said, "congratulations on being the first one then."

"Actually, though we are the ones that had managed to get this plot of land. We are not the first guild that had buy land for guild base. There is another one that had beaten us to it. And from what we heard, they are even about to construct the guild base soon."

"Really? Who is it?" Jack asked.

"They are over there," Bluedaze informed as she pointed.

Jack looked in the direction she was pointing at and saw another group not far from them. There were not many people in that group but he seemed to recognize one of them. He tried to remember where he had seen the person. After a brief moment, he remembered that he had seen the person during the meeting held by the three guilds. The person was the middle-aged man who led the Saint Edge group during the meeting, William of Wellington.

Saint Edge? Jack was surprised by this. How wealthy was this group? He knew from John that they were the ones that had hired him, even spending 30 gold coins for it. And they still had enough coins to be the first one to buy the plot of land for their guild base? He had known Saint Edge was a famous guild, but now he could see that the guild was really not simple at all.

They had been the mastermind that had disrupted the three guilds while remaining in the shadow. This kind of guild was very much the type to be wary of. He hoped he didn't have to come into confrontation with them in the future.

Jack had a brief chat with Silverwing and the others before returning to Amy's Bakery. When he entered the shop, he was greeted by the cheerful Amy.

"There is a letter for you," She said as she handed him an envelope.

Jack was puzzled. An envelope? Who could it be from? His friends would simply send him an in-game message. This letter messaging was so old-fashioned. Was it from some players or guilds who were not on his Friends list?

He thanked Amy and accepted the letter, but didn't open the envelope until he was inside his room. The envelope was locked by a wax seal, the kind that was commonly used during the medieval era to verify that the letter was unopened. There was an engraving of the letter T in the wax seal.

"This is interesting, that was the symbol of Themisphere royalty," he heard Peniel's voice as the Fairy came out and floated beside him.

This letter was from NPCs? Jack thought. Intrigued, he broke the wax and took out the letter inside and started reading it.

"Greetings, young adventurer, Sir Storm Wind of the Outworlders. Your exploits had come to the attention of royal kingship. Duke Alfredo particularly had sung praise on your behalf. We have a proposition that might be in your interest. A carriage and an entourage will be sent to you by the morrow morning at 8 AM. We will be delighted with the grace of your presence. Yours truly, Mason, Royal Advisor."

Royal advisor? Jack's eyes bulged out.

"How high is the rank of royal advisor in this kingdom?" Jack asked Peniel.

"Apart from the royal families? He could be considered the number two person," Peniel explained.

Jack whistled. An invitation from the number two NPC in the kingdom? Now that was intriguing. It seemed like his initial plan of going on a hunting quest trip with Bowler and the others would have to wait. Meeting the royal advisor of this country's ruling power was much more interesting.

He spent the rest of the night training on forming the runes of his available spells, especially Mana Detonation. It was a spell used for combat especially for close range, so he would need to be able to cast it fast.

He trained until he felt tired before retiring to bed.

The next morning, he woke up early. Since there is time to spare before the time stated in the letter. He did some stretching and then performed several martial art moves. During his younger days, especially when he still lived with his grandfather, such morning exercises were common. It was a long time already since he did such exercise. Despite this current game world didn't require such exercise to help with physical fitness, doing it gave him a sense of clarity.

During his practice, he realized his high attributes allowed him to perform many moves which in the past were extremely difficult. He still remembered all his grandfather's teachings. If he could learn to control his body better and get used to it, his level of aptitude shouldn't be any less than those martial art prodigies. As for fighting experiences, he was not any less than those top players.

After finishing his exercise, he ate breakfast which had been prepared by Samantha.

"There was a coach at the front," Amy came reporting. "The rider said it was for you."

Jack had just finished his breakfast. "All right, I'll be heading out," he said.

Chapter 237: Factions

When he came out from Amy's Bakery, he saw a large and luxurious carriage. Four majestic horses with ornate adornments stood in front of the carriage. Each of them had thick ropes tying them to the front of the carriage. A coachman sat at the carriage's front, holding the leash to the four horses. A burly man with a mustache stood beside the carriage's door.

Jack was surprised by the burly man as he knew him.

"Gruff?"

"You remember me!" Gruff exclaimed with a wide smile.

"You are hard to forget," Jack said. "What are you doing here? Aren't you taking care of the Warrior Academy?"

"Heh, I was just passing by there when you went to take your test there. I don't actually work there. Additionally, with more and more of you outworlders coming to apply for the class. It had been nothing but work there, why do I want to bother myself with that hassle? I got other more interesting things to do."

Jack was speechless, shouldn't he be glad many wanted to become warriors? "So am I one of those interesting things to do?"

"You are," he said with a wide grin. "I see you still wearing that tasset I gave you."

"Yes. It is good armor. Thank you again for it."

Gruff opened the carriage door. "Come on in. It's not polite to let the Knight Commander waits."

"Knight Commander? I thought we are going to see the royal advisor?"

Gruff gave him a ridicule smirk, "haha, you are funny. Now get in already."

"What's wrong? This letter was clearly saying it was from the royal advisor," Jack took out the letter he received last night and showed it to Gruff

Gruff didn't even look at the letter. "You are so naïve. Do you think the royal advisor is someone you can meet just like that? Even if it was the royal advisor who invited you, you will only meet with his representative, not the royal advisor himself. Now get in the coach before I throw you in. I ain't gonna ask the third time."

Jack complied despite his irritation, and went inside the carriage. The inside was not less extravagant from its outer appearance. Its inside felt more spacious than what it looked from outside. The seats and its back pillows felt really soft, and they were much more comfortable than any seats he had found in this game world.

He heard Gruff gave the order for the coachman to depart. The burly warrior then came inside and sat opposite him. The carriage started moving soon.

Jack tried to pry information from Gruff about the purpose of this summon, but the guy was not telling. He just kept on chatting about inconsequential matters. Jack gave up on getting a clue from him and entertained his trivial chatters.

The carriage went pretty fast for such a large vehicle. Still, the journey took some time. Jack could see from the view out the window that they had entered the noble quarter. The journey was shaky as the carriage traveled through the uneven pavement, but it became much smoother as they traveled further into the noble quarter. From the direction they were traveling, he knew that they were heading towards the large castle that he could only see from the distance.

Jack was enthusiastic. The castle looked truly majestic from afar. He had no doubt it would be much more impressive from near. Too bad the coach's window was too small, he could only see a small portion of the outside. After seemingly a long time inside the confined space of the carriage, accompanied by Gruff's incessant ramblings, the carriage finally stopped. He heard several tapping sounds against the roof of the carriage.

"We have arrived," Gruff said.

He opened the door and went out. Jack eagerly stepped out of the coach following him. When his feet touch the ground, he looked around. His excited expression slowly waned, replaced by a confused expression.

They were not within the castle complex. Although the castle was nearby, Jack could only see a small portion of its side. Much of it was covered by its massive inner curtain wall and a part of Mount Thenias which the castle's keep was leaning on.

Nearby there was a tower connected to the castle's outer curtain wall. Gruff went to the door of that tower. He turned and looked at Jack who was still standing there gazing at the castle.

"What the heck are you gaping there for? Come here already."

He then turned back and continued his walk into the tower, Jack could still hear him muttering, "I swear, these outworlders were nothing but a bunch of country bumpkins."

Jack was annoyed, but he still followed the burly warrior into the tower. His lofty expectation of this invitation had truly been grounded to dust. The only thing that prevented him from just turning around, threw the letter away, and forgot about this whole summon by the kingdom's official, was that he had wasted the time to come all the way here. Might as well see what they were up to.

The tower inside was plain and simple looking, with minimum furnishing. Two guards were doing some maintenance works on the weapons by the shelf at the back of the room. Gruff went up the curving stairs by the side of the room. Jack followed behind him.

The second floor was much better furnished. There was a large desk at the center of the room. A robust man wearing ornate armor with a stern expression was sitting behind the desk. A large kingdom banner with a drawing of the head of some sort of horned beast was hung at the back of the sitting man. Jack assumed that might be the symbol of Themisphere kingdom.

There was another person sitting by the side of a wooden door, Jack recognized the person as the female warrior who was Gruff's aide when he went for the Warrior application test. The female warrior nodded at Gruff as he came up. Gruff nodded back.

The man in armor was scribbling at a paper on his desk. When he noticed Gruff and Jack coming up, he stopped and put down his quill. He looked at Gruff before turning his attention to Jack. Jack used his God-eye monocle to inspect the man.

Quintus (Special Elite Human, Knight Commander), level 60

HP: 310,000

He was stronger than Captain Salem. But he thought it made sense, his Knight Commander title did sound higher rank compared to Captain Salem's Knight Captain title.

"Are you that outworlder called Storm Wind?" The Knight Commander asked with a huff.

"He is," Gruff answered for Jack.

"I wasn't asking you," Commander Quintus uttered.

"Yet I answered," Gruff was not backing off.

The Knight Commander gave Gruff a steely stare. Jack could feel from the atmosphere that their relationship was complicated. Gruff was nonchalant, he simply sat on the chair in front of Commander Quintus' desk. He motioned for Jack to sit beside him.

Seeing Gruff's callous attitude, Jack wondered if the old warrior's status was not any lower than the Knight Commander in front of him. Jack took the offered seat.

After Jack took his seat, Commander Quintus didn't waste any time. He said, "I'm a busy man, so I will just get to the point. The royal advisor had asked me to give you an offer to join our Themisphere kingdom faction. What say you?"

Kingdom faction? Jack knew that in VR RPG games there are in-game factions. They were sort of like the official NPC organizations. Sometimes players were allowed to join these factions, they carried certain benefits as long as players contributed or done the faction quests. However, every game had differences in how they handled such factions. And since he knew nothing about this game world factions, he turned to the only one who did.

'Peniel, what can you tell me about factions. What's the benefit and is there any disadvantage if I join one?'

Peniel answered, "there are numerous factions in this world. Mostly they can be classified into three types, Kingdom factions, league faction, and neutral faction. Kingdom faction is like Themysphere here. It was a faction that governed a country. You can only join one kingdom faction. If you join a different kingdom faction after joining one, you will be considered a traitor by your previous faction. You will no longer be welcomed in the region governed by this faction and the NPC guards and soldiers of this faction will attack you on site. However, joining a kingdom faction also provides many benefits. The benefits are different for each faction so I cannot inform you much on this. Since your base of operation is in this Themysphere kingdom, it was a good idea to join their faction."

'But does that mean then that I can't visit other countries? Will I be considered an enemy by the other kingdoms?'

"No. As long as you didn't go and join the other kingdom, there should be no problem. Still, some kingdoms have a bad political relationship with others. If you visit a country that is hostile to Themysphere, then the authority there might cause you problems, since you represented the Themysphere country."

Chapter 238: Initiation Trial

'What about the other two types?'

"League factions are more numerous and diverse. Some are pretty clear-cut, the others are more mysterious. You can find some of them in this city. The Church of Creation that I mentioned previously is one such faction. The Cult of Phobos which you fought before is another one. Other examples are Assassins Guild and Orders of Magi. In terms of the last two, you would need to be a specific class in order to join. Each league faction has its own criteria of recruitment so you will need to find out on your own. Same as kingdom faction, not all factions' relationships are good to each other. But unlike kingdom faction, you can join more than one league faction as long as they don't contradict each other."

'So if I join more league factions, the more benefit I will get then?'

"You wish. Same as your auxiliary skills. You can only reach the highest rank on one faction. Once you have done so, your progression in the others factions will be locked to a certain rank. You will not be able to go any higher no matter how much merit you amassed. No one would want the higher-ups of another organization to become one of their top people. How could they ensure such person will put their well-being as their top priority?"

'Guess that makes sense. What about the neutral factions?'

"Neutral factions are those that didn't impose restrictions on their members. Anyone can join. As long as you complete their tasks, they will reward you. In fact, you are already a member of such factions."

'I am?' Jack was bewildered by such revelation. Since when did he join a faction?

"Adventurers Association and the Hunters Association," Peniel said.

'Oh, them. So they are considered factions as well.'

Jack had been having internal conversations all this time. Leaving the knight commander waiting for his answer. Commander Quintus finally lost his patience and said loudly, "are you done thinking? I have never met such an indecisive person as you. Are all outworlders that way? Just tell me if you are interested to join or not?!"

Jack was brought back to attention by the rude reminder from Commander Quintus. He put on an apologetic smile and said, "yes, yes, of course, I'm interested to join. Please confer my thanks to the honorable royal advisor for having given me such chance."

"You got me going for a second there, kid," Gruff commented from the side with a laugh. "All that silence, I thought you are going to decline the offer."

Commander Quintus didn't show any expression, happy or sad, upon Jack's reply. He simply gave him a plain metal badge. "Take this, this is the token for you to do the initiation trial. Once you passed the trial, you will be officially a member of Themisphere faction."

Jack heard a voice notification, "you have been offered a kingdom faction quest, Initiation Trial, do you accept?"

An initiation trial? He thought that he would immediately be accepted into the faction once he agreed. So he still had to pass a trial? Hopefully, the benefit was indeed worth the trouble, Jack thought.

Jack took the metal badge and accepted the quest.

"Another thing, before I forget," Commander Quintus uttered. "Let's just say if by any chance you passed the trial, which branch of Themisphere faction that you would like to be placed? Nobility or Military?"

Jack was annoyed by the knight commander's low opinion of him, but he didn't let it show. "What's the difference?" He asked.

"What's the difference? Aren't the names themselves already self-explanatory?" Commander Quintus blurted.

Gruff took over the explanation, "what this esteemed knight commander trying to say is, you will gain rank based on the branch you choose. The benefits of both branches are roughly the same, but Nobility ranks will be harder to be gained as there was less faction quest available and they are usually more complex. While Military ranks are easier to achieve for higher ranks because there will be more available quests and they are more direct."

Commander Quintus glared at Gruff, evidently displeased by him saying that the military branch was easier.

"There must be some cons to the military branch, right? Won't the choice be too obvious then?"

"There is," Gruff said with a smile. "If you enter the military branch, you will be required to report daily and do the tasks assigned to you. A military discipline will be expected out of you."

What? I didn't want to get tied down that way? Wasn't that the same as becoming a soldier and worked for the army? Jack thought.

He was just about to tell them that he had changed his mind and had decided to decline the offer to join, when Gruff gave another laugh, "look at your face! Haha. I've known you outworlders don't like to get tied down. Don't worry. Just choose the Nobility branch then. You have no obligations there. You can just do the faction quest when you feel like it. There is less restriction. As long as you didn't do anything that besmirches your noble title, then you are free to go and do as you wish."

Jack was relieved, but then he gave Gruff an annoyed look. The old warrior was intentionally messing with him. This game world's NPCs were truly rich and complex.

"So?" Commander Quintus asked impatiently.

"I will choose the nobility branch," Jack gave his choice.

Commander Quintus nodded and used his quill to jot something down on a paper.

"So, when will this initiation trial being held?" Jack asked.

Commander Quintus gave him a vexed look. "Now," he said. "Do you have someplace else that you have to go?"

"No, now is good," Jack replied.

"You can go with Bailey there, she will bring you to start your trial."

"Bailey?"

Gruff pointed at the female warrior sitting beside the wooden door. She stood up after hearing Commander Quintus' cue.

"Come, the others are waiting," she said.

"Others?" Jack asked. But no one answered his question. Bailey had already gone through the door beside her. Jack immediately stood up and went after her after paying respect to Gruff and the knight commander.

He went through the door and saw Bailey walking away slowly. They had come out of the tower and were on top of the castle's outer curtain wall. The curtain wall went a far distance away. It seemed to run along the side of Mount Thenias.

They walked for a long while. Jack looked back and saw the castle was getting smaller.

What's the point of building the wall away from the castle? Shouldn't it simply circumvent the castle? Jack wondered. He then took a peek to the side where Mount Thenias was. There were several caves on the mountain base. Many people could be seen coming and going from the caves. The ones that came out carried pushcarts filled with stones.

"They were mining?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Bailey replied. "Mount Thenias is a mountain rich with minerals and gemstones. This capital was originally a mining town that grew into a large kingdom with the help of the ores mined from this mountain. In fact, our mission this time has something to do with one of these mining caves."

"Mission? I thought I am having my initiation trial?"

"Your initiation trial is helping a group of novice squires in securing a mining cave that is recently being infested by monsters."

"Can't they just send soldiers to do the job?"

"They can, but this is a trivial matter. The knight commander sees it as an opportunity to give the young cadets to experience real fights. The royal advisor's interest in you simply came along at an opportune time, so the knight commander included you to accompany and guard these cadets as your trial. Their safety will be your responsibility."

"So my trial is babysitting a bunch of rookie soldiers?" Jack commented.

Bailey looked at him in amusement. "They are all level 20. More like they will be babysitting you," she said.

"Ow," was the only word Jack uttered.

They almost reached the end of the outer curtain wall before Bailey led him to a stone stair by the side of the wall facing mount Thenias. The mining activity was much scarcer here, as there were not as many caves as the part they had passed. Bailey took him to one of the caves which were devoid of mining

activity. There was a group of people stood outside. They all looked young and wore the same blue color uniform. Jack estimated their ages to be around himself or younger.

The young people in the group were chatting with each other. When they noticed Bailey approaching, one of them immediately shouted out, "attention!"

They immediately got in line and posed in a respectful manner. The speed by which they formed the formation showed that they had trained till they got used to it. Jack assumed that these were the young cadets that Bailey mentioned. There were five of them, three males and two females. They all carried long swords on their waists and bucklers on their backs.

Chapter 239: Appointed Leader

Jack used his God-eye monacle to scan the young group. All of them were indeed level 20, and all of them were classified as Squire. Jack speculated that to be the rank of the military branch, just like Knight Captain and Knight Commander which he saw on Salem and Quintus' description respectively.

Bailey looked at the row of young cadets and bellowed, "where is Walter?"

The five young cadets showed expressions of uneasiness.

Bailey raised her eyebrow, displaying her disapproval. One of the female cadets immediately spoke, "he said it was a waste of time to wait for a weak outworlder. He had gone ahead to scout the cave."

"That idiot!" Bailey cursed out.

She looked at Jack before turning his attention back to the cadets. "All right, you all already know the extent of the mission. Storm Wind here will take command, you will all listen to his orders and work together to clear out the cave and complete the mission. Is that understood?"

Jack's eyes went wide hearing her words. What did she mean by putting him in charge? Weren't those rookie soldiers all higher level than him? To add to the matter, he was an outsider, how could he expect them to obediently follow his every command?

He looked at the expressions of the cadets. From their grim looks and occasional chilly glances at him, he was sure that his intuition was right. Jack rubbed his temple. The heck was this woman warrior scheming at?

Despite their clear dissatisfactions, they didn't utter any objection. They just kept their silence.

"Is everything clear?!" Bailey bellowed with a stern voice.

"Mam, yes, mam!" The five of them said synchronously.

Bailey turned to Jack and nodded at him. "All right, use them to the best of their abilities," she said.

Use my ass! I would be lucky if they listen to a single command I give, Jack said in his mind.

"All right, now introduce yourselves to your new leader!" Bailey commanded.

The young cadets were reluctant, nevertheless, they did not dare to disobey.

"My name is Alonzo," one of them spoke.

"I am Lindsey," one of the female squires followed.

"Marriet."

"Teddy."

"Pablo."

"Storm Wind," Jack nodded to them and introduced himself.

"Do all of you use only sword and shield?" Jack asked.

"Yes, sir. That's our standard weapons of training," Alonzo answered. "Except for Lindsey, she can also use a crossbow."

Lindsey showed the small crossbow slung around his back after Alonzo's mention.

"Any special battle skill?"

"Mostly melee skills. Marriet can use heal," it was Alonzo who had spoken again.

Jack nodded. He had met several NPCs and saw them in action already. He knew their classification of classes was not as clear-cut as the players' ones.

"All right, go on now," Bailey said after seeing their introductions were over.

Jack looked at her. "You are not coming with us?" He asked.

Bailey gave him another amused look again. "What do you think my level is?"

Jack made a scan using his God-eye monocle.

Bailey (Elite Human, Knight Lieutenant), level 50

HP: 90,000

Sensing that Jack had inspected her level, Bailey said, "do you think there is any point for your trial and their training if I follow you people in?"

Jack didn't answer her question. He took out a sweet dumpling and a whetstone from his bag, consumed the first, and applied the latter to his sword. It had been customary for him to administer this extra boost before a planned battle. He didn't offer the NPCs, first because he was not sure if they would have an effect on them or not, and second because he only had two sets left after this last usage.

After finishing his preparation, he turned to the five squires, who were waiting patiently by the side, and uttered with a loud voice, "all right, you lot. Now move your asses and follow me!"

Bailey's smile was wide, she found it entertaining seeing Jack putting an act to be a leader. The cadets, though, didn't find it entertaining. Their dark faces expressed their dissatisfaction, but none of them dared to disobey Jack's order while Bailey was watching. They reluctantly followed after Jack as he entered the cave.

The inside of the cave was dark but there were strange lighting apparatuses placed in an interval by the side of the cave walls, they provided just enough light for Jack and the others to see their surroundings.

Jack felt a shiver. "Does any of you feel cold?" He asked.

None of the cadets gave an answer. 'Right, as I have thought,' Jack said to himself. He had expected this cold treatment.

As they proceeded further into the cave, Jack could see thin ice crust covering the floor and wall of the cave. As they traveled even deeper, the layer of ice became much thicker. Some noises could be heard from inside the cave. Jack knew from his radar that the noises were coming from four monsters.

From the depth of the cave, four figures came out from the darkness. Their statures were short, with sharp ears and long noses. They have blue fur covering their entire body, in line with the icy background. Each of them was carrying an icy club in one of their hands. Jack used his God-eye monocular to inspect the monsters.

Ice Troll (Basic monster, humanoid), level 20

HP: 3700

"Okay, let's gauge these monsters' strength. Four of you each..." While Jack was still speaking, three of the cadets went past him and headed directly to the monsters.

'Of course,' Jack said again in his mind.

As he saw the three squires engaged the Ice Trolls, Jack looked back and was puzzled seeing Alonzo and Lindsey were still standing behind him.

"You are not joining them?" Jack asked.

"We are awaiting your order, sir!" Alonzo replied.

Jack lifted his brows as a surprised reaction. 'Well, would you look at this, two obedient and composed NPCs,' he said in his mind. Although he knew that the two had the same dissatisfied feeling like the others, but these two were disciplined enough to follow the order given to them.

Jack looked back at the three engaging the Ice Trolls. Although they were outnumbered by monsters of the same level as them by one number, they were still at an advantage. Seeing that they could manage it, Jack didn't ask the other two squires to join. He used the chance to analyze the monsters and his allies' capabilities.

The Ice Trolls only used melee attacks without any special skill. The three squires' coordination was very good. It was clear that they were used to group combat with each other. Each of them took a position that covered the others' blind spots. The battle skills they performed looked like a simple variation of skills using longsword that increased attack power or increased attack speed, like Fighter's power strike and Ranger's swift strike. They sometimes also used their shields to bash at the monsters which caused them to tumbled back, Jack thought those shield bashes should be a skill since they caused higher damage than the squires' normal slashes and each of them gave the effect of pushing back their opponents.

It took them quite some time but finally, the four Ice Trolls fell to the ground.

'Eh? I receive experience points?'

Jack was astonished when he received the notifications. Now only did he notice that the previous white dots in his radar representing the five cadets had turned to green. He opened his party system and checked. He had no party. He had tried before to form a party with these five squires when Bailey made him the leader, but he couldn't find their name for an invite. The system only worked on players. So he thought that each of them would be considered as an independent combatant during battle. He had expected to not receive any experience point since he didn't land a single damage on the monsters. So imagine his surprise when he actually received them. His best guess was a hidden party system had been formed between the squires and him when Bailey ordered them to follow his command.

The three disobedient squires started walking forward again after the monsters were vanquished. Jack could only sigh and walked forward as well, but his steps stopped when his God-eye monocle informed him of several things on the ground where the monsters had fallen. A few coins and troll's tooth trophy loots were on the ground. Jack looked at the three squires walking in front, then back to Alonzo and Lindsey who were behind him. None of them showed any interest in the dropped items. Jack picked up the items and looked at them again, still no response. He then stored the items in his storage bag.

They met several waves of monsters again as they traveled deeper. All of them Ice Trolls. On the second and subsequent battles, Jack ordered Alonzo and Lindsey to join their three compatriots. Alonzo joined the others in melee while Lindsey used her crossbow and sent range attacks at the monsters.

With the five of them, they could utilize better formation and handled the monsters with more ease. The training of the army was evident on them. They became much stronger as their numbers increased.

Jack let them handled all the battles as he stood behind. They were eager to do the fighting, he was happy to receive free experience points by just watching them. He didn't forget to collect all the dropped loots from the fallen monsters too.

Chapter 240: Swarm Of Ice Trolls

As they headed in deeper, the air became even colder. It started to affect the squires as he could notice their movements were slower than usual. Jack felt himself affected as well. In fact, his radar that could usually detect a radius of 300 meters, was reduced to 50 meters as they had deeper. He opened his map and found that the area over 50 meters away from him was covered by grey fog, even for the path that they had just passed through. He realized this place was not as simple as he thought.

After the next battle was finished. He asked Alonzo, "is this cave usually this cold?"

"No, this anomaly started from the depth of this cave. These Ice Trolls started appearing soon, attracted by this cold. The guards had to evacuate the miners and stopped all mining activity. Apart from clearing this cave from monsters, our mission is also to stop the cause of this abnormality."

Jack nodded.

The other three squires had continued ahead again, completely disregarding Jack. Jack motioned for the other two to follow after the three. There were several mining spots visible along their way, but they

were covered by a layer of ice. Jack was not sure if he could perform mining with that ice covering the spots. He didn't try as their mission was to clear the cave, and it might cause the NPCs to look down on him even more if they saw him trying to mine, so he left the spots alone. Maybe later after the mission was done.

The next wave of monsters was more than the last. He saw that they were starting to have trouble already, when he was about to lend a hand, he noticed a green dot approaching. As his radar was impaired, the one represented by the dot was already close by when he noticed it. But since it was green, he didn't worry too much.

The green dot turned up as a young man with blonde hair wearing the same blue uniform as Alonzo and the others. He charged and ambushed the monsters from behind, breaking their formation and decreasing the pressure on the five cadets.

"Walter!" Marriet cheered when she saw the one coming to their aid. He was the missing squire who had gone into the cave by himself.

"You are safe now, for I am here!" The cadet called Walter proudly proclaimed.

With the six of them together, the battle became manageable again. The upper hand was slowly shifted to the group of young squires. Not long after, the Ice Trolls were routed.

After the battle was over, the three squires who always ignored Jack went to greet Walter cheerfully.

"You all are lucky I come to your rescue," the newcomer Walter boasted proudly.

The other three didn't seem to mind Walter's cocky disposition, they chatted with them happily. Alonzo and Lindsey on the other hand, stayed behind with indifferent expression. Jack didn't expect the relationship between these NPCs would be this complex. It was apparent that the latter two didn't think too highly of this Walter character.

Jack didn't bother their reunion, he went ahead and picked up the dropped items from the fallen monsters.

"Who the f**k is this clown?" Walter said with an annoyed tone when he saw Jack went around picking things up.

"He is just a nobody," Marriet answered.

"A low-level nobody," Teddy added.

"This nobody is our appointed leader," Alonzo spoke out loud.

"You must be joking, right?" Walter said.

"No, Lieutenant Bailey was the one that appointed him," Lindsey added.

Walter turned and stared at Jack. "Not only she made us wait for a useless outworlder, but she also appointed him a leader? What the heck is that old hag thinking?" He said with disgust.

"Careful! That's our commanding officer who you insulted," Alonzo warned.

"I don't care who she is. Her status as our trainer will be over once we complete this mission," Walter said with defiance. "I have had enough of her training. Once I go back to my father, I will request for that hag to be demoted. Placing us under the command of a low-level outworlder, that in itself is an offense against my noble line. But worry not! Now I am here, I will take over command as the leader."

"No, Lieutenant Bailey had given the order. It is our duty to follow her order!" Alonzo exclaimed.

"You are always such a stickler for rules. Well, you can continue to be a follower if you like to follow orders that much. I for myself will follow my father's footsteps and join the higher-ups of this kingdom to give out orders instead of following them."

"You still have to listen to the order of the royal family," Lindsey exclaimed

Jack was continuing to pick up the dropped items, completely oblivious of their arguments.

"I have no time to argue with you. Come on, follow me. We should finish this mission as soon as possible and end our status as trainees," Walter said as he started leading the way.

Jack had done picking up all the dropped items. He turned to Alonzo and Lindsey who were not following Walter and said to them, "let's go." He then followed behind Walter and the other three squires.

Not far ahead, his radar detected something in the wall. It was marked with a blue marker. He remembered that blue indicated an uncommon grade. So he went to the place with the marker. He saw something in the wall behind a layer of ice. He hit it with the hilt of his sword and the ice broke off. Something fell to the ground with the broken pieces of ice. He inspected with his God-eye monocle and found it to be a Copper Ore, which was an uncommon grade mining material. He was just about to pick it up when he heard a loud yell.

"Do not touch! That is mine!"

Jack was startled by the yell. Before he knew it, a hand had dexterously picked up the Copper Ore. It was Walter. He put it inside his pocket without any qualm.

"It was Mister Storm Wind who found it first!" Lindsey protested.

"This cave belongs to our kingdom, so everything here is ours. Outworlders had no right to it," Walter retorted.

Jack was not too angry by Walter's snatching the copper ore, he was more in surprise. The NPCs didn't show any interest in monsters' dropped items, but they competed with him when it was something that had already existed in this world. However, he did feel a slight annoyance to Walter's constant belittling of him.

"You seem like you have something to say to me?" Walter asked with a sneer on his face.

Jack was about to teach the smug punk a lesson when his radar lighted up. Numerous red dots rushed in from the depth of the cave. Because his radar was reduced to one-sixth of its usual coverage, the monsters were already almost upon them when they were detected.

The cadets had also come to know about the incoming monsters from their noises before Jack had the opportunity to warn them. They turned to look into the deeper part of the cave. Mob of Ice Trolls came out from there. The numbers were much more than any other monster waves they had encountered within this cave.

"Crap! They are still chasing?" they heard Walter blurted out.

Alonzo turned to Walter with an incredulous expression, "you drew them here?"

"I was scouting! Of course I would draw something. I just didn't expect them to be so tenacious. I thought I had lost them and they had given up," Walter replied, he felt wronged by Alonzo's statement.

"We have no time to argue, get into formation!" Jack commanded.

"Shut up! You are not our leader here!" Walter exclaimed.

"Everyone, line formation!" Alonzo took over, ignoring Walter's pettiness.

All the squires immediately get into the formation instructed by Alonzo, including Walter despite his irritation because Alonzo had taken over the leading role instead of him. There were over thirty Ice Trolls in front of them, none of them could afford to take the situation lightly.

The six squires stood in a horizontal line and had their shields held high in front of them. Even Lindsey who had been using her crossbow all this time opted to join the front line and used her shield and sword. They would need to stand together and stopped the swarm's advance. If they broke through their line and surrounded them, they would be done for.

The Ice Trolls clashed against the six squires' sturdy shields. The force of the impact pushed them back a few steps. The Ice Trolls themselves possessed little strength, but with their large number marching together, the pushing force was not something to be underestimated.

The Ice Trolls made another push, while the squires were losing their balance. They managed to hold on by supporting each other, but they were losing ground. They had to use all their strength just to defend against the monsters' battering without having the chance to strike back.