

D. Diver 221

Chapter 221

"Here we are! Welcome to DryRock!"

Issac turns to the open area of desolate sandy flat land in front of the Red Mountain range. Immediately after he speaks these words, I feel the space around me begin to tingle and buzz.

The air before my eyes waves and shifts, giving off a rainbow hue. Almost like the rippling sensation of a heat wave, but there's definitely some kind of mana-powered illusion at play here.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye and everything becomes clear...

Literally.

A dome of transparent magic covers an entire city in the middle of the desert. It's nearly 1 kilometer wide, stretching all the way to the base of the mountains and completely hiding over 100 buildings in plain sight.

Smaller huts similar to the ones in the last village we just left line the streets, but there are many taller buildings made from the same color stone as the mountains in the background.

There are 3, 4, and even 5-story structures with modern windows and metal frames to them. There are flat stone streets that divide merchants from residential areas.

People line the roads, buying and selling goods, while the occasional city guard walks by to keep order. This looks like a much more civilized city than I expected to see.

Without my perception skill, this would have been invisible to the naked eye. I shut it off, then look at my teammates.

They're all still staring in awe at the twisting rainbow light in front of us.

It looks like a portal is opening, but I know that's not the case.

The smaller man that Issac talked to before we entered walks in front of us, toward the light as it begins to expand.

He taps the source of the illusion with a silver object and a small gap in the transparent seal opens.

The hole gets larger and larger until it stops to make a 5-meter wide gate in the illusion magic to show us the city with our unaided eyes.

As we walk through on our camels, the gate monitor speaks up, as the wobbling entrance of rainbow-tinted magic slowly fades shut.

"Enjoy your stay at DryRock, hope your business dealings go well."

The concealment magic completely closes, but we can still see the man standing outside behind it.

He stares forward with a blank expression for a moment, then smiles to himself and turns away walking back to his small tent like nothing happened.

I look at him curiously for a moment, then Issac turns to me.

"He can't see us now."

I raise an eyebrow, but Issac continues before I get a word in.

"If you were wondering, he can't see us anymore... This barrier is a one-way illusion. It's pretty heavily guarded, I've just known that guard since I was a young kind. He's one of the only exceptions to security."

I nod slowly as I hear the camel's feet below me transfer from the soft sand onto a hard road beneath us.

I reply while keeping my face hidden under the red cloak, looking around the town.

"That... makes sense. I got it.... "

I activate my All-Seeing Eye again, but the only reading I pick up are the various collections of mana crystals in shops. The massive mana-imbued barrier around the city is the only high-density magic I can sense.

I mutter under my breath, squinting at the fire user.

"There's no breaks anywhere near here..."

I quickly lock eyes with Abby, but she gives me a shrug while Arie also extends a confused but relaxed expression.

The green-haired mage speaks up.

"Oh, we're definitely in there right place. He didn't lead us astray. There should be breaks here..."

I scratch my chin as I keep following Issac through the emptier streets of the outer area of the town.

"Then what happened to them...?"

Eventually, we hit a much busier street. The 5 of us begin leading our ride through one of the open market squares.

There are all kinds of items being bought and sold from level E-Class to high D and even low C-Class rated items. They're all mostly protection items and crafting materials. Combat items aren't too common out on these streets, but I still spot a few dozen shields and swords.

Lush greens and ripe fruit along with glimmering potions and mana crystals fill my vision for over 200 meters as we walk through town.

Kids playing by their parent's merchant carts look up at us, pausing their games to admire the camels that strut through town.

No one has said a word yet, and most people ignore us just like regulars in the streets. There are other groups coming from other directions on camelback as well, so we're not too far out of place here.

The 4 of us keep our heads down and faces covered anyways. Issac leads without covering up.

Finally, we come across one of the tallest buildings in the city.

Issac waves us down to stop about 1 block away from a 5-story tower. It's made of red bricks and blue glass windows.

It looks newly built, and of great quality. The base is nearly 20 meters wide. It stands out from all the buildings surrounding it.

"Alright, here's the quest office. Wait for me outside, I'll accept our two break quests and be right out in a minute."

I grit my teeth and instantly combat his statement.

"Hey! We're still the ones in charge here. I'd like to see what all of this is about..."

He rolls his eyes and hops off his ride, tying it to a rock structure on the side of the road. I hop down too, giving Maria the reins, and walking over to the fire wielder.

He stares me in the eyes and leans in, whispering in a low tone.

"You know... this building is one of the Dark Continent's unofficial government hubs. It's like the Association, but for the wall's insiders. Basically, you're walking into enemy territory. It'd be unwise to show your face in here. Especially as one of these so-called, Elites... That's what you are... right?"

I swallow hard, still staring at him with a stern expression, then begin to lighten up. I close my eyes for about a second, then open them to stare at Issac with a calmer tone.

"That... makes sense."

I pause, then turn to my team.

"Stay back for a few minutes, out of sight. Issac and I will return shortly."

They all agree without a shred of doubt but Issac looks at me like I'm crazy. Struggling not to raise his voice he speaks again through a clenched jaw as I start walking forward towards the quest office.

"Did you not hear a word I just said?!?"

I wave for the fire user to follow, keeping my head down and activating conceal.

I turn my status into what looks like a mid-level D-Class Swordsman at level 220. Taking off all of my stat-boosting items as well, only to leave the red cloak of protection giving me a 100+ defense boost.

I use my [Special Grade] Concealment attribute to disguise my face. I shift it to a generic tan-skinned, brown eyes, middle-aged, black-haired man.

I look like I could be any villager picked off the street.

The only thing I won't change is my voice, but I don't plan on doing much talking.

I respond to Issac with my head still down.

"Yeah, yeah. I heard you the first time. You make an excellent point. It'll be fine, I have a plan."

The fire user catches up to me in silence, then we turn to face the front side of the tall building.

He begins to say something to me but is cut off by one of the workers standing by the front door.

He's a tall, very skinny, dark-skinned man in a professional-looking black suit. I see a bright smile from him as he speaks up, looking right passed me.

"Welcome back, Issac. We haven't seen you here in DryRock in quite a while. Are you looking to pick up some new quests?"

The grunt straightens his posture and takes a step back from me to greet this worker.

"Oh- Good to see you too. Long time no see! I was just passing through, I thought it'd be a good idea to check out the guest guild. Old habits die hard.

He laughs, shaking the worker's hand and continuing, now in a much more confident tone.

"You know this is where I got my start, It's always nice to come back and see how much the place has grown. Are there any good new quests up for grabs? I'm looking for some tough ones before I leave in the morning."

The tall man grins and nods slowly.

"Of course, we always have new quests available."

He turns to me.

"And who might you be."

He stretched out his right hand, looking me in the eye.

I stare tight back, using Inspect and Appraisal. I only glance at his level and skills before shaking his hand with a firm hold.

[Lv. 297]

Active Skills:

Inspect [Special Grade]

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

I clench my jaw and squeeze his hand a bit harder than I mean to when I see he has a [Special Grade] Inspect skill.

The guard winces, and I reply as we both step back from each other.

"I- sorry about that- I can't control my own excitement sometimes. Just- looking forward to some quests, that's all."

He lets out a nervous laugh, then stands up straight with a smile, flustered at my strength.

"No, no problem at all. Quite a firm handshake for a D-Class. You must have an extremely high natural strength aptitude. I'm impressed."

He turns back to Issac, giving him a firm nod, then opening the heavy brown wooden front door.

"Well, I see why you're heading off for some quests. I can't keep a man from his business for too long, please don't let me keep you waiting."

Issac smirks, walking past the guard.

"Yep, appreciate it. Good to see ya."

I follow quietly, speaking to the man in a suit in a low voice before the door shuts behind me.

"Nice to meet you."

He waves us through, not saying another word.

I gulp.

That was awkward...

Click

The door shuts and I step inside onto a smooth white floor. Immediately, the sound of abundant chatter fills my ears. There are hunters, businessmen, workers, and casual villagers going about their daily business.

I lift my gaze, shifting my eyes left and right.

There are quests on the walls, just like the mercenary guild. The ones here just seem to be a bit more ordered and much easier to read.

There are basic mana crystal quests, various magic crafting items, escort missions, hunting gear, and even food and water requests.

All of the prices are a bit more stable, not varying as much as the smaller town's erratic pricing.

I continue to scan the room, then my eyes land on a troubling sight.

There's one bulletin board near the entrance that makes my stomach drop. It's a wall with large newspapers showing the faces of familiar-looking Association hunters.

Some look very old like they've been on the wall for years, but sticking out like a sore thumb, I see 4 brand-new papers.

It's [The Newest Vice Region Association Elite Squad] in bold letters with all four of our mug shots posted and bounties labeled underneath them.

It looks like our dealings in DryRock are not going to be as easy as I thought they'd be.

Chapter 223

"Your guess is as good as mine. All we can do is head over and find out."

This is the response I get after asking Issac how the dungeon break could possibly be nearby when there are no monsters in sight.

I can't sense any mana disturbances at all...

I'm pretty positive the barrier around this city isn't interfering with my senses either. It's a high-level D-Class spell at best, there's no way it's messing with my mind.

We continue through the underdeveloped section of town and I murmur to myself while watching the sun completely set over the horizon.

"Impossible..."

This break is a mid-tier C-Class break, minimum. The association wouldn't have sent us out here if it was any lower, and someone from the town would have surely taken it out themselves by now.

So many things aren't adding up.

The fatigue of our long travels today is catching up to me too. My mind is getting a bit foggy and my body is more tired than usual.

I scratch my chin, thinking about it, but become distracted as troches begin to light our way and the buildings around us get much larger and shinier again.

There are 2, 3, and even 4-story shops and guild centers that start to pop up and the road beneath our camel's feet has a much more sturdy feel to it as we walk through this portion of the city.

It's only been a few minutes and there's already a drastic change in architecture and neighborhood layouts.

We approach a wide open square with many people out on the streets continuing to go about their nights trading, cooking, laughing, and sharing conversation with one another.

From what I can piece together in my fractured view of the city's layout, there are 3 sections to this 1km wide circular city.

The main square, where we entered today. That's the portion of the city with a high-density area of merchant shops, guilds, government buildings, and housing for those that work there.

The portion of the city we just walked through seems to be a lower-income area. Not quite the slums, but much more independent housing and rogue hunters that make their money elsewhere or off a black market of sorts... That's my guess anyways.

Now, lastly, the third sector of this city is the one we've just entered. It looks much smaller than the other two, but very clean, well built, higher income, and there's not as much worry in these streets as the ones we just left.

Buildings are mostly rectangular, made from either the same red brick that the office building in the main part of town was, or a lighter-colored stone similar to the hue of the desert sand. Most of the cloth and clothing used for decorations and clothing are the same red as the cloaks we're wearing.

My gaze shifts back and forth, taking in the view of the small town as Issac takes us on a sharp right turn instead of walking through the center square.

I catch a glimpse of a crowd, but can't make out what they're surrounding in the center of the courtyard-like town center.

He turns around as we make our way down a more narrow, but well-lit backroad.

"This is midtown. Believe it or not, I lived here for a few years back in the day. Come on, the Inn I usually stay at is right over here."

At this point in the day, my eyes are practically closing. The thought of a nice warm bed is slowly becoming much more important in my mind than the fact that theirs a near B-class level threat somewhere nearby...

We come across a generic red-bricked residential building with a man standing outside that takes our camels to the back of the Inn. He hands us a small black token to fetch our rides whenever we'd like.

They'll feed, water, and take care of them in our absence.

I give Issac a handful of silver to check us in using his name and we all go to our rooms and pass out without much delay.

Today was a long day.

We took out an entire dungeon break, traveled 10s of kilometers across the desert, and successfully infiltrated a town that we're wanted criminals in.

The woman at the front desk pays us no mind and accepts the silver with a smile. She offers us a meal at the bar in the back. I decline and head off to my room as soon as Issac tosses me a key.

I'm too tired to even eat, most of my teammates share the same thought and say no to the woman's kind offer for food and drinks.

All 5 of us agree to meet each other in the lobby first thing in the morning, right as the sun comes up.

I make my way to my room, don't bother turning on a light, and drift off to sleep with a million things on my mind slowly fading away into peaceful darkness.

Time passes and the night turns into day.

The hot morning sun wakes me up, causing the once-cozy bed I'm lying in to make me break a sweat.

I jump out of bed and throw my cloak back on to meet the others in the lobby. We decide to eat breakfast on the way from the supplies I've brought, not wanting to take any extra steps or human interactions.

As we walk out the front door Issac takes a sharp left turn back to the center of mid-town, in the direction of the square we didn't get to face last night.

"Come on, let's walk. No need for those rides if you 4 are going into the break, right?"

I bite my bottom lip as I follow, not responding, just thinking to myself.

This break in town is worth 7 gold... but the one out in the mountains is supposedly 15. It's probably much more powerful, hence the price difference.

I'd like to head straight for the tougher break... If this one we face is anything like the others, there's a good chance I won't have a fun fight.

I want a new skill or new information.... Or another mana control breakthrough. That's why I came to the dark Continent anyways, to find opponents that wouldn't be possible to find elsewhere.

Also... of course, to appease the Director and buy more time while I build my strength. There's no point in disagreeing with power magnitudes above mine. For now, I must continue training, then I'll have more options.

I mutter under my breath, gritting my teeth while thinking of Brutus' face...

"I need to get stronger."

Issac turns around.

"What was that?"

I look up to him with an unnecessarily stern look on my face.

"Nothing, I'm just ready to fight."

He nods as we walk out of the small backroad and the main town square comes into view.

"Great, it should be... right... about...."

As the fire welder looks around, I do the same, and my teammates follow my gaze.

In the middle of the sandy crowded square, there's a large metal box with 4 guards all standing around it.

The chatter of nearly a hundred villagers fills my ears as I try to concentrate.

After a quick inspection, I find that the guards are all over level 275 and have decent basic combat skills. These men are all the equivalent of basic low-level C-class hunters.

I use my All-Seeing Eye on the massive mysterious box, but nothing can be found.

Nothing at all...

There's an absence of space inside the box entirely.

I didn't notice it yesterday because I wasn't fixated on it like I am now. I stare further, burning through a few hundred MP to boost my skill's performance.

Then, the hint of a dense mana signature deep within the box fills my mind's eye.

I whisper under my breath.

"The break is in there..."

Issac responds without looking back.

"That's what the quest office worker told me. He said just walk to the center of mid-town and you'll see it. I guess- this is it."

We walk forward, with our cloaks covering our faces, and Issac taking the lead.

To make us a bit less suspicious I activate conceal and edit my status to that of a higher-than-average C-Class swordsman, about level 350. My disguise of the middle-aged tan-skinned hunter returns as we walk up towards the supposed break.

People move out of the way as we near to the massive silver box. The closer we get, the less crowded the square filled with merchants, hunters, and villagers gets.

Seconds later, we're no more than 5 meters away meeting the gaze of the nearest guard.

He places a hand up in the air.

"Hey now, this is DryRock guarded property. Move along before you get yourselves hurt."

Isaac rolls his eyes and reaches into his cloak pocket to pull out the signed bounty offer for the mid-town break.

The guard's eyes tighten as he reads the paper then looks up at both Issac and me.

"You sure? We've had 4 casualties this week already. What level are you two-"

He peers behind me to see the three figures covering their faces.

"And who are they?"

Issac gulps and turns to me, then I quickly respond.

"Hired help. I'm just trying to get paid and save my village from a drought. I heard there were some bounties for breaks out here. It's either this or we starve..."

I show him a saddened stare, then end with a more lighthearted statement.

"Wanted to see if I could snag a fight with an Elite while I was at it, looks like I just missed 'em."

I let out a fake laugh and a grin, but it seems rather convincing to me.

The guard smirks, giving me a chuckle.

"Yeah right. Those two Elites walked through town without any fear. Guards that got close were blown away by some weird barrier, you wouldn't have stood a chance."

I roll my eyes playfully.

"I'm kidding, just a fantasy of mine..."

Then pause before continuing.

"Well, at least let us give this dungeon a shot, I hope to clear the one out in the mountains too..."

The guard crosses his arms, staring me in the eyes.

"A confident one aren't ya?"

He sighs and gives me a nod then calls out to the guard on his right side protecting another wall of the silver cube.

"Hey, let's let 'em in. We have some new break challengers today."

Chapter 224

"Hey, let's let 'em in. We have some new break challengers today."

The second guard peeks his head around the corner of the box with a goofy grin across his face, making eye contact with me. This man is heavier set and has a body hardening skill, he's most likely a tank.

"Is that right? Are you all facing the mid-town break or the mountain break?"

His silly grin turns into a more serious look as he walks from his post to stand by the other guard's side.

I raise an eyebrow and respond.

"Well, what's the difference? All I know is one's worth more than double the gold to clear than the other."

Both of the guards turn to each other and can't help themselves from bursting into laughter. Eventually, they stop and the larger guard speaks up again.

"Let me see your status, I don't feel comfortable sending you off on a death mission. You better be over level 300."

I nod slowly, turning my concealed status towards the guard.

It shows a level 351 swordsman with various stat-boosting rings, but none of my actual powers.

His eyes widen as he reads everything allowed. Both of the guards become much more serious, then I reply.

"See, I'm not just messing around here. My teammates here are all at similar levels. Tell me about these breaks, we can handle it. Also, I'm smart enough to run away if I can't."

The guard that read my status allowed replies.

"Ya know what, you may be the kind of guy we need for that mountain break- I-"

His partner elbows him in the ribs, cutting him off.

"The mountain break is where those 4 casualties came from that I mentioned earlier. There's... also only been 4 challengers. No one that enters that break makes it out alive... we don't have much info on it."

The other guard speaks, after clearing his throat from being elbowed in the gut.

"Y-Yeah. Sorry, you just wanted info on both breaks. I can't tell ya much about that one. The one we're guarding here is an old Griffin Dungeon. It used to be the perfect training ground for our higher-level 200s hunters to break into the 300s after farming the boss, but now it's gone way out of control."

He lets out a long sigh.

"No one has dared to face the mutant boss, our teams of 5 have trouble with the regular dungeon-spawned mutants. They have some nasty wind magic... According to a few of the break experts, the Boss is rumored to be almost level 400..."

An audible gulp comes from the other guard as he agrees.

I nod slowly, thinking this information over my head for a few seconds, then respond.

"I'd like to talk this over with my partners for a moment."

I turn to Issac, motioning for him to come back over to my three teammates. They're still standing together with their faces covered.

Maria is the first to make a comment once I get closer.

"You want to go off and face that mountain break by yourself don't you?"

I let out a chuckle.

"You read my mind..."

I turn to look at the mountain range made of orange-red stone towering over the village for a moment then back to my team.

"You 3 handle this break, I want the one in the mountains. With a record of 4 attempts and 4 casualties... There's something fishy going on, and I want to figure out exactly what it is..."

I get a firm nod from Arie as he responds.

"Finally, I'll get to solo a mutant boss."

Abby slaps him on the shoulder.

"Hey, I'll be the one to take it out, just watch!"

Maria looks at me with a serious stare.

"Meet back at the Inn in 4 hours. If either of us doesn't show up, go in to help the other with their break. Deal?"

"Deal."

Issac butts in.

"H-Hey so what if- well, you don't come out?"

Then he turns to me.

"And- you're facing the Mountain break by yourself? Are you deaf-"

I cut him off.

"It'll be fine."

I turn away from my team and relay the news to the guards standing by.

"These 3 are going to handle this break. I'd like to take a crack at the one up in the mountains. Where is it?"

Not expecting these words to come out of my mouth, the tank chokes on his own breath before responding.

"Y-You're not serious, are you? We were joking! Do you even have a signed bounty for it? A level 350 soloing the Mountain Break are you crazy? That's suicide-"

I roll my eyes and turn to Issac.

He understands and shows them the signed paper with a worried look on his face. The fire user holds a second sheet of very small paper under the signed bounty.

The guard takes both of them, reads them carefully, then hands the bounty paper back to Issac.

The nervous gaze from Issac now transfers to the guard. The one on my right gulps then points to the highest mountain peak.

"Your- paperwork checks out... See that middle mountain?"

I shift my feet to face the mountain and cross my arms. The corners of my lips begin to curl upwards.

"Yeah, I see it."

He continues.

"There's a path all the way up to the top, you should see it about 3 quarters of the way up. It's impossible to miss the break."

I stare up at the peak, then reply.

"Alright, then how do I get inside? Are there more guards like you up there? And another one of these shielding contraptions?"

He looks over at Issac, then back at me.

"All of the guards were called down after yesterday's challengers didn't make it out. It's basically just left up to whoever wants an earlier death sentence."

He pauses.

"As I said, there's no info on that break still... It shouldn't be anywhere near as dangerous as it is. We lost a level 385 rogue the other day that attempted to challenge it. He's known for taking about the toughest breaks, I didn't even know that man could bleed..."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Oh yeah? He didn't make it out? What kind of dungeon is this anyway?"

Issac throws an arm around my shoulder and begins turning me away while whispering in my ear.

"Enough talking, you sound like an outsider more and more every second you keep running your mouth. You'll blow your cover."

I yell out.

"Hey!"

Issac cuts me off, but I can sense some urgency in his tone now. He must be serious...

I shift my gaze to see some wandering eyes and ears listening in, then shut my mouth. The fire user asks me another question.

"Your friends can handle themselves fine?"

I reply.

"Yeah, a Griffin break? They'll be fine."

While turning away, I see Maria's lips mouth "4 hours". I say "4 hours" back, confirming our deal, and wave the others off.

I think to myself as both Issac and I walk through the crowd of people in the mid-town village square.

This break shouldn't be much harder than the one we just defeated. The three of them are more than competent enough to face a break on their own. If for whatever reason they're not up to the challenge, I'll be back in 4 hours to help.

I'd be very surprised if they don't clear this dungeon without me.

Issac responds, breaking my train of thought.

"Whatever you say. The faster you clear these breaks the faster I get paid and can leave you crazies. I'll be set for years off this payout!"

He murmurs under his breath as we make it through the crowd and head off toward the mountains.

"This will all be worth it in the end."

The two of us walk in near silence again for what seems like a very long time. We make our way to the edge of town, step off the stone road, and begin walking on a much more sandy rugged one.

As we stray from town, the wavering transparent barrier is easy to walk through without any resistance. When I look back., the town is completely gone. I let out a light gasp at the sight, but Issac assures me we'll be able to get back in without a problem.

The twisting sandy road winds up the side of the mountain, and after half an hour of walking I wish we brought those camels along.

I can see it in the fire user's face too, he regrets leaving our rides behind. The hot sun is beating down on us overhead even though it's still very early in the morning.

There is a slight breeze that comes through every few minutes, giving us a hint of cool air, but fading away before I'm fully satisfied every time.

We're about halfway up the middle mountain, and I already see a glimmer of something up ahead on the trail. I squint my eyes and activate my All-Seeing Eye at the same time.

To my surprise, I pick up a faint mana reading....

Then, activate it even further and pick up the traces of an entire dungeon portal... The pulsing was too weak to sense from the town, but now that I'm focused on it, there's definitely something here.

We trek upwards until it comes into full view.

I see a light red glowing dungeon portal sitting up on a high rocky ledge. It's calmly swirling and completely unguarded. The entrance to my next break is about 200 meters away on the path ahead.

I whisper under my breath.

"This all seems way too easy. Something doesn't feel right..."

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"...but something feels off..."

As the two of us make our way up the narrow sandy path up the mountain's side, a light red glowing portal comes into full view.

It gives off minuscule amounts of mana radiation compared to what I was expecting to see.

The closer we get, the more I prepare for a wave of intense energy to come pulsing out, but it never comes. The two of us approach the portal in silence, then I finally speak up.

"This is giving off the mana signature of an E-class dungeon at best..."

Issac responds as we come to a halt about 10 meters away from the light red spinning portal.

"W-Well, once you enter, I'll be waiting out here. You heard what that guard said. Not a single person has walked into that dungeon and made it out alive. There's no way it's an E-Class!"

I tighten my gaze and burn through a few hundred MP to examine every millimeter of this calmly swirling break. I don't find anything different than the last time I scanned it.

"Nothing... it's just a normal E-Class break..."

With a sigh, I begin walking straight toward the break while continuing to speak in a low tone.

"I'll be back in a few hours at most. See you soon."

As I turn away, I catch a glimpse of his nervous expression turns into a slick grin. I don't think much of it as I'm mesmerized by the odd portal in front of me... but shake myself from its trance before going into full battle mode.

I turn to the grunt, looking him straight in the eyes to watch sweat roll off his forehead in streams.

"Don't try anything stupid while I'm gone... "

I light the tip of my finger with a dark flame, then grab it with my other hand putting it out in an instant.

"We have a deal, but I won't hesitate to make you disappear if you do anything to harm my teammates or put my mission at risk. Don't mess up this life-changing payout for yourself..."

He gulps, then shows me a slight bow, stuttering a reply.

"O-Of course. I'll be right here when you return."

He steps back.

I reply to his bow with a firm nod, then face the portal again.

"Great. Now onto more important things."

The light red mass of mana spins slowly and silently just above the rocky desert floor. It's almost eerie how little energy it's giving off.

There's not much use in thinking about it anymore, I'll just need to jump through and figure out what the problem is from the inside.

With a grin forming across my face, I jump through without a hint of hesitation. Instantly, white transfer magic brings me into the dungeon.

My eyes open wide for a moment, then tighten and shift back and forth as I question what exactly is going on here...

There's tall green grass, occasional patches of rocks and small trees, a bright blue sky with white clouds, and a cool breeze that pushes my hair up as I step into this new world.

"A... goblin dungeon?"

Blinking a few times, I activate my enemy detection and inspect skills as I see 3 small green creatures come running towards me with their small black daggers held tight in their grips.

[20m]

[Lv. 16]

[Lv. 13]

[Lv. 12]

I squint more, unable to truly believe what I'm seeing in front of my eyes.

"Goblins... really....?"

They're higher levels than normal goblins, but still, these are double-digit-level mobs...

I must have entered the wrong break. Maybe there is another one nearby that I missed on the way up? Or it's further up the mountain?

I wrack my brain for ideas as the 3 goblins continue to come charging my way.

The group attacks, but I kick them to the side and incinerate the group with a small fireball from my right hand as I continue to ponder my predicament.

The guard's description of the dungeon break matches the location of this one exactly...

"So what am I missing....?"

I'm pretty frustrated, but decide to begin my trek forward into the dungeon anyways. It's still a break after all. Someone has to clear it.

I open up my item storage and let Ember fly out, it's been a while since we've had some peace and quiet alone in a dungeon.

The elegant glimmering black wings of my battle partner come out of my white twisting item storage portal, then the crimson eyes of the large monster show themselves next.

Instantly, I feel our telepathic link open up.

"We're a long way from home, and I've gained a few levels. It seems you've been busy."

I smile and watch the magnificent beast flap its wings and fly up into the open sky of the dungeon.

I air-step upwards to climb on his back and respond.

"I have. You haven't missed any exciting fights yet, I'm hoping we'll come across one soon."

Ember begins to fly his wings harder, bringing us higher up into the sky, then responds.

"Maybe we'll get one here. What a peculiar break."

I raise an eyebrow, activating my All-Seeing-Eye and looking down from above.

"I'm not sure what you- oh-"

I sense something odd on the far side of the dungeon that was definitely not there when I scanned for enemies upon entry...

"This is new..."

Just as I catch onto the odd disturbance in mana that's lurking back by what can only be the boss room portal, it disappears from my mind's eye.

"It- It's gone?"

Ember pauses for a moment before responding.

"Seems like it is... My guess is a dungeon intruder. Something with a teleport skill."

I nod slowly, continuing to extend my perception skill's range, but coming back with nothing at all over and over again. I did feel it, there was something there... It was strong too, very strong.

Ember and I continue to soar through the sky for another 30 minutes. I catch him up on the whole Dark Continent situation, but the Dragon doesn't seem to care much for our human issues.

He's more focused on the break's themselves, hoping to snag more levels where ever he can. We're only 75 away from his next rank up, so it seems like this is still the only thing on the forefront of his mind.

It gives me more motivation to focus too. Leveling up and improving my skills is the only thing that matters.

"Let's find this intruder..."

The moment I speak these words, its presence comes backing my mind's eye. Ember seems to notice a disturbance in the mana around us too and immediately changes directions, beginning our descent.

Whatever is down there is giving off mana levels similar to the Salamander Boss in full battle mode that I fought just yesterday. There's also an odd shielding around it blocking me from reading into its full potential.

As we plummet down toward the floor at blinding speed, I begin to activate my other detection skills... then the presence vanishes again.

"It's... completely gone... again."

I grit my teeth as we break through the cloud line and the light grey spinning boss room portal comes into view below us in the middle of a wide open meadow of tall green grass.

Both of us land to the ground with a thud and I hop off Ember's back with my hands at my sides, looking around with both curiosity and frustration.

The portal slowly spins and gives off a light grey tint.

Even for a dungeon break, it's hardly dark at all. The portal doesn't buzz one bit, and there aren't any goblin or hobgoblin mobs in sight. There is usually some kind of portal guardian or something...

Nothing seems to be popping up.

I reach into my item storage to cautiously take out my sword.

"It's way too silent."

My eyes continue to dart back and forth, waiting for an ambush, but it never comes.

Minutes pass, and nothing happens... that dense mana source that has appeared twice isn't showing its face. I don't understand why....

Letting out a sigh, I walk back over to Ember who has now made himself comfortable laying down in the soft green grass. Leaning against his cool black glossy scales I open our link.

"Looks like it ran away.. whatever was here is definitely not here anymore."

Ember replies.

"What a shame. I thought we'd get to meet a real Arch Demon-"

Ember's voice stops mid-sentence and the air pressure shifts. The dense mana readings begin to pop up on my radar again out of nowhere.

I grip my sword and turn around to see the source of the energy...

An unexpected guest has arrived.

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I turn to see what the source of this overwhelming power is and my jaw drops at the sight of a full-blown demon with red horns, white eyes, dark skin, and pointed white teeth staring at me curiously.

Dense white mana shielding covers its bulging muscles and I see the thin black line on its forearm stretch all the way up its nice, shoulder, and curl onto its chest just like mine.

The monster doesn't have any armor or gear on other than tight black pants that hug its overly muscular legs.

It looks very similar to the Greater Demon I faced in the past. The only difference is this monster looks much more compact, more muscular, and possesses the ability to control mana at a much higher level.

Its skin is such a dark red color it almost looks jet-black. The creature's white eyes wander back and forth from me to Ember, to the dungeon behind us, then back to me.

Then, it speaks...

Breaking through my telepathic links defenses immediately, I hear the deep voice of the 3-meter-tall entity invade my mind.

"A demon and a dragon, what a lucky surprise."

Its eyes tighten on me like it's looking straight through my body.

I gulp as the monster continues.

"Now how did the two of you get all the way out here...?"

I don't say a word, cautiously gripping my sword tight by my side and activating Inspect and Appraisal.

[Lv. 450]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Body Double [Special Grade]

Dungeon Walker

No items and it has a skill I've never seen before. The other two are common demon skills, but... There's no core. Where is the Arch Demon's Core?

Ember stands up and begins to flicker with dark flames behind me. I put my left hand in the air as the Dragon stares down the demon in front of us.

"Wait... wait. Doesn't something feel off?"

Ember nods but keeps his eyes locked on the potential enemy.

The demon smirks and continues to talk through our link like nothing has changed.

"Oh come on, don't be like that. I haven't had anyone to talk to face-to-face in years. I abandoned my labyrinth too, can't you tell?"

The demon takes a step forward, showing off its pearly white teeth, and stares deep into my eyes while continuing to speak through our link.

"You're an odd one, aren't you? A shape-shifting perk? Well, it doesn't matter. Whatever helps you blend in while outside the dungeons is none of my business."

I look at the demon with a slightly confused look on my face, but pay close attention as it continues. I want to ask a million questions, but I'm better off just letting this monster continue doing the talking uninterrupted before it realizes what I really am.

It takes another step forward.

"I really have been getting tired of guarding that place. Only in this recent surge have I been able to open my links to the dungeons that were formed during my creation."

I squint my eyes as the monster continues its long strides, making the ground sink beneath its heavy feet with every slow step it takes in the tall green grass.

"You know, if neither of us reports each other to the King, we can each go our separate ways like this never happened."

I stare forward with half pure astonishment and half mind-bending curiosity. The words that this demon says as it continues to walk toward me without changing its emotionless calm expression one bit are keeping me on the edge of my seat.

A shape-shifting perk? It abandoned its labyrinth? Report to the King?

So many things make my mind buzz with new thoughts.

The shielding around its body is still glowing in the vision of my perception skill on full power. It's spewing unnecessary amounts of MP into the air. If anything, its defenses are getting stronger with every step closer it takes.

My shielding isn't active at all, and Ember is hardly producing any flames.

Either this demon is oddly confident that we're already allies, or it believes the two of us are so inexperienced that this is the peak of our power.

It speaks up again, now less than 5 meters away.

"I heard there was a premature labyrinth collapse recently on one of the newer spawns. In a place humans called, the Vice Region I believe. We were informed that you had perished in the defeat, but it seems this isn't the case. I know your core signature very well. You've gone rogue."

I nod slowly, remembering back to the labyrinth that I collapsed following the C-Class exams. It seems I've really been mistaken for a demon again. All these monsters see is my core and my dragon companion and believe everything they see.

I let out a sigh and go along with its game. If it believes I'm its ally, this may be a positive.

"That's right... We've... been laying low. Looking for others to team with."

The demon takes another step, then its demeanor changes entirely in an instant.

The calm eyes turn fierce, its kind grin shifts to a devious smirk, and it begins to swing its left hand of sharp claws directly at my neck without hesitating for a moment.

I hear it say a final line.

"Too bad you've decided to betray us, I'll make this quick."

I activate my mana manipulation to create a bright pink barrier of energy between my neck and the demon's incoming clawed fingers.

I use nearly half my MP stores on the shielding while activating my stat-boosting skills simultaneously. I'm not taking any chances.

It forms fractions of a second before impact, and I watch the crimson-red claws fracture into dozens of pieces on my dense shielding. The demon's eyes widen with fear, and a spinning black and purple portal opens up behind it.

I lift my sword, instantly charge it with 1000 MP, and swiftly slice the monster's head clean off before it can take a step backward to blip away using its teleportation magic.

I expected it to counter or fight back in some way, but the battle is over in an instant...

As the head of the demon slides off its body, the portal behind it fades and a few final words come into my telepathic link.

"How interesting..."

Its eyes close and the head drops toward the ground. The demon's body falls backward. It whispers out a final line through our link before hitting the grassy floor.

"Come see me in Solara, I'll be waiting for you..."

THUDD

Its head and body hit the ground at the same time, then the entire dungeon falls silent.

I look up at the grey spinning portal in front of me, then turn back to Ember, then finally back at the corpse on the ground.

In just mere seconds, its body dissolves into thin air, not leaving a single thing behind.

"A Body Double... That skill I'd never seen before. This is the only explanation."

I turn to Ember again, he speaks up before I can get another word in.

"That was far too easy to be the real thing, your thinking I most likely correct. A body double skill. Possibly similar to your Advanced Mana Manipulation perk. Arch Demons aren't easily fooled."

I nod.

"So it probably knew I was a human all along? Or... Maybe it was just testing my strength...? And how does it know all of these city names from outside the dungeons? It wants me to meet it in Solara."

I gulp, then my facial expression slowly morphs into a grin.

"That means there's a Labyrinth in the Capital right? Or... maybe it's just in another dungeon like this."

I scratch my chin, looking up at Ember while standing in place and thinking about our new situation for quite a while. So many things just got much more complicated than they were just a few hours ago...

"I'll deal with this threat once I get to Solara. For now, one thing at a time, let's clear this break."

I open up my item storage to let Ember hop back inside. The last thing I need is to have Issac see my 7-meter-long fire-breathing companion when I leave the dungeon. That grunt already knows one too many things about me.

After entering the boss room, a mutant hobgoblin appears at level 41. I take it out in a single swing of my sword and wait for the white transfer magic to take me back out to the surface.

Putting away my weapons and powering down my skills, the white light takes over and the break is cleared.

I mutter to myself as I feel the earth under my feet shift from soft grass to hard smooth flooring that does not feel like the rocky desert.

"That went well... Easy enough, wait-"

While transporting back to the real world I begin to feel a very odd humming sensation.

As my vision comes back I see white walls surround me on all sides and the buzzing sound of manmade mana shielding fills my ears.

I'm in a box... It seems to be about the same size as the metal contraption I saw in the village square earlier this morning.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye reveals that it is in fact, exactly the same as the box from DryRock.

"What have I gotten myself into this time..."

Chapter 227

"What have I gotten myself into this time..."

There are 6 white walls, including the ceiling and floor all around me buzzing with the strong sensation of high-grade mana shielding in the air.

My perception skills reveal the level of shielding to be more than enough to keep most C-Class monsters at bay.

It seems as though the outside is made of a strong metal alloy while the inside is coated in dense white mana shielding. It's similar to the kind used in the Vice City capital training rooms.

Well, the public ones.

"... how did I manage to get stuck inside one of these...?"

I walk over to one of the walls and begin banging on it with a fisted hand.

"Hey! Hello? Anybody there? I'm.... Kind of stuck inside here!"

The pounding sounds of my fist against the impenetrable shielding fade instantly not even leaving me with an echo. These are some hard walls...

No one replies. I can't hear anything but the low hum of mana now that I think about it...

I gulp, then begin to pace around the small white room in circles thinking about my options here.

It makes no sense as to why I'm in a box like this.

It's only been 2 hours at most since I left the city

Maybe it was some kind of weird linked dungeon that brought me back to the town center? Or... was I set up? Is this some kind of trap?

I activate my plunderer skill and begin sucking the MP out of the floor beneath my feet while fully activating my All-Seeing Eye to look through the walls around me.

The moment I do, I catch onto the faint sensation of magic items in my near vicinity.

Not many, and not strong ones, but there's definitely some mana-imbued gear lingering nearby.

A few cloaks, swords, and item boxes are moving slowly in the open area all around me.

I activate enemy detection too and find that all of the people around are between levels 275 and 330.

I mutter under my breath.

"Guards..."

This was a setup.

All signs only point toward one person. I roll my eyes and reach into my item box to pull out my sword.

Using the excess mana from the shielding I'm standing on, I power up my own version of shielding using mana manipulation. I cover my entire blade in a thick pink layer of mana while coating my body in a thinner layer of it as well.

This may be overkill.

If my calculations are correct, none of the guards outside have a clue what mana control even is, but there's one that I'd like to teach a lesson.

One of their levels matches Issac's exactly... After activating Appraisal and doing a full sweep, his Fire Magic confirms his position as well. He's cowering behind them.

I grit my teeth and swing the mana-shielded blade at the dense white walls. It slices through like butter... not even making a sound, leaving the full wall entirely intact.

I hear the chatter of guards come through the white walls the instant the shielding is fractured.

A raspy voice fills my ears.

"It's only us four... we're the only ones that know about this Elite. The bounty on his head is all ours, we'll kill him the second we get a chance. He's a crafty one too, he can change his face to look like anyone... So don't let that fool ya!"

Another guard responds.

"Yeah, and he wields two elements... Fire and Earth...This box better hold him. Ready when you are to set off the trap."

There's a pause.

"3... 2... 1-"

Without wanting to know what exactly will happen at the end of this countdown, I kick the triangular sliced metal shielding in to open the hole just large enough for me to hop through onto the rocky mountain path overlooking the city.

The 4 rougher-looking men in guard's uniforms stop counting down and stare at me wide-eyed with shields, swords, and daggers pointed straight ahead.

One of them in the back speaks up.

"H-Hey, how'd he get out of there... T-That shielding is graded for up to level 400 monsters! I-I thought you said he was a level 351!"

The guard turns to a nearby rock pile and I follow his gaze to see the back of Issac's head running away down the path without saying a word to reply.

My eyes shift back to the 4 guards as they begin to run at me with their weapons raised yelling death threats and baring angry expressions.

The world around me seems to slow down...

I take a deep breath in, then let it out. Watching the sand beneath the backs of Issac's feet fly up in the air and the shining silver weapons of the guards before me slowly close in on my location.

I think to myself.

"It's a shame you ratted me out... Once a crook, always a crook I guess..."

I haven't killed anyone in a while.

Unfortunately, today I'll break my clean streak.

I'm not mad about it, just disappointed. Disappointed that even with common interests in mind and what I thought was some mutual respect, it still wasn't enough to tame human greed.

Including my own.

"This will be quick."

I lift my sword, still covered in a layer of pink mana, and run forward while charging its core with fire-imbued MP.

In the blink of an eye, I slice through every last one of them.

All 4 guards freeze in place, unable to comprehend what's happening. I run through them without batting an eye, slicing while keeping my eyes focused on the man that revealed my secrets to these 4 grunts.

Issac calls out, begging for something, but I don't give him the time of day to say a single word. The backstabber is finished before he can even meet my gaze.

I fly past him with a swift swing of my sword, then come to a halt using a hint of wind magic to stop my feet from sliding down the trail any further.

My perception of reality speeds back up to normal, then the 5 astonished men all burst into balls of hot black flames.

In less than a second upon leaving that mana-shielded box, every last one of them has been completely incinerated.

One of the rare cool mountain breezes comes through, making the black flames waver on all of my targets for a moment. There's a slight whistle in the air, I'm left in near silence.

All that remains now are piles of sizzling ash and the inconsistent buzzing of a broken metal mana shielding contraption.

I curse under my breath, realizing the seriousness of what I've just done... but don't regret it for a moment.

They were going to kill me if I gave them the chance, and letting them run free would have endangered me even more in the future.

That was the right thing to do.

Well... that's all I can tell myself now. What's done is done.

After looking over both my shoulders, confirming there are no other wandering eyes, I throw all of their low-level gear into my item storage. Using my earth summoning skill, their blackened remains are mixed into the sandy dirt below my feet.

Then, I stare at the massive metal contraption with a triangle-shaped hole in the side of it.

"Now how did they even manage to get this thing up here...?"

It's enormous.

"There's no way I'm moving this thing in one piece."

With a few swift swings of my mana-shielded sword, the metal box is sliced into 8 smaller pieces that conveniently fit in my item storage without a problem.

Each fragment buzzes and vibrates, giving off absurd and uneven amounts of mana. They rattle and shake the ground if not handled with my telekinesis skill. Even while floating in the air they aren't very easy to hold.

It won't be containing any monsters or people any time in the near future, but I'm sure these parts will come in handy at some point in the future.

I let out a long sigh, confirming that all of the evidence has been scrubbed. Looking down at the city below, my heart skips a beat as I remember my teammates clearing the break in the town center...

I wonder if more guards have set up a similar trap while waiting for their return.

Chapter 228

I stare down at the city below, wondering how my teammates are fairing against a potential ambush.

Remembering back to when we showed the guards in the middle of town our bounty to clear the break, Issac slipped him a second piece of paper.

I grit my teeth and curse under my breath again.

"How could I have been so careless..."

Well... trusting is a better word.

How could I have been so trusting of a grunt that would turn his back on his own town's people for some gold? Of course, he'd turn his back on me once he got a better offer!

I swallow hard, rolling my eyes, then tighten the grip on my blade for reassurance while staring down the mountain trail that leads back to the town.

"Think..."

It's been a little over 2 hours. Even if the 3 of them ran the whole, there's a low chance they've defeated the entire break already. I still have time to scope out the center of town and prepare for what happens next.

Thinking back to what the guards that attacked me said, they were the only ones that knew of my whereabouts and hidden abilities. Hidden in a much more private setting, they were going to cash out on my bounty alone.

My teammates will re-appear in a much more populated area, it'll be much harder to keep a secret, so I can only assume they have a lot more guards on the job.

No one else has to die...

If I can just get us out of the city quickly and quietly that would be the best-case scenario here.

I'm sure, given enough time, they'll figure out where their missing guards went. However, our immediate concern is to escape this city, all 4 of us have a bounty on our heads.

I begin walking down the mountain at a quick pace while re-activating conceal and throwing on a new generic villager disguise while covering my face with my long red robe just to make sure no one identifies me.

It takes nearly half an hour to get down the mountain. The sun has risen higher in the sky, making its hot rays much stronger, pulling moisture from my skin with every step.

The city is still invisible to me too, the odd magic barrier shields any visuals from making it through. Maybe that's it?

I walk up to the invisible magical wall. Using my All-Seeing Eye it appears as a rainbow-pink-tinted wavering wall of light-imbued magic.

In the silence of the desert, I look over both my shoulders but see no one to my left right, or back. There isn't even anyone from the village past the wall looking at me. It is a more unpopulated portion of town with residential buildings facing away from the open desert.

I slowly bring my finger forward and tap the wall of glimmering transparent magic 2 times.

To my surprise, it sends rippling waves all throughout the barrier and actually stops my finger from pushing through it.

"Well.. this is unexpected..."

I tap it again with my outstretched pointer finger, but the vibrations just show up in my mind's eye and flow throughout the entire town-sized curved dome. The waves look like the result of throwing a rock into a pond.

"So... odd..."

There's a good chance that if I hit it hard enough, this barrier will most likely break. As I gauged it before, it's a high-grade D-Class spell. I'm sure it does well at keeping most intruders out.

I'm not exactly sure how it's maintained or operated, so I don't really want to break it beyond repair if the caster isn't in town to fix it.

I activate my mana manipulation skill and coat my finger in a layer of pink shielding, then try my tapping again. To my amusement, my finger slips right through.

Tiny fragments of clear shimmering energy fly off of the area my finger touches and dissolve into thin air. It looks like paper-thin glass being shattered. It only affects a small area that is touched with mana and disappears within seconds. The ripples don't carry throughout the entire barrier like before.

With a smirk, I coat the rest of my body in mana and take a few steps forward to walk all the way through.

More small rainbow-shimmering, transparent fragments burst from the spell as I slip through and dissolve into the air. I do a final scan once I get to the other side, making sure that I've left the wall completely unharmed and remained totally unscathed myself.

Powering down my perception skill, the city is visible to me without any outside aid. I made it back inside.

Immediately, I head toward the Inn we stayed at last night while using my Special Grade Conceal perk to shift my appearance around to something that'd help me out a bit more at a time like this.

With long black slicked-back hair, a beefier build, and a smug look on my face, I take on the appearance of the fire-wielding grunt that crossed me and head for the camel stand at the back of the town.

Without even batting an eye, the kind old man taking care of the animals in the back gives me the reins for 2 of the 3 camels he was taking care of. I mention if we're not back by nightfall, the 3rd one, Issac's old ride, is his to keep, a token of my gratification. It may be better off with this caretaker anyway.

He looks at me with an astonished stare, but graciously accepts as I walk off with our two rides toward the town square.

My heart beats faster and faster as I walk through the narrow alleyways holding the reins of both camels tight, leading them behind me.

There's a cool shade near the walls of the buildings that line both sides of the street. Every step forward I take makes me more jittery about the sight I'm about to see.

Finally, making it to an opening that leads out into the bustling crowds of people, I tie the two camels up in the last bit of shade and slowly walk forward into the mass of people going about their everyday lives. The top of the massive metal box is visible, reflecting the mid-day sun right back at me.

Still in full disguise, looking exactly like the fire-using thug that tried to have our heads sold off to the highest bidder. I wade through dozens of people, making my way closer and closer to the metal box.

The laughter and conversations all around me fade away, all I can hear is my own breathing and my slow footsteps on the hard ground.

The mana shielding contraptions gets closer while the crowd of villagers gets thinner.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye and stay hidden by the hoard of people all around me and begin to walk around the open courtyard in slow circles while examining the mana in my close vicinity.

There are tons of mana crystals and mana-imbued items being traded all around. Some wear item boxes while others are holding goods on their person. The 4 guards that stand around the large metal box are all stacked up with lower-level C-Grade gear. There are another 8 guards stationed all around the square, armed with similar gear.

I continue to walk around in a slow circle stopping at random shops and switching directions every once and a while with the crowd's natural flow for a full 10 minutes.

Keeping my head down and out of sight, only using my perception skill, I completely blend in with every other merchant and villager that passes through.

It's been just over 3 hours now, so my teammates still have plenty of time before our decided meeting time, but I would have guessed that they beat this break by now.

My breathing slows, and my eyes grow sharp as I continue to watch the box from all angles and wait.

Finally... I feel something.

The strong magic within the portal ceases to spin and I feel an intense wave of familiar earth and ice magic hit my mind's eye seeping through the heavily shielded metal box.

One of the guards takes out a glowing silver contraption from his pocket and yells out with a fearful tone to the guard next to them.

"They're here! Get into positions!"

Just like before, moments prior to when I cut through the magic box up on the mountainside, I hear one of the nearby guards counting down.

"3...."

The 4 guards scatter, running away from the box while yelling at villagers in the crowd to stay back.

One of the other guards continues to yell.

"It's a break! Get back! Everybody get back! The containment is failing!"

My eyes dart back and forth while I watch everything go down in real-time. The men are clearly lying, they're collapsing the box from the outside.

At least they're getting the innocent citizens away, that's good...

The surrounding 8 guards begin to walk closer from all sides.

"2..."

The villagers and merchants all around me start to scream and smaller children in the streets cry in fear, but I run forward, making my way straight at the metal box.

I pass one of the guards on my way through, locking eyes with him for a moment to see that it's the same one that Issac handed the small piece of paper off to this morning.

I get a surprised look from him, but pay it no mind. I'm still in full disguise.

"1..."

I lunge forward, then the countdown hits its final number.

"0..."

There's a loud bang, and everything glows bright white.

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"3..."

"2..."

"1..."

I hear a nearby guard count these numbers down as I run toward the metal box in the middle of the square.

All of the villagers and merchants run in the opposite direction, following the orders of the screaming guards that are lying to them all about a collapse in their containment tech.

In reality, whatever is about to happen is all their doing. It was triggered by that small silver contraption in the hands of one of the escaping guards.

"0..."

The countdown hits zero. I'm close to taking out my sword and slicing through the metal box myself, but I feel energy building up inside it.

The district dense mana for Arie's bow, Maria's new royal blue ice, and I feel the ground begin to shake and ripple sending waves of earth magic all throughout the courtyard.

I grin and tuck my sword back into storage, realizing they have this all under control.

There's an incredibly loud bang that's quickly overpowered by the humming and buzzing sounds of excess mana shielding flying out into the air.

A bright white flash of white light engulfs the entire square. To anyone without extreme perception awareness like mine, it'd be impossible to tell what is going on.

So, in other words, I'm the only one that has a clue of what's going on for the next 1-2 seconds.

Metal fragments from the contraptions begin to burst out in all directions and my 3 team members jump out of the mana-spewing box with angry expressions on their faces.

They've busted out at the last minute without my help. Arie's arrow blew a hole right through the shielding and Maria's Ice took advantage by freezing the whole box solid in fractions of a second. Abby finished the job by forcing the desert floor beneath the box to shoot spears of rock into the brittle outside layer shattering it into thousands of pieces.

This chain of events releases massive amounts of built-up energy into the atmosphere.

I summon walls of rock to shield the innocent townspeople that may be caught in the blast radius. Massive 5-meter tall walls of stone make a 20-meter-wide circle around the inner part of the town square. While doing so, I activate my telepathy skill and aim it directly at my teammates.

It's been used on intelligent monsters before, but never on other humans. In theory, it should work just fine.

"Can you hear me?"

About a second passes...

Shards of metal and broken mana shielding collide with my walls of stone blocking them from hitting the villagers, but I conveniently let a few pass in the direction of the 12 guards now all running away in fear of the blast.

Maria's voice echoes in my mind.

"J-Jay? How-"

Then Abby cuts her off with a confused echoing voice.

"Hello?"

Arie is the last to talk through my telepathic link as Abby's voice fades off, he's more calm and collected.

"What happened...?"

I reply while shooting a dark ball of fire in the air heading off in the direction of the camels I parked in the shadows of the narrow alley. The black-crimson ball of flames shines through all of the dust and mana-imbued white and silver-colored debris.

"It was all a setup. Issac betrayed us. Follow the flames, we're getting out of here."

Abby butts in with a sarcastic tone.

"Who woulda thought? Issac betrayed us?"

I cut her off with a serious reply.

"Tease me later, for now, our only goal is to leave this square."

I activate stealth to zip through and hop over the crowd with ease as the dust begins to settle all around. The display of earth magic and metal fragments is revealed. The bow wielder, blond, and green-haired mages follow close behind me.

I deactivate my concealment and stealth skill and hop on one of the camels while unhooking them from where I previously tied them up. My other three teammates hop on and we ride away through the empty ally way before the screaming crowd can escape the square.

We leave the village center in shambles.

With bloodied guards cursing the elites they let slip through their fingers and yelling out words about the association, we're leaving this town just like the other two hunters from a few days earlier.

Although, the turned-up earth, and a completely destroyed mana-shielding contraption, this is a surefire way to get our bounties raised. We probably left a bigger impression on this city than we should have...

I can't help but to laugh at the chaos all around.

A few small fires start in the confusion, but hunters and guards put them out before they spread too far. Clouds of smoke fill the air behind us.

We twist and turn through the backroads until finally making it to the outer edge of town, then we go straight through the shimmering invisible wall without hesitating for a moment.

Camels are surprisingly fast when pushed to run, I thought they were just lazy slow-moving creatures all this time. Learned something new, these animals are quick.

The 4 of us, on 2 rides, make our way straight for the mountains in the direction I just came from.

Abby is the first to yell out.

"Hoohoo! Now that's how ya leave in style."

She turns to me and changes her tone.

"So, you finally got rid of that fire user I take it?"

I nod, staring forward.

"Yeah. He's gone. A few guards were taken out in the cross fire too. Deserved... Just wish I got a skill or something out of it. I'll sift through the gear another time. Oh- what about you all? How'd the actual break go?"

Arie replies.

"It was a good boss fight, the 3 of us nearly had to go all out. Maria, want to show what we got?"

She nods and reaches into her item box behind me, pulling out a few random items. The only one that stands out is a long curved white talon with a 70% mental strength buff.

I look at it curiously for a moment, then feel a buzzing sensation come from Maria's lap followed by a white glowing light.

Her eyes open wide and she reaches down to pick up the transmission tablet that came out of her item box and is now vibrating like crazy. With a tap of one of the crystals, we all hear a loud voice come out.

It's The Director.

"I've been trying to reach the lot of you for almost a full day now! What are you doing out there?? Give me a full mission status report right now!"

Just hearing his voice makes me sick... I'm not sure why. Maria chuckles and responds while my stomach drops to the floor.

"Oh, we just cleared the 4th break, only 2 more to go!"

There's a pause on the other end of the transmission tablet as Maria's cheerful voice echoes in my mind and the clomping sounds of camel's footsteps fill my ears while we begin to enter an alcove between two mountains.

Instead of climbing up the path from earlier, we head off to the right side of the middle mountain. Red walls of rock line a narrow valley-like path cutting straight through the two mountains.

A cool breeze even drifts through whistling past the tall rock cliffs on both sides as we continue forward. Finally, the director's voice returns as we all wait in anticipation.

"Good.. good. So you didn't run into any trouble, this has gone much more smoothly than I expected. So you'll be staying the night in DryRock before heading off to Solara I'd assume."

Maria giggles again.

"Well, actually we-"

Arie reaches over to grab the tablet.

"We'll be heading off to Solara soon, yes. Why? There was no mention of giving mission updates until we finished the job. What's come up? Cut to the chase here. Why are you calling?"

There's another long pause.

Maria is a bit annoyed that she didn't get to finish her sentence but stares at the glowing tablet waiting for a response just like the rest of us, not saying a word.

The Director replies.

"You have less than 2 days to clear the final break in Solara. If by any chance you fail, there will be a major catastrophe."

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"You have less than 2 days to clear the final break in Solara. If by any chance you fail, there will be a major catastrophe."

The sick feeling in my stomach slowly fades as the conversation carries out, turning into pure anger rather than dread.

I stare at the glowing transmission tablet in Arie's hand and clench my jaw tight. I want to give the Director a piece of my mind, but there's no use. It'd only be detrimental to this mission and there's no clear reason for why I'm really that mad at him...

It would be pointless to antagonize that man right now.

I want to face the stronger dungeons to come, and he wants us to clear them. Even if we want the same job done for different reasons, there's no use in sabotaging him or myself.

Arie replies as I take a deep breath and stare forward still not saying a word.

"You're going to need to give us a few more details than that. At the rate we're traveling, 2 days should be just enough time to take it to the big city. Even without calling, we would have made it in time, so don't worry, Director. We'll be well on our way soon."

There's a pause.

The four of us travel further into the shade-filled valley between two mountains. The sudden lack of direct sunlight cools my skin, making it a bit easier for me to think straight.

The Director's voice rings out from the tablet again. Instead of his slow and stone-cold usual self, he speaks fast with a hint of emotion in every word.

"My apologies for being rash. There was just a minor delay. The scouting party we sent out 3 days before you gave us details of the final break. It... seems to be a multi-level dungeon break. A labyrinth with over 20 floors actually. There hasn't been a break like this in Section 4 in years, and one to this magnitude would be devastating. There will be C and possibly B-class monsters scattered across the continent. Worst case scenario we'd have to create another abyss to contain them."

There's another click and the transmitter goes silent.

Abby, Maria, and I are all left confused by his final line. Another Abyss...? Even with that, I can't help but think about what the Director said beforehand. A multi-level dungeon break...

Arie's eyes go wide, then tighten immediately on the small silver box in his hand. He stays silent.

I finally speak up.

"A Labyrinth break? I- Didn't know that was even possible. How do we go about clearing one of those?"

We all sit in silence waiting for a response as the camels continue to make their way forward at a much slower pace through the sandy valley. Any traces of the city we just left are completely out of sight, and from what I can tell no one is following us.

A light chuckle comes through the glowing tablet before hearing a response.

"Good to hear you're going alright, Jay. I assume you're looking forward to a good fight in the capital. I wish I could say I planned this, but that isn't the case. You may meet your training partner while you're there. Fisher is the one who called and asked for backup after all."

There's another pause and I begin to think about all the details in the news he just dumped on us.

Fisher called for backup, meaning he wasn't able to beat the Labyrinth's final floor. Then again... once you enter boss rooms there is no way out unless you die or defeat the opponent. So the fact that Fisher called for help probably means he didn't even try to face the boss himself yet.

Now that it's been mentioned, a labyrinth being in Solara does make total sense... This must be where that Body-Double Demon is residing.

One thing doesn't make sense though.

I grit my teeth and speak up again.

"Then why'd you send us? Our party is much weaker than that seasoned Elite. If he can't beat it, then why would you put your faith in us? This makes no sense!"

Arie butts in and speaks before there's any response.

"Hey. U-Understood Director. It doesn't matter. If it's vital to collapse this break before it decimates Solara, we'll do everything in our power to stop it."

Abby sighs and Maria nods happily.

I was going to agree anyways, and it seems like Arie knows something I don't. So, I just shrug.

Brutus' voice rings out again. This time, in an even softer tone.

"We've sent a team of B-Class Elites your way from Section 3. They're finishing up a series of their own urgent breaks in the meantime. We didn't intend for you all to be facing a labyrinth mission at the start of this outing. This is just the way things turned out. As stated before, doubled credit rewards will be provided and you may keep all drops from the labyrinth. No questions asked."

I think to myself for a moment.

It does all seem very out of the blue, and he wouldn't ask for us to try this near-impossible task unless very desperate.

Usually, interactions with this man end in me being forced to do something I don't want to, or him trying to pry some info out of me that I don't want to tell.

Neither of these are happening right now.

Something else may be amiss, but it doesn't concern me much. This seems like a great place to end the conversation.

I speak up in a positive tone.

"Great. The pay rise and item drops are perfect. We're on it. That 5th break will be taken out on our way and the 4 of us will face the Labyrinth break as soon as we get to Solara!"

After a final pause, he responds.

"Very good. I'll let them know you're on your way. Remember, 2 days remain. If it's not cleared, millions may die. Best of luck."

Click

The tablet stops glowing and there's no way to respond back, our transmission has ended. He left us on an unnecessarily ominous line there...

Abby pulls out the map from her item box and speaks up.

"Well, this doesn't change any of our plans. I'd assume we're not exactly welcome back into DryRock anytime soon, and I don't want to go back to check. The only towns nearby are way out of the way, it'd only make our journey to Solara even longer."

Maria responds.

"Agreed. We were headed this way anyways, now we just get an extra reward!"

Arie replies while turning backward to look at the map.

"Yeah, but now we have a reason to step on it. He wouldn't have called if it wasn't serious. Looks like the 5th break is in this mountain range anyways, there's no point in taking any other path. We may have to camp out overnight in the desert."

I nod, remembering the map earlier this week, but not being able to picture this mountain range. I wasn't sure if all of those tiny poorly drawn triangles were an exaggeration for this mountain range or not...

As we begin to walk out from the small valley area and re-enter the rays of the scorching hot sun, I see the vast mountain range before us that stretches off as far as the eye can see.

There have to be hundreds of them, for as far as the eye can see stretching out into the deep blue sky in front of us. Sandy paths twist and turn throughout the Rocky Mountains guiding us onward.

Arie speaks again.

"If we travel non-stop, we may be able to find this 5th break by nightfall. I've heard of a powerful dungeon out in this mountain range, but never had the chance to face it myself. They're rumored to be Blue Ogres."