

Destiny 1301

Chapter 1301 Trap

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A few minutes during Shin's battle against King Yulis.

Diablo just entered the secret passage when a sudden sense of dread washed over his body. It was as if an existence way beyond his level had sent its eyes on him the moment when he set foot at the passage.

He hesitated for a moment since he knew that it was already beyond his limit. But since there was no one else who would investigate this place other than him, he had to continue and at least see what was hiding beyond the dark corridor in front of him.

Putting his guard up, Diablo used most of his stealth-enhancing skills to make sure that his presence would be as unnoticeable as he could as he stepped into the dark passage.

While moving forward, he saw huge piles of bones at the side of the passage whenever he reached a certain distance. From what he could see, those bones came from humans and monsters.

Aside from the decaying bodies that had yet to turn into bones, he also saw a few corroded bodies due to some unknown toxins. His eyes which could see through the dark also saw some smoke and vapors coming from those bodies, which indicated that it was not that long since they had been corroded.

The deeper he got into the secret passage, the more remains of a human and monsters he found. They were scattered around, making the whole place very messy.

The entire passage was not that long. Aside from it being slightly inclined and headed deeper to the ground, the distance seemed to be not far.

Not long after, he stood in front of a pair of huge metal doors that were tightly shut and completely locked.

Observing the engravings and the rune patterns that the metal doors had, he could tell that whatever was locked behind them was something very powerful.

Diablo was not sure if he had to open these doors or not. After all, it was no different from him freeing the entity trapped behind these doors if it escaped.

Click!

Clank! Clank! Clank!

While he was hesitating, he suddenly saw the locks of the door moving on their own. The runes that were engraved into the metal doors were also shining with crimson light forcing him to shield his eyes due to the sudden illumination within the dark.

Bang!

When the final lock was finally undone, the doors slowly opened themselves as if someone were pulling them from the side of the room.

Dong!

When they were finally opened, Diablo felt a strong gust of wind that blew at him from the inside.

Swoosh!

He crossed his arms in front of his face and lowered his stance so that he would not be blown away by the air current.

When the blowing wind finally stopped and he was able to recover, he slowly raised his head and looked through the doorway.

It was at that moment that he saw a dark shadow moving inside.

When he tried to focus his gaze and used the observation ability of his 'Demon's Eyes' to look clearer in the dark, the massive silhouette of the creature was gradually revealed in front of him.

"Sh*t!" he cursed under his breath when he realized that it was a giant centipede that was coiling around inside the room.

Judging by the massive size of the room where it was trapped, Diablo could get a rough estimate of the side of this monster. From what he could see, it was at least hundreds of meters long.

Hum!

Diablo felt a cold shiver that ran through his back as he saw hundreds of red lights appearing one after another within the dark room.

Looking closer at them, Diablo realized that they were the eyes of the centipede!

They were looking at him, seemingly staring straight into his soul as they carefully observed each of his moments.

Shriek!

Then there was a soul-screeching cry that came from the centipede as it opened its mouth. It then charged straight out of the room, heading toward Diablo as if it found its food.

"D*mn!" Diablo did not hesitate to use all his speed-boosting buffs and turned around, running back to the direction where he came from.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

He left a series of afterimages behind as he climbed up the inclined passage toward the outside.

He did not dare to turn around as he knew that the giant centipede was chasing him with a speed no lesser than his. He could also hear the series of explosions that indicated that the entire passage was being destroyed as the centipede ran through it.

Rumble!

He could also feel the intense tremors of the walls, which indicated the rapidly approaching monster. The concrete floor and ceiling also shook violently, having long cracks and falling dust and rock fragments respectively.

Swoosh!

A few moments after an intense and thrilling running, Diablo finally dashed out of the secret passage.

But he did not pause his steps and continued to run away from the entrance as far as possible. He only stopped when he reached a considerable distance before turning around.

Boom!

Right after he did, a huge explosion suddenly erupted along with the breakthrough of the giant centipede. Its body emerged from the ground which was immediately shrouded by the thick and huge cloud of dust while rock fragments flew in the air and scattered in every direction.

Diablo watched from the distance as he watched the giant centipede wreak havoc on the castle and destroy all the structures nearby.

At first, Diablo felt a little guilty since it was most likely because of him that this gigantic monster had escaped. But after seeing how it destroyed the corrupted nest and even devoured all the surrounding corrupted monsters and demonic creatures in a gulp, he felt rather good.

That was until he saw the giant centipede stop what it was doing before dashing toward a certain direction.

Diablo raised his head brows for a moment as he looked in the direction where the giant centipede was headed. Then he suddenly realized that that direction was headed to the Maze Forest.

His eyes suddenly turned wide in realization before giving chase.

Swoosh!

He also sent a message to Shin, informing the latter about the current situation while also contacting Owen and the rest of the people stationed in the Maze Forest.

But he also received bad news from the other side as they informed him about the declaration of war of the 'Big Three' to the Sacred Light Kingdom.

Even though they were somewhat expecting it to happen due to Diablo's warning earlier, the timing that they had could also not get worse due to the appearance of the giant centipede.

And from what he had seen earlier, this centipede was most likely an Emperor Class Monster. Such a monster would not only create chaos for the whole kingdom but also destroy whatever was on its path.

Given that it was targeting the Maze Forest, Diablo felt that the kingdom was already doomed. It was unless something as powerful as this Emperor Class Monster Boss appeared.

Diablo heard from Shin that the latter had to deal with the business on his side first. Shin still had to retrieve the Crown Relic that was on his side before he could catch up to the rest.

Realizing the gravity of the situation, Diablo did not have a choice but to reveal a couple of his trump cards.

Since he did no longer find any sign of Pandemonium Descendants in this corrupted nest, he knew that Paimon had pulled out their forces from the kingdom. Their main goal had most likely been accomplished.

Diablo did not have to reveal his cards since most of his main targets were no longer around. But since he felt a little obligated at the current situation, he felt lending a hand a little.

Taking out a whistle that looked like the skull of a small monster from his inventory, Diablo turned toward the giant centipede ahead of him blowing it.

Hong~!

The sound of the whistle was soft and quiet, but it seemed to have been heard by the giant centipede.

The centipede suddenly halted its advance and slowly turned around. Its hundreds of eyes looked straight at Diablo, seemingly glaring at him.

Seeing that, Diablo suddenly smirked before saying. "Come at me, you ugly creature. Let me play with you for a while."

He then put the skull whistle in his mouth once again and blew it as hard as he could before turning around and running in a random direction.

He did not even bother to look at the giant centipede as he was confident that it would chase after him no matter what.

Shriek!

With a loud cry that seemed to be able to shake one's soul, the giant centipede chased after Diablo. It destroyed all the trees on its path and flattened the ground in its wake during the chase.

Diablo did not dare to look behind as he knew that it would be the end of him the moment when he slowed down.

He was planning to lure the giant centipede to an isolated place or a corrupted nest first before using more of his trump cards to buy as much time as he could.

If possible, he would want to destroy all the corrupted nests within the kingdom by leading this giant centipede around. But he knew that it would be impossible since the effects of the skull whistle would most likely disappear after an hour or two.

The skull whistle would also lose its effectiveness the more he used it, so it would be better to refrain from using it often.

Aside from those intentions, Diablo was also planning to lead the giant centipede away from the Maze Forest as far as possible, so he could buy more time for Owen and the others to set up a much stronger defense.

The forces of the Big Three were busy with the towns and cities around the Sacred Light Kingdom to prevent those places from sending any kind of reinforcements. They would still take some time to conquer everything, so they would not be able to attack the Maze Forest for the time being.

With that, Diablo had to lead the giant centipede around and lead it to a 'stroll' until they found a way to deal with it.

But a few minutes after leading the giant centipede, Diablo sensed something unusual.

His eyes turned sharp as he quickly activated the second phase of his 'Demon's Eyes' without any hesitation.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Then a group of people suddenly surrounded him from all sides as the giant centipede was still a few distance away from him.

Raising his head, Diablo stared at the person leading the group before smirking. "So, that was it, huh?"

"You waited for me to use the [Soul-Luring Whistle] before making your move. You are planning this from the start so that I can't escape," he said to the opposing side.

Amon, who was leading the group of sweepers with him, shook his head and said. "Well, it will be hard for us to catch you if you run away again. It is already a lot of trouble to find you, so how can I let you go that easily?"

"I guess it is another arrangement of Paimon? Or is it Belial, who gave you this idea?" asked Diablo as he glanced behind him, looking at the huge cloud of dust that was rapidly approaching from the distance.

Based on the speed of the giant centipede, it would catch up to him within just a couple of minutes.

Amon did not give a direct answer and just said. "I will be in deep trouble if you analyze my current style and strength, so I have no choice but to follow this arrangement."

He then raised his hand and pointed it to Diablo. "Go! You don't have to defeat him. Just buying enough time for the Dragon Centipede is more than enough."

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Chapter 1302 Demon (Part 1)

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Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

Multiple silhouettes could be seen dashing across the forest of one of the maps of the Sacred Light Kingdom. Their figures were like a shadow ghost that flew through the trees and bushes of the forest, running like a gust of wind.

One of them was at the forefront of the group while the rest were chasing after that person to the best of their abilities.

These were Diablo, Amon, and the rest of the Sweepers of the Pandemonium Descendants. Despite doing everything they could to entrap Diablo in a tight formation, the group still failed to confine the former commander of the Sweepers.

Forced to make his move, Amon had to step in, but still holding his strength back.

Whoosh!

Accelerating forward, Amon suddenly dashed through the forest and caught up to Diablo within a few seconds. He then ran toward a nearby tree, leaped in the air, and kicked it to propel himself toward his former friend.

Swoosh!

Dragging his sword in the air, Amon swung it at Diablo, who was forced to halt his advance to defend himself.

Clang!

Burning sparks flew in the air as the two sides clashed briefly before separating from each other once again.

Diablo used the force of the impact to fly away and disengage from the battle while Amon quickly stomped onto the ground and lunged forward.

In terms of speed and mobility, Diablo had the advantage over the opposing side, but Amon used an unconventional method to have a sudden burst of speed.

Bang!

Swoosh!

There was an explosion behind Amon that sent him forward. There was also a pair of flame tongues that were ignited on his back, resembling the exhaust flames of a rocket. They were pushing him forward as he caught up to Diablo.

Diablo was still able to avoid the incoming attack by a simple sidestep to the side, but such action delayed him from running away.

Left without a choice, he was forced to continue exchanging blows with Amon.

Diablo knew that it would be impossible to run away from Amon when the guy decided to join the pursuit. Having his back facing such a dangerous opponent would only put him at risk, so Diablo had to turn around and fight.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

Clang! Clang!

The two exchanged a couple of strikes as they talked.

"What's the problem, Amon? This is not how I know you. I thought you hated relying on cheap tricks like this. How about having a proper fight against me?" said Diablo, trying to provoke Amon. He knew how bad the temper of this guy was, so agitating him should be easy.

But to his surprise, Amon remained calm despite the ugly and enraged look that he was making. "Don't try, Diablo. I know what you are trying to do, but it will no longer work for me. The mission always comes first."

"Tsk! Tsk! It looks like Paimon had trained you very well. The previous hunting hound has become an obedient dog in a short time," commented Diablo with a mocking tone.

The corner of Amon's mouth twitched as his sword was suddenly ignited with a blazing fire. He then swung it at Diablo with a strength that could crush mountains.

Diablo skillfully avoided the strike and nimbly distanced himself, making the attack land on the ground in his previous location instead.

Boom!

The explosion formed a tall pillar of flames in his previous location, towering along with the tall trees of the forest.

Swoosh!

Amon quickly broke through that pillar of fire and lunged at Diablo once again while swinging his blazing sword.

Despite achieving his desired outcome, Diablo could not help but knit his brows as he could tell that Amon was just randomly attacking instead of using his signature skills and techniques. It was clear that the latter remained rational despite exploding with his temper.

The latter was still trying to hide his real battle style despite facing the current situation.

Diablo was forced to retreat multiple times during the exchanges since he knew that it would be foolish to face a strength-type and explosive swordsman like Amon in a frontal confrontation. Moreover, he also had to keep an eye on the sneak attacks of the Sweepers that caught up to them and tried to surround him for another time.

Swoosh!

During the intense melee against Amon, Diablo suddenly kicked the latter and used the momentum of his actions to propel back, creating a considerable distance away from the opposing side.

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

It was at that moment when a series of arrow bolts flew past his previous location and hit the nearby trees instead.

Somersaulting in the air, Diablo landed on his feet before dashing straight to the deeper parts of the woods. Since he could not gather any data from Amon, there was no point in continuing these exchanges. His focus right now was to escape from them while luring the Dragon Centipede away from the Maze Forest as far as possible.

The effects of the [Soul-Luring Whistle] were already about to run out since was already approaching the one-hour limit. He had to cast it again if he wanted the giant centipede to continue chasing after him.

But he decided to use it yet since he had to shake off Amon and the rest of the Sweepers from his tail. He also knew that Amon would not be willing to continue fighting him if the burden of the giant centipede was no longer on his shoulders.

This was why Amon had to deal with Diablo when the effects of the [Soul-Luring Whistle] were still in effect since it was only his chance. Once the effects reached their maximum duration, he had to fight Diablo normally, which would only lead him to expose his cards to the latter.

Troubled, Amon had to think of a way to completely lock Diablo within their encirclement. Or at least prevent him from running away repeatedly.

"Do I have to use one of my styles just like Belial said?" mumbled Amon as he tried to recall the warning that his colleague had given him.

– "If you want to take down Diablo, then you must sacrifice at least one of your swordsmanship styles. And if you want to capture him, then you must be ready to reveal most of your cards." –

– "He is no longer the same as before. He even completed his research in 'Demon's Eyes' based on the reports that we have received. If I am not mistaken, then he most likely achieved the perfect 'Hyperactive Immersion' that he is looking for." –

– "Take it as a serious warning. If you let your guard down, you will pay dearly for it." –

Amon looked down at his sword before finally deciding. He turned to his subordinates and ordered. "Use your Demonic Powers and execute the Spider Net Formation. We no longer rely on the Dragon Centipede. Once the [Soul-Luring Whistle] loses its effects, we will take him on, and you guys must make sure that he will not escape the Demonic Field."

"Yes, Sir!" responded the Sweepers running along with him before scattering in different directions.

Diablo immediately sensed the movements behind him and instantly realized what they were up to. "Are they planning to set up the entrapment formation? Is it the Mist Formation or the Spider Web Formation?"

Diablo did not dwell that long on those thoughts as he knew that Amon had finally decided to take this matter seriously. He had to make his preparations this time.

Amon might not know that Diablo could not use his 'Demon's Eyes' in the fourth and fifth phases while the third phase was currently his limit. Professor Henry had repeatedly warned him not to use those later stages quite often, at least not until his body in the real world fully caught up with the growth of his brain.

He had to hold back as much as he could to make sure that there would be no accidents in the future. After all, the professor had said that he could die due to exhaustion of his lifeforce if he repeatedly used those two stages, especially when they were together with 'Hyperactive Immersion'.

If he were planning to use the 'Hyperactive Immersion', Professor Henry also said that it would be best if he also did not use the third phase either if possible.

Diablo had already learned about a few of the secret methods to enter the special states similar to 'Hyperactive Immersion' from the professor and Benedict. Professor Henry even said that they wanted to gather some data from him and Shin later when they had the time.

From Diablo's understanding, only 'Lucifer' was the one who could enter those special states from all the commanders of the Pandemonium Descendants.

This meant that he still had a slight edge against Amon in this battle even if he could not use the latter two stages of his 'Demon's Eyes', and the third phase would be his trump card.

Formulating a plan inside his head, Diablo took out his signature weapons from his inventory, a shortsword and a stiletto dagger. He played with them for a couple of moments, trying to familiarize himself with the current state of his virtual avatar.

It has been a while since he had undergone the treatment from Professor Henry. He had also discovered quite a lot of improvements in his body and mind. He could also tell that he had not only become strong in the real world, but his improvements inside the game were also quite great.

This would be his 'proper' battle since achieving those improvements, so he was quite excited. He wanted to test his current capabilities against a proper opponent like the game's top experts, especially the Godlike Players.

Amon was just a perfect candidate to test his current skills and techniques. He was quite eager to test everything right now. He felt that he would explode in excitement when he thought about it.

One of his intentions of coming to Shin was to ask for a quick spar. But after learning the movements of the Pandemonium Descendants, he decided to change his plan and look for whoever was in charge of the events here or the ones that would be targeting their greatest threat at the moment.

While keeping at the timer of the effects of the [Soul-Luring Whistle], Diablo adjusted the gears within his body. He became silent as he relaxed his muscles and loosened his joints while sprinting across the woods.

Along with these changes, the aura surrounding him also took a sudden turn. From light and sharp, the air around him became heavy and suffocating.

There was also a threatening aura that his body was emitting. It was as if a hungry beast was about to be unleashed at any given moment.

No one could sense these changes, but Amon, who was paying close attention to Diablo, quickly noticed it.

He squinted his eyes as he focused on Diablo in the distance a little closer. He even activated his ocular skills to see what was happening in extreme detail. It was at that moment that he realized that a monstrous beast was about to come out of its cage.

While Amon was observing Diablo, the latter suddenly turned his head slightly and looked over his shoulder.

That was when Amon felt a sudden shiver that ran through his spine, especially when he saw those cold and emotionless Diablo that seemed to be looking straight at his soul.

It did not last long and was very brief before quickly disappearing as Diablo turned his eyes back in front of him.

Amon thought that it was just imagination, but after putting more thought into it, he knew that it was not the case. The Diablo that they were trying to catch was completely different from the one that he remembered.

He did not know what exactly changed, but he knew that it was not good news for him. He could not help but mutter to himself. "One or two styles may not be enough."

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Chapter 1303 Demon (Part 2)

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On the major castle that had become a corrupted nest, the throne room became a battlefield for Shin and Lodhir, who were controlling the body of the fallen elven king.

The entire place had completely turned into ruins. The throne room was completely different from what used to be. Its high ceiling was no longer there while the thick and sturdy walls filled with murals had fallen during the battle. Even the platform where the throne was located was ruined while the throne itself was smashed into pieces.

The entire place was already covered with thick roots that had either been cut into multiple pieces or scorched into charcoals.

At the center of these ruins stood the lone figure of a cloaked young man while pointing his blazing sword at someone, who was lying on the ground.

Underneath Shin's feet was the body of King Yulis, who was possessed by Lodhir. The body no longer had any of its limbs as they were cut by Shin's sword earlier. Shin had severed all the limbs of the fallen elven king to make sure that it could no longer move.

"Heh-... Hehe-... You are indeed a monster. No wonder those people are too wary of you," Lodhir, who was still possessing the body of King Yulis, was laughing maniacally despite the current state that he was in.

He stared at Shin with an insane look on his face as he continued. "You may have won this battle, but we have won the war! This kingdom can no longer be saved! It has already been corrupted and will become one of our lands!"

He continued to laugh as if he was mocking Shin. Then he continued. "As your you! Just you wait! I will turn your virtual avatar into a perfect puppet that would be my most powerful weapon!"

"Let's see how your account will become once I make that happen!" it was clear that he was provoking Shin on purpose.

Unfortunately, Shin had no intention of falling for it as he coldly said. "You are welcome anytime. But make sure to be prepared for being imprisoned in a prison prism the next time we meet. I have no intention of letting you go for the second time."

Lodhir smirked. "What a coincidence. I happen to have the same plan."

Shin no longer had the time to play with this guy, so he quickly swung his sword and severed the latter's head for 'another time'.

Shin sheathed the [Yamato] immediately after that and bent down to take the Crown Relic that was on the head of the fallen elven king. He did not bother to look at its properties as he directly threw it in his inventory.

He then turned around and looked at the remains of the fallen elven king as he hesitated. He then shook his head and mumbled to himself. "There is nothing to lose if I give it a try."

He then formed a palm blade with his right hand and focused his mana on it. He then thrust it down and struck the chest of the remaining below him.

After feeling that he had something in the place where King Yulis' heart was supposed to be, Shin closed his hand and grabbed onto that 'thing'.

He then pulled his hand out along with what he had grabbed with all his strength.

Raising his body and standing straight. He looked at his hand and saw a spherical object that looked like a small globe. It had a color like the blue sky while releasing a gentle glow that seemed to have pulsed with a proper rhythm.

It was the core of King Yulis, which was formed after he became a Humanoid King Class Monster.

This core was supposed to be contaminated by the Corrupted Mana. But its appearance clearly showed that it was not affected by any kind of corruption, which made Shin heaved a sigh of relief.

Shin stared at that core for a moment before turning to the remains on the ground. He was not sure how he was going to extract the soul of this monster since he had never done it before. Even though he had read the 'legends' about acquiring the Sword Heart, it had never been mentioned the proper method of doing it.

Aside from extracting the core and the soul of the said monster, nothing else was recorded.

Ding

It was at that moment when Shin heard a notification sound.

System: You have met the conditions to extract the Soul of the Sword Slave.

System: Sword Heart Tinder (Soul) had been detected. Do you want to extract it and seal it to the core?

Shin suddenly came to a realization as his eyes suddenly turned bright. "So, it is like that!"

He realized that the developers would have to think about it and download it to the system. Since they had designed such a scenario, it was clear that they had a solution for the problem that he was facing.

No longer hesitating, Shin quickly hit the 'Yes' button in front of him.

Swoosh!

Following his actions, a sudden 'movement' could be seen from the remains under him. He saw a translucent light moving from within the remains of King Yulis before 'coming out' of it. It was as if something had lured it to come out before slowly extracting itself from the physical body.

Then Shin watched this 'tinder' float up and enter the core that he was holding in his right hand.

The translucent light looked like an incorporeal spirit that turned into smoke while it was being sucked by the blue core.

The process lasted for a couple of minutes before being completed.

Ding

System: Extraction has been completed!

Shin stared at the core for a few moments before looking at its details.

[Item Name]: Sword Heart Container

[Item Type]: Miscellaneous Material

[Item Rank]: Special (Legendary) – Obsidian Material

Description:

A special core that has been used to host the soul of a fallen swordsman.

It contains the knowledge and experience of the fallen Swordmaster.

Note: Can be used as a main material to form a Sword Heart.

Special Clue: Look for a Great Sage with a secondary profession of Alchemist or Apothecary at the Saint Rank to achieve the highest rate of success.

Shin's eyes became brighter when he read through the description of the item. "So, it is true! It is really designed from the legends in the real world! This is good stuff!"

It took him quite a while to calm himself down before keeping the item inside his inventory and looking around.

He then saw the pair of swords lying on the ground a few distance away from him. He suddenly remembered the new rules of drops inside the game.

Monsters no longer drop any items when they die. Materials could be extracted from the bodies of the Beast-type Monsters while weapons, equipment, or other items could be dropped from Humanoid Monsters.

The former case was pretty much a common practice these past few days after the player adjusted. There was still a certain chance to extract or gather some special materials from the monsters' carcasses if they were lucky.

The latter case was somewhat similar. If the players were lucky, then they could get the weapons or other equipment that the monsters were using as a form of drop just like what happened in front of them.

Bending over, Shin picked up the pair of swords and looked at their descriptions. The swords were good quality as both were at Black Mithril Rank. Their stats and other bonuses were also quite interesting and would be at the top of the rankings if they were to be listed.

But since Shin was already in possession of a better weapon, a sword at the Obsidian Rank, these swords were nothing in his eyes. Other than their interesting names – [Twilight] and [Nightfall] – Shin quickly lost his interest in them.

He then casually threw them in his inventory before sweeping his gaze at the battlefield once again, making sure that he did not miss anything.

After being sure that he had not overlooked anything, Shin opened the communication panel to inquire about the current situation.

Ithilien immediately reported that the Maze Forest was still able to hold on with the help of the players and NPCs, but barely. She felt that the situation would turn for the worse if they did not perform the ritual as soon as possible.

Shin quickly informed them that he already had the final relic and would be headed there in no time.

Ithilien heaved a sigh of relief when she heard that and urged Shin to come as soon as he could while they prepared for everything.

Shin then contacted Diablo and asked about his situation. From what he had heard earlier, the latter seemed to have lured the Dragon Centipede away from the Maze Forest to buy them enough time.

Shin was quite surprised that Diablo just replied simply.

Diablo: Go! I will play with some old friends first and join you later.

Reading between the lines, Shin realized that the Pandemonium Descendants might have pulled one of their tricks once again. But since he no longer had the time to dwell on it, he set it aside for the time being before rushing toward the Maze Forest.

He had to deal with the most urgent matter first before anything else.

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On one of the hunting maps of the Sacred Light Kingdom, a giant centipede suddenly lost its cool and started wreaking havoc the moment when Lodhir died.

It broke free from the constraints and control of the necromancer that was controlling it and finally regained its freedom.

To 'celebrate', it started destroying everything on its path while heading toward a random direction.

As if taking it as a cue, Amon, who was patiently waiting up until this point, finally made his move.

Boom!

An explosion erupted behind him as he suddenly lunged forward, flying straight to Diablo, who was running ahead of him the entire time. He caught up to the latter within a couple of seconds before swinging his sword.

Swoosh!

Puff!

His attack was swift, strong, and ruthless. But he had cut nothing but air as Diablo turned into smoke right after the blazing sword passed through his body.

Unknowingly and soundlessly, Diablo suddenly appeared behind Amon while swinging the shortsword on his left.

'Twilight (Elven Thief) Skill: Backbreaker'

Amon quickly sensed the chill on his back as the shortsword was about to hit him. He swiftly took a couple of steps forward while quickly turning around and holding his sword diagonally in front of him.

Clang!

Burning sparks flew in the air as the swords collided.

Then the two separated from each other as Amon used the force from the impact to retreat while Diablo kicked the ground and swiftly gave chase.

Swoosh!

Amon stomped his foot to forcefully halt his retreat while raising his sword in the air. It released a blinding light that looked like a golden sun that rose in the void while a raging flame flowed through its blade.

He then swung it down when his opponent was about to enter his attack range.

'Divine Wrath Skill (Tier 2): Solar Explosion'

Boom!

The flames exploded and created an energy that rippled in all directions like tidal waves. Wherever they went, everything the waves touched was reduced to dust.

It was clear that Amon wanted to cover a huge area to prevent the opposing side from dodging. But Diablo did not even hesitate to use one of his life-saving skills when he saw the incoming attack.

'Shadow Dancer Skill (Tier 2): Gale Steps'

Swoosh!

Diablo took advantage of the few seconds of immunity all kinds of damage and status effects of the skill while using the extreme speed boost that it had to continue advancing.

Diablo disappeared for an instant before reappearing right in front of Amon. But right after his reappearance, his face was already in front of a blazing sword that was greeting him. He could already feel the heat of the sword as it was about to hit his face.

'Shadow Dancer Skill (Tier 2): Shadow Waltz'

Swoosh!

The blazing sword passed through his 'body'.

His figure slowly faded away as it was only an afterimage.

Diablo then reappeared behind Amon for another time as the stiletto on his left hand pushed forward. Its tip was directed to the lungs of the latter, seemingly wanting to pierce it with all his might.

'Twilight Skill: Backstab'

But before the tip of the stiletto reached its destination, Amon used the momentum of his previous actions and quickly spun. He then turned to face Diablo and swung his sword down as it released a much more intense burning than earlier.

'Divine Wrath Skill (Tier 2): Divine Cleave'

A Tier 1 Skill against a Tier 2 Skill – it was clear which side would win if this exchange continued.

Even if Diablo was confident that he would still hit Amon's heart with this stab, he would still be unable to kill the latter since he was aware of the 'Seven Hearts' of Demon Race.

On the other hand, he would be cleaved by the descending sword if it continued.

Not going to risk it, Diablo retreated without hesitation.

'Shadow Dancer Skill (Tier 2): Extreme Vanish'

Swoosh!

He disappeared once again and retreated. But this time, he did not reveal himself immediately as he entered stealth and started stalking his opponent from the dark.

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Chapter 1304 Demon (Part 3)

...

The more Amon exchanged blows with Diablo, the more he realized how strong the latter had become. Diablo was already strong enough to be put on the same level as the five commanders of the Pandemonium Descendants before, but he had grown even stronger.

If Amon had not grown more powerful and had made great progress in his research in swordsmanship within the game, then he would most likely be defeated right now.

Fortunately, his research was successful. Moreover, he had achieved much more than he had expected. He had to thank Lucifer for helping him perfect his special method.

Clang! Clang!

Bang!

Flashes of light continued to illuminate the dark forest from time to time as Amon and Diablo exchanged more blows.

Amon remained on his body and never walked ten meters away from his position. He had to be always on guard for every ambush that seemed to come unexpectedly all the time.

In the air, the clash between a blazing sword and shortsword shrouded with dark light lasted for an instant.

Swoosh!

A figure was sent flying black, crashing into the distant ground. That figure turned into a human silhouette for an instant before disappearing once again.

Amon was still stronger in terms of strength. After all, his class focused more on balanced statistics compared to the class of the opposing side. Adding the fact that he was close to being a True Demon, the terrifying body that was almost as strong as the physique of a physical-focused class hosted an overwhelming strength.

In a frontal clash, even someone with Berserker Class or Knight Class, who were expert at close-range combat, might not find themselves in an advantage. They would be most likely to lose if their overall stats were from something other than ordinary race or regular classes.

But when it came to speed, Diablo had an overwhelming advantage. He could use this weapon to bridge the gap between their strength.

Diablo's flickering figure suddenly appeared in front of Amon. Then a crescent-shaped shadow light sprayed out of the shortsword, slashing toward the neck of the latter.

The sword gleam was unbelievably fast, reaching its destination in almost an instant.

"That's so fast!"

Amon's pupils dilated as he found this attack much faster than the previous ones. With just one slash, he realized that Diablo was still holding back.

However, Amon was not slow to react either. He held his sword and leaped back, swinging the blazing sword once as well and slashing forth a radiating sword gleam.

Just as the shadow crescent was about to slash Amon's neck, the radiating light surged forth and clashed against it.

Bang!

After a loud crash, the sword lights fell apart almost at the same time.

Amon's body was sent skidding several dozens of meters while Diablo had gotten the slight upper hand due to his dominant position.

As soon as Diablo moved to give chase, however, almost a hundred blazing lights came raining down toward him like a violent storm.

Some of these slashes were fast while the others were slow. Some came straight at him while the others curved and flew toward him from different angles, surrounding him completely.

They covered such a large area to make sure that he would not be able to advance or detour around them. This left him the only choice of retreating.

'Divine Wrath Skill: Solar Storm'

Diablo was not surprised in the slightest as he somewhat expected it. Instead, his eyes were shining even brighter when he saw what his opponent could do.

This was what he wanted when he chose to face this old friend of his.

He tightened his grip over the shortsword while switching the stiletto with a bloody dagger. He then swung them repeatedly, and suddenly it looked like the sword and the dagger had split into countless shadows that flew toward the blazing slashes.

'Legendary Combat Technique: Darkness Excursion'

This was the skill that he had used against Shin when the latter used his never-ending chains of slashes, the 'Infinity Edge'.

At that time, this combat technique was a combination of movement and offensive techniques. He was utilizing his insane speed to move around Shin while also attacking from different angles during the process.

But since that time, Diablo has gotten a lot of inspiration and modified this combat technique multiple times and was able to combine a few more techniques such as defensive ones and counterattacks.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A series of explosions erupted as the powers of the two sides collided.

Diablo did not bother to look at the result as he used the momentum that he had accumulated through his actions before swinging the shortsword and dagger at a much faster rate.

He then sent a series of purple waves toward his opponent which resembled a raging storm.

'Class Fighting Style: Shadow Cyclone'

Swoosh! Swoosh! Swoosh!

The wave of purple crescents flew past the epicenter of the previous clash and headed straight to Amon who was fully ready to welcome them.

He adjusted his stance along with the style of swordsmanship before swinging the blazing sword repeatedly, deflecting each of the purple waves.

'Class Fighting Style: Evasive Flame'

Diablo ignored the raging storm of explosions as well as the violent ripples that they had as he lunged forward and dived through them.

His shadow seemed to move and enfolded himself, protecting him from those explosions. He charged forward without stopping and accelerated his speed even further.

Swoosh!

When he broke through those explosions, he suddenly turned into a purple flash of light that flew straight to his opponent.

'Class Fighting Style: Killing Shadow'

Boom!

A sonic boom exploded behind him as the air that accompanied him during his charge formed a spiraling aura that spearheaded his charge.

'Basic Combat Technique: Second Drive'

'Class Fighting Style: Final Strike'

Swoosh!

With Diablo pointing the shortsword and dagger in front of him, he appeared right in front of Amon with a flickering figure.

Amon knew that he was in trouble the moment when Diablo started using his signature combat techniques, which were much different and stronger than what he could remember.

But he was also not the same as before. He had improved and grew stronger since the last time they had fought.

If there was something that he had to take Diablo for, then it was the two consecutive defeats that he had suffered during the previous fights that they had.

Because of those setbacks, he grew at a rate that he did not expect and became what he was right now.

He held the battle sword with both of his hands and raised it in the air.

A huge sword gleam was descending at Diablo when he appeared in front of Amon. This attack resembled a bolt of divine lightning as it fell toward him.

'Class Fighting Style: Divine Wrath'

Diablo could feel that this move had locked onto him. No matter how he tried to dodge it, the sword gleam would come right at him and cleave him in halves.

Since it was impossible to evade it, Diablo could only face it head-on.

He slightly adjusted the course of his attack directed it at the descending sword and clashed at it with all his might.

Boom!

The entire forest shook as the two sides clashed against one another. The aftershock that it had blew the surrounding trees while shredding them into pieces.

When the chaos settled down and the dust cleared, Diablo and Amon appeared again in the view, revealing their figures.

Both were in a sorry state.

They might not be able to land a clean hit at each other, but the impact of their attacks dealt quite a lot of damage on each side. Their respective health bar suffered quite a lot of damage, almost reaching their bottom line.

They were left in a sliver of health.

Amon was slightly better due to his superior stats when it came to VIT and STR, but Diablo, who had a slightly inferior side in these aspects was in a much sorrier state.

But due to the previous protection that he had sent up before the direct collision, he was able to survive, although barely hanging on it.

Their states lasted only for an instant as both sides consumed high-quality Elixirs and Master Class Potions to restore their respective health bars to a healthier state.

Then the two resumed the battle right in that instant.

The next exchanges reached an extremely high intensity as they showcased their respective skills and styles.

Diablo cycled more of his in-game skills perfectly and executed them in a manner that broke the logic of the game.

He was usually able to perform this well only when his 'Demon Eyes' were at the fourth or fifth phase. But after his treatment, his body had reached a much healthier state. This made his mind to perform better.

Despite him only utilizing the first and second phases of the 'Demon Eyes', he was able to achieve a result that was impossible before. This clearly showed how much growth he made and how high his proficiency in using these skills was when he was healthier.

He was close to reaching the level of a great Martial Artist or a skilled Mentalist utilizing a Reality Manifestation within the game.

He might still be a little far when compared to supreme geniuses like Shin, Arthur, and Zero when he was in this state – if he did not include their current forms and styles. But he would be comparable to them if he increased the phase of his 'Demon Eyes' further.

On the other hand, Amon was slowly become more troubled as the battle progressed. He knew that this battle would only lead to his demise if he continued to let things go like this.

Diablo would only analyze his styles and skills further if he did not find a way to break free from the current deadlock.

He had only used a single style of swordsmanship up until now. It would only take time until Diablo had fully analyzed it and found counters in his every move if this continued.

He had already expected this to happen, but he did not know that he had to use his second style this soon. It seemed like he still underestimated Diablo despite all the cautiousness that he had shown up until now.

He had already heard it from Lucifer before, but it seemed like Diablo had truly become a 'Demon' that the Pandemonium Descendants could not afford to take easy.

He then suddenly reminded that Diablo seemed to have a slightly good relationship with the members of the Empyrean Talons.

When he thought about this, the expression on Amon's face suddenly turned darker. It seemed like the 'problems' that the Pandemonium Descendants would be facing in the future would be more troublesome than they had expected.

If these obstacles gathered around and became a stumbling block so large enough to become a tall wall in front of them, Amon had to admit that they would be hard to overcome.

"What you have said at that time may be true," mumbled Amon, attracting the attention of the opposing side.

Diablo had no plan of listening to whatever Amon wanted to say, but it felt like he had to hear it somewhat.

But despite having those thoughts, he refused to lower the intensity of his attacks.

Amon did not mind and continued to defend himself while throwing a couple of counters from time to time. "It may be true that the current Pandemonium is holding us back. Or at least for someone like you, who is always looking for something."

"But unlike you, we choose to stay because we want to follow him. We all believe that he will be the one to make our goal come true," he added as he distanced himself away from Diablo before taking a new stance.

Seeing Amon taking a new battle stance, Diablo knew that he was about to use a new swordsmanship.

He switched the dagger on his left hand with the stiletto once again as he took his stance. He said. "No. You're wrong. He is no longer the same as before. He becomes blinded by power. He is no longer the same leader and friend that we used to know."

"He has become someone else since that time," he added as a purple flow of mana covered his entire body.

"So there is no need to stay together since our goals are no longer the same."

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Chapter 1305 The 'Withering' (Part 1)

...

Boom!

In a distant and isolated place within the Sacred Light Kingdom, there was a massive explosion that was so huge that it caused a serious disturbance in the surrounding area.

The explosion created a huge dome of energy that spread in every direction, destroying everything in its path. The flames that it had burned everything and turned them into ashes no long after.

When the energy dome reached a certain point, a powerful suction force suddenly appeared and pulled everything back. The blazing energies, the scorched and charcoaled trees, and dust scattered in the air were all sucked by that suction force.

The pulling only stopped after a few minutes of causing havoc. It formed a small spherical energy in the air that stayed for a moment before completely disappearing.

Everything returned to its usual calmness, but the place was left with complete destruction. There was a massive crater on the land that the explosion had swept through. It left nothing but desolate land that looked like a massive, inverted dome.

At the center of this massive crater, a lone figure stood while looking at the sky. He stayed still for a couple of moments before heaving a deep and heavy sigh.

He then lowered his head and looked at the two broken weapons in his hands before mumbling. "Close but not enough, huh? I guess it still requires some serious polishing."

Diablo stood lonely at the center of the crater as he recalled the previous battle. He had almost gone all-out and even activated their third phase of the 'Demon's Eyes' yet he only managed to fight Amon on an equal footing despite all of that.

He even used the 'Hyperactive Immersion' to the fullest, yet the result only barely able to win him a slight edge.

Diablo had not expected that Amon had also achieved the true 'Hyperactive Immersion' and even combined his personal style of swordsmanship with it. Not only did the latter incorporate those two perfectly, but he also formed multiple varieties of styles.

Diablo had only recorded at least two sword styles perfectly and was barely able to record the third one that Amon had used during their final exchange. It was also from that style that Amon decided to end the battle with a final strike.

Amon understood that it would be his loss if he let the battle continue for an extended period, so he chose to end it as soon as he realized that he still could not defeat Diablo with the second style.

In a sense, it was already his loss when he started using the third style since Diablo had already recorded his first style through 'Demon's Eyes'.

If not for their final exchange, where they poured every ounce of power that they had, which also resulted in an earlier explosion, then Diablo would have successfully recorded the third sword style of Amon.

Diablo could escape the aftermath of that explosion only because of the Unique Special Skill he had acquired during his adventures. It was a skill that could make him invulnerable to all kinds of attacks as long as he did not move from his position and let the shadow powers cover his body.

It would last for as long as ten minutes at the maximum, which was how he was able to survive such a destructive explosion.

What surprised Diablo was the powerful clash in their final exchange was able to destroy his weapons. He did not know that that clash would be able to destroy his weapons like that. Those were a pair of top-grade platinum weapons.

It looked like it was finally to look for a new pair.

After adjusting himself and regaining his composure, Diablo turned his head around and swept his gaze at the surroundings.

When he made sure that there was no one around, he took out a pair of daggers from his inventory and sheathed them behind his waist. It would be better to be ready for the unexpected rather than paying for his life later.

He knew that the earlier explosion did not catch Amon. He was sure that the latter was able to escape in time before the explosion erupted and spread in the entire area. After all, he did not get the notification from the system that Amon had died.

As for the Sweepers that were maintaining the formation to entrap him, he did not care about them since they could not pose enough threat to him.

After making sure that he did not overlook anything, he leaped toward a certain direction and started sprinting to the best of his abilities. He knew that the job was yet to be completed since the Dragon Centipede was still around. Even though he did not know where it headed, he was sure that he would be able to find it if he followed the trails that it left behind.

He was not sure if they would be able to take it down even if the rest of the Sacred Kingdom worked together. After all, the kingdom was already in chaos, so it would be hard to gather enough people to hunt it down.

Diablo was aware that Shin and the rest would not be enough if they wanted to take down such a powerful monster, but they did not have the choice to do it to complete their quest.

On Diablo's side, he wanted to gather some of the materials from the Dragon Centipede for his new set of weapons. He already had an idea of what kind of weapons he wanted, so this monster just came at the right moment.

He was not sure where the others would let him get the materials that he wanted.

Swoosh!

...

As Diablo was tracking the Dragon Centipede, Shin was already helping the others with the defense of the Maze Forest.

At first, the people in the current base were doubtful of this newcomer, especially the players. But when they saw his abilities and learned that he was the famous Battle God, who was recently gaining more fame in the virtual world, they immediately acknowledged him.

They started regaining their confidence when defending the final fortress of the Sacred Light Kingdom amidst the corrupted land and forest.

After participating in the initial defense right after his arrival, Shin showcased a strength that put most of the players in awe.

He first delivered the crown relic at the center of the Maze Forest and met with Ithilien and the rest briefly before quickly heading out and helping the people desperately defending this final base.

The tide of monsters was almost unstoppable, and the players and NPCs were barely holding up. But right after he showed himself and announced his arrival, the corrupted monsters and demonic creatures were immediately slaughtered one after another, lifting some pressure from the people.

He had showcased an unrivaled power that overwhelmed the entire battlefield.

After freeing the players and NPCs from the pressure of the monster horde and stabilizing the situation, Shin quickly went back to the command center of Maze Forest to discuss a few things with the rest.

Not long after he joined, he immediately took the position as one of the main commanders of the base. Even the NPC Commanders were speechless at how they maneuvered their forces and put everything under control.

He even arranged an impenetrable defense around the entire Maze Forest despite having a limited number of people.

Most of their forces were stationed at the main entrances of the map, so they could not cover some of the gaps in their security, which also led to some breaches where the opposing side entered.

But with Shin's arrangements, he only had to station a few groups of players in every hole in their defenses before taking advantage of the terrains and unique features of the Maze Forest.

He had solved almost all their biggest problems one after another right after he had taken the commanding position. Even the elves, who were usually cold to humans, had to acknowledge him.

But despite solving almost all their problems, Shin was still able to relax. It was because of the other matter that he had to be taken care of – the former Big Three of the Sacred Light Kingdom.

Since those three biggest guilds had betrayed the kingdom, the situation that they were in had gone for the worst.

With the strength and forces of those three guilds, the problem that the Sacred Light Kingdom was facing had become almost unsolvable.

Inside the temporary quarters within the base, Shin was taking a brief break. He started to feel the fatigue right after he dealt with the most urgent matters.

Not long after, his friends entered the tent and checked on him.

Shin had already taken off his mask and put it on his inventory, so the others could see the hint of tiredness on his face.

"Working pretty hard, huh?" commented Owen when he saw Shin slumping on the chair.

Shin rolled his eyes at him and said. "Whose fault do you think is it? Isn't this supposedly a simple quest? How come it turns out like this?"

Owen shrugged his shoulders and took a seat on the nearby chair. "It is not like we are expecting this quest to escalate this big either."

"From a simple main scenario quest to a kingdom-level quest. We are also taken off guard," he added.

Shin ignored him and turned to Ithilien. "How is the preparation for the purification ritual? Will they be able to perform it before we log out? Or at least before I log out?"

Ithilien felt a little troubled when she heard him, which had given Shin the worst answer that he wanted. "So, they will not be able to do it."

He fell in silence for a moment before asking. "Is there any issue?"

Ithilien sighed helplessly as she nodded her head, troubled. "We are already preparing everything earlier, but a problem comes up. The 'Seer' is already old. He must rest well enough before performing the ritual."

"After all, the purification ritual must be performed continuously for an entire week to counter the effects of the withering. Then another week for hastening the process of the growth of the World Tree and formation of the Spring of Life."

"During these two weeks, the purification ritual can't be interrupted, or else we will have to restart from the very beginning."

Shin did not let Ithilien complete what she was saying as he already figured out what she was trying to say. "You are afraid that there are traitors within the base."

Ithilien nodded her head briefly, confirming his words.

Shin thought for a moment before asking. "Is it because of the betrayal of the big three?"

Ithilien sighed and answered. "Yeah. But that is not only the issue here. The problem is the NPCs are starting to doubt the players because of what happened, especially when the three biggest organizations of the players stationed within the kingdom have betrayed them."

Shin understood before the expression on his face turned dark. "But that is just one of the problems. We also have to keep an eye on these NPCs since they can also betray us, especially with what happened during the assassination of King Yulis."

"I refuse to believe that the people of Corrupted Cult and Demonic Churches can sneak within the castle completely unnoticed. That is the castle where the king of the kingdom is residing, the security can't be that lax."

"There must be a traitor within the castle that helps them enter," he added with a heavy tone.

He then turned to Lorraine and said. "Can you put your people to monitor some of the NPCs? Focus on the ones that are spreading the rumors and intentionally creating unnecessary chaos. The traitor must be one of them."

Lorraine shook her head and smiled bitterly. "I have already done it. Don't worry, I choose the sneakiest ones for this monitoring duty. They are not going to be discovered that easily unless someone purposely sells us out."

Shin smiled as he knew that she understood his intention. He then turned to his blinking notification bar, which indicated that someone had messaged him. Looking at it, he saw that Diablo had already dealt with the problem on his side.

"He is looking for the Dragon Centipede? It looks like he is also working quite hard," he mumbled before turning to others. "Ask some people to look for the traces of the giant centipede."

"That Emperor Class Monster Boss is one of our biggest problems. We also must form a team to hunt it down if possible. Help me look for suitable people, the others in our team are still quite busy," he added as he felt a little headache.

These problems were coming out one after another despite him solving them one by one. He felt that they were endlessly flooding his way.

He then thought of something before turning to Lorraine. "Can you contact Leo? Tell him that I ask if he successfully invited those people to his side."

"While I'll look for more friends," he added before opening his friend list and looking for a certain name.

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Chapter 1306 The 'Withering' (Part 2): Invitation

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Leonard headed to another Kingdom to scout a group of people. He wanted to pull some elite members of the Central Order who were kicked out due to their internal conflict.

Legolas and Aragorn were some of the elite players in the game. Both were Titled Rankers with a lot of people respecting them. They were regularly participating in ranking matches and other tournaments and always stumbling on each other.

They were great rivals that clashed repeatedly until the higher-ups of the Central Order had scouted them.

They were invited to just such a powerhouse guild and did not hesitate to agree since the benefits that were offered to them were the best among all the guilds that wanted them.

From great rivals, they became good friends and fought side by side in countless battles. They had become one of the best duos within the virtual game as they led the Central Order to victory in many battles.

They had become important figures within the Central Order. They became the generals of their core forces and continued to build their reputation through tough battles and wars.

However, due to their limited talent, they were unable to break through to the next level. They failed to become Godlike Players time and time again. Despite their hard work and great performance, they still failed to reach the peak in God's Tournament and earn themselves a position.

Even though they were capable of fighting some of the Godlike Players and Maverick Gods, they always fell a little short whenever they were about to achieve the title that they were looking for, and unable to catch up with the rest of the players running ahead of them.

This was one of the reasons why they had fallen in grace. Their position within the Central Order had also suffered greatly, making them fall from being great generals to a mere captain of a unit.

A lot had overtaken them, which was why they were being underestimated by the elders of the guild as well as the others who had taken over their positions.

In the eyes of the upper echelon, they were no longer worthy of investment, which was also the reason why those elders did not side with them during the previous conflict.

Given the fact that Elrond had pushed almost all the blame on them regarding the failure in the Blind Abyss Empire, they two were unable to fight back and defend themselves. Especially when the entire guild had suffered huge losses during that operation.

They had been pushed greatly into the corner, so Legolas chose to leave the guild along with Aragorn as well as the loyal brothers that fight with them in countless battles.

Naturally, they had to pay quite a lot due to the breaking of the contract. The two had exhausted almost all their savings just to pay the penalties. They also had to return all their equipment in the process just to reduce the amount that they had to pay.

They had also paid extra to cover the life-and-death brothers who were leaving the guild with them. These people depended on the virtual world to live, so Legolas and Aragorn refused to make them pay the separation fees.

Despite all the accumulated wealth that the two had throughout their career within the virtual world, the two were barely left with anything.

Fortunately, the money that they were left with was more than enough to build a gaming studio with the brothers that they had.

Since they had to leave the headquarters of the Central Order, they were also kicked out of their dorms and unable to use any gaming helmets and cabins to log in to the game.

Legolas and Aragorn had to find a good place that they could rent for the time being to shelter everyone and turn it into a real gaming studio. They had also brought everyone with the cheapest gaming cabins so that they could play the game once again.

With this funding, the studio had kicked a great start. They might have lost their equipment, but their skills and techniques remained the same.

With their abilities, they were able to earn enough gold to support themselves and the entire studio.

Although they were still far from the ideal state that they wanted, it was more than enough to run their activities regularly.

They had to thank the gold to real-world currency conversion for this. Even though the currency conversion was not as high as before, it still had a great ratio for most professional gamers, especially when it no longer moved to its current state.

With all of these, Legolas and Aragorn built a Mercenary Group instead of an Adventurer Team or a small guild. The profit for this line of business would earn them enough to support their gaming studio and earn them some extra that they could use for development.

With this number of members that they had that was almost reaching fifty, their business was quite good compared to most of the mercenary groups that were recently formed.

With their skills and background, the two leaders of their group were more than qualified to put everything on the right track.

...

At this point, Legolas and Aragorn just finished completing yet another commission that they had accepted. Since both were quite free, and there was no other work waiting for either of them, they decided to partake in the mission.

They had helped a first-rate guild secure a foothold that would become a guild base after a certain development period.

The leader of the first-rate guild had wanted them to join the guild and even offered two elder positions, but the two refused.

They were from a powerhouse guild, so how could such positions entice them?

They just accepted the commission fees before packing up and preparing to leave and return to their base.

"The business here in Scarlet Horizon Kingdom is pretty good. Should we transfer here and build our base in this location?" asked the vice-leader who was accompanying Legolas.

Legolas put some thought into it before inclining his head. "The business here is quite good, but it is not that good in the long run."

"The kingdom is quite small and lacks any kind of high-level regions. We will only be limiting our growth if we stay here. It is fine to accept certain commissions from them from time to time, but it will not be good if we stay here for an extended period," added another person, who was also holding a vice-leader position.

This person was the most loyal brother who left the Central Order with the two, so Legolas and Aragorn fully trusted him. They also accept his advice as most of them saved their lives during dangerous operations before.

Legolas turned his head and smiled at this player before nodding his head. "I agree with Old Green. It is better to look for a better base of operation. This one can give us a lot of opportunities, but it will not last that long since this kingdom lacks that sense of 'competition'."

"Urgh! Boss, can you not call me with that nickname? It is embarrassing," Old Green could not help but complain as he heard that nickname. It was always reminding him of a certain tale about a wife cheating on her husband.

And if ever, Legolas should be the one to be called that nickname since his name was supposed to mean 'green leaf'. But he could not bring himself to voice out those thoughts since he knew that he would be beaten up later.

"Then you should have not chosen that name when you were creating your first virtual character," Aragorn suddenly appeared at that moment and chimed in.

The others turned to him and greeted him.

Legolas stood from his seat. "How is it? Have you dealt with everything properly?"

Aragorn shook his head as he answered. "Of course! What do you think of me? I handle these things very well."

Legolas shrugged his shoulder picked up his body and hung it behind him. "Then let's go back to the base. The 'Big Sister' must be waiting for us already. I heard from the others left in there that they are suffering due to her training."

Aragorn chuckled when he heard that. "Who would have thought that Big Sister Aurora would come with us after hearing what just happened?"

Legolas shrugged his shoulder for another time. "I don't know either. I've just heard that she also left the guild after hearing what just happened. Then I heard from my boys that she is already training them at our base."

"What do you expect from the 'Valkyrie'," commented Aragorn before adding. "This is also good for us. She can work as a part-time leader whenever we are not around. She can also become our handler since she has a lot of connections!"

Legolas paused for a moment and stared at Aragorn for a few seconds before shaking his head. "Don't let that big sister hear what you've just said if you don't want to be punished greatly."

Aragorn paused them swept his gaze at everyone with a sharp glare before warning them. "Don't you guys dare report this to her if you don't want to experience my newly improved style?"

The others ignored what he just said and started laughing at him.

The humorous atmosphere continued as Aragorn turned back to Legolas. "Let's talk about your discussion earlier. Have you found any good region that can be our main base of operation?"

Legolas thought for a moment before replying. "I know quite a few places, but all of them are quite far from here. It will require us a lot of funds to transfer to those places, so we must wait until we earn extra money for the travel fees alone."

While they were discussing this matter, an unfamiliar voice suddenly interrupted them.

"Should I have you with this problem of yours?"

When the group heard that unfamiliar voice, their bodies suddenly trembled. It only lasted for an instant as they quickly responded and took out their weapons to get ready for the battle.

Swoosh! Swoosh!

Clank! Clank!

Swords, shields, bows, guns, and staffs were taken out from their inventory, sheaths, and back while pointing them toward a certain corner of the room.

They had reserved the entire bar for themselves, so they were only the ones that should be present in this place, and no one else.

The bar was quite small but would fit the members that they had brought for the earlier commission.

Given that it was just an ordinary bar, they could not rely on the security level that it had. It was to be expected that there might be someone who would be able to sneak inside. But that was also the reason why they stationed the sharpest members that they had near the entrance.

Both were Archers with high awareness stats, so it was supposedly impossible for anyone to sneak inside without their notice.

Moreover, Legolas was also present, so he should be able to sense if someone entered the room if ever those two guards failed to notice it.

But to their surprise, this unknown person appeared at the corner of the room without their knowledge and seemed to be sitting there for quite a while already since he had overheard their conversation.

As the strongest and sharpest members of the group, Legolas and Aragorn were sensitive to threats. They could instantly tell how dangerous the unknown person was sitting in the corner of the room.

And when that person slowly raised his head and took off the hood hanging over him, the entire room was suddenly enfolded with complete silence.

That Lion's Head Helm was very famous within the game. It was the symbol of a certain Godlike Player, who had become a legend despite his very young age.

"War God Simba!" shouted Legolas and Aragorn almost at the same time.

As people who were regularly in contact with these legendary figures, the two were able to identify the opposing party almost at the same time.

Leonard, who just revealed himself, waved his hand and explained himself. "You guys don't have to be too wary of me. I am here to scout you guys."

He then paused as he realized the misunderstanding that his words could give before clarifying himself. "I am here to propose a partnership. I am sure that you guys will like it since it perfectly fits your current needs."

Legolas and Aragorn were unable to respond to his words as they were still in the process of adjusting their moods.

It took them quite a while to recover their composure.

Aragorn was the first to recover and asked carefully. "Can I ask God Simba to elaborate?"

Leonard crossed his arms as he replied. "Main base of operation. I have the best place for your group to operate. It is also a place that can make you and your members grow much stronger and at a much faster rate."

"Can we ask where this place is, God Simba?" asked Legolas as he chimed in.

Leonard scratched the back of his head and found this question quite troublesome. In the end, he was forced to disclose a few information. "I can't say the exact information, but I can guarantee you that you have the right to hunt in a lot of high-level regions if you agree to be our partner."

"The contract will be quite strict, though," he added as he warned them that this was not going to be as smooth as they imagined.

Regardless, the pair understood a few points. A place that a god like the one in front of them worthy to be called a high-level map was not as simple as the ones that most of the players were thinking.

It was without a doubt a map filled with treasures and resources.

Thinking for a moment, Aragorn suddenly asked. "Can we ask for a copy of the contract?"

Leonard was already prepared for this, so he sent a copy to them right after hearing that. Shin and Shiella had already prepared the contract a long time ago.

Legolas and Aragorn browsed through the contract before wearing a deep frown just after reading the first few lines.

"Thirty percent of what we have earned just for the tax? Isn't this no different from a robbery?" asked Aragorn with a heavy tone.

Leonard knew that it was quite high for such a contract, but he also knew why Shin had put it on the clause. He also followed what Shin had instructed him to say. "You may see it that way normally, but you will understand that we are being generous once you arrive in our place."

He then paused and continued. "You can also read the rest to see if we are sincere or not."

Legolas, who was still reading the contract at that time, listed out a few important points. "A whole twenty percent discount on every product and service of the Hand of Midas Guild. A priority commission when asking for the service of the Assassin Union. A ten percent discount when looking for information from the Secret Recipe."

Those were just a few of the benefits and there were still a few more listed on the contract, but those were not as huge and appealing as the first three. It was because the organizations behind those three services were as big as their previous guild – all of them were Powerhouses within the game in their respective field.

In front of these benefits, the thirty percent tax fees were indeed very generous. Even though there were still quite a few fees that they needed to pay, the overall conditions written in the contract were not that bad.

They even think that even if the fees were forty percent, they would still find it quite reasonable given the list of benefits laid in the contract.

"We can discuss further if you want to. But I must warn you that if you try to fight for a few more benefits, you may even lose some since the ones that you will be facing for that are a pair of 'Devil's Advocates', " said Leonard, sincerely warning them.

After all, with Shin and Shiella combined, these people were bound to lose the benefits that they already offered rather than earn more.

While Legolas and Aragorn were in deep thought, Leonard suddenly received a message. When he read through it, he suddenly turned to them and said. "It looks like we will have to save this for the future."

"For now, I have a commission for your group. Do you want to hear the details? The pay should be quite satisfying since it is a very big 'operation'? What do you guys think?"

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Chapter 1307 The 'Withering' (Part 3): Gathering of Forces

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Cruelty, the branch leader of the HeadHunter Guild within the Saint Heaven Kingdom, fell in deep thought as he closed the virtual screen in front of him.

He had gotten an unexpected call from an unexpected person just now, and it was about a business that he could not refuse.

Closing his eyes, he recalled the recent conversation.

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"It has been a while," greeted Shin almost instantly after the call was answered.

Cruelty nodded heavily as he heard that. "It has indeed been a while. But what do I owe the famous Battle God for this call?"

Shin chuckled a little as he could see that Cruelty was not that interested in having a conversation. "Since you are straightforwardly asking me about it, then I must be honest too."

"I have a pretty good proposal for an interesting business opportunity. But not only you will be able to earn some profits from this, but it is also another opportunity for your guild to build up a good image to clean up the stained reputation," he added with a mystifying smile.

Cruelty sensed a sudden chill running down his spine when he saw that smile. He had done a deal with Shin just recently, during the huge incident in the Saint Heaven Kingdom. Even though it was almost like a one-sided offer, the HeadHunter Guild indeed won a decent image for their guild.

However, he had no idea that Shin and the Empyrean Talons would be able to clear a huge Empire Quest that was changing the state of the neighboring empires and kingdoms around the new map that was about to be opened.

He knew that he had been used, but he could not complain about it either since the HeadHunter Guild indeed benefited from that deal.

Since Shin was proposing another deal, Cruelty could not help but feel that it was something similar to the previous deal. But this time, he had the right to refuse since there were no 'hostages' involved in this deal.

Cruelty fell in silence for a brief period before asking. "Let me hear it first."

Shin shook his head since he could read the line of thoughts of the other side. He knew that Cruelty would try to see if it was worth risking another deal with him.

He paused for a moment before briefing Cruelty on the current situation. "It is like this. My friends and I are currently in the Sacred Light Kingdom and helping the NPCs to defend their homeland."

"We are currently stuck in a tricky situation where we need some people. What do you think? Are you interested in joining the fun?"

"So, you and your friends have joined that event as well," Cruelty fell into another deep thinking when he heard that. As another powerful guild within the game, his information network shouldn't be that bad. He had already received the news about the events in the Sacred Light Kingdom and was very aware of the situation there.

Since that kingdom was one of the special places that had strategic resources and extremely rare materials along with a special profession called Apothecary, all powerhouses were keeping an eye on that region.

But since it was already under the influence of three powerhouse guilds, not many would want to trouble themselves at extending their hands in there, especially since the three big guilds had bonded together to chase away any other powerful organizations that would want to 'invade' their territory.

From the most recent news that Cruelty had received, the Sacred Light Kingdom seemed to be in deep trouble. The whole kingdom was currently in the middle of the withering event where the corruption of the evil faction was slowly swallowing the kingdom. Even their king was assassinated, so it was clear that the situation on that side was not looking good.

It was also said that the kingdom was currently flooded by hordes of corrupted monsters and demonic creatures. Under the leadership of the so-called 'Big Three' who turned their backs on the kingdom and joined the evil faction, the state of the Sacred Light Kingdom was not that optimistic.

From the views of the outsiders, it was already clear that the kingdom was doomed to fall. It was just a matter of time before it happened.

But for some unknown reasons, Cruelty felt that the result was still unclear when he learned that Shin and the others were currently there. He felt that the tides of the war could still be turned at any given moment.

Following his instincts, Cruelty nodded at Shin. "Please continue, Sir Battle God."

Shin smirked as he knew that the other party wanted to play it safe. "We already have a way to turn the situation around. But the tricky part is we are lacking a few people to hold the frontlines for the time being. I wonder if your guild wants to join as well?"

"And the benefits that we can get?" asked Cruelty as he knew that this was the most important part.

Shin chuckled as he started to this guy for his straightforwardness. "Well, there are quite a few. For the indirect ones, your guild will be seen in a different light by the players, especially the ones residing in this kingdom since you will be saving them and their land."

"Your reputation improved quite a lot because of your victory over the Wing's Alliance just recently, but don't you think that news is already dying? This is a perfect opportunity to improve your image, which is good for your guild."

Shin purposely paused as he let Cruelty digest those words for a moment before continuing. "As for the other business opportunity – I can't say that it will be a direct profit, but it will not be bad."

"I am sure that you already know about the current situation here given the information network of a powerful guild, so I will not dwell on that matter. But let me tell you something, since those guys have turned their backs to the kingdom, the seats for the 'Big Three' will be empty. What do you think it means?"

Hearing those words, Cruelty already knew what Shin was trying to say. If the three biggest guilds had already converted to the evil faction, then the seats for the overlords of the kingdom would be empty.

But that was only if Shin and the others defeated those three first and succeeded at defending the kingdom.

With that concern, he could not help but say. "I don't think it is a guarantee. There is still a huge chance of your group failing."

"Can I ask how confident you are for this battle?" he asked with a slight frown.

Shin smiled mysteriously before answering with extreme confidence. "I don't think that we will lose."

"Can I know which forces have you invited for this?" asked Cruelty with another time.

Shin thought for a moment before answering. "The Hand of Midas will be sending a couple of their chiefs for assistance. We have also invited the Titan Guild and they have confirmed that they are interested in the deal."

Cruelty had already expected the help of the Hand of Midas since he knew about the connection of the guild with Empyrean Talons. But the case with the Titan Guild was a little surprising, but not farfetched since it was quite reasonable.

After falling into another silence, Cruelty suddenly asked. "How can you guarantee that we will be the ones to take those empty seats when we win?"

Shin raised his brows for a moment before answering. "One of the reasons is the 'people' of this kingdom. Once you have become one of the major contributors to this war, both the players and the NPCs will feel grateful to you and full of gratitude."

"The other reason is because we hold the 'priority' for this quest. The person who initiated the main quest scenario is on our side. Once the event is over, she can recommend you as one of the people who help her during the entire event."

The first case was already to be expected, but the second reason made Cruelty raise his brows higher. He now understood why Shin and the others joined this seemingly hopeless event.

While he was lost in thoughts, Shin suddenly added. "But instead of taking over the seats of the previous Big Three, we are planning to offer a few more 'seats' for other people. We are planning to build an Alliance between the smaller guilds and organizations, adventurer teams, and independent players that will represent themselves in the new council."

"It is a necessary move to prevent the conflicts that the previous council has faced," he added a little more.

Hearing that Cruelty knew that this was going to be a little tricky but the benefits in the long run were already laid in front of him.

If the HeadHunter Guild indeed had taken a position in the council that Shin was talking about, then the guild would gain access to the rare and unique materials that could only be found in the Sacred Light Kingdom as well as the great masters of the Apothecary Profession.

Those two reasons alone were more than enough for him to see the positive light on this proposition.

But the problem remained. He was not sure if Shin and the others would be able to successfully save the Sacred Light Kingdom against the forces of the Evil Faction.

But at the same time, he felt that it was worth risking since the person in front of him was giving him the impression that they could not lose this battle.

After a deep thinking and serious consideration, Cruelty nodded his head. "I will convince my side. Wait for the good news."

Shin nodded his head before saying. "I hope that you will be able to come up with the same conclusion. I also hope that you make it quick since we don't have much time to waste."

Clink!

With that, the call ended.

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Cruelty tapped as index finger on the wooden table repeatedly and rhythmically. After a few moments, he suddenly sighed. He then stood up and shouted outside. "Tell the others to gather in the meeting room. I have something to discuss with everyone."

Hearing his words, the person on standby outside the room quickly responded. "Right away, Guild Leader!"

As Cruelty was gathering the people from the HeadHunter Guild, Shin was already greeting a couple of people, who just arrived at the Maze Forest.

"It has been a while," he said as he greeted the people in front of him.

Tinker smiled as he nodded his head. "It looks like the young master has grown greatly since the last time we met."

Beside him, Adept Hands suddenly appeared, hopping before stopping in front of Shin. She smiled widely as she said. "I knew that my assessment of the young master was accurate. I have indeed made the right choice at that time."

"You are always in the middle of trouble wherever you go. It is the perfect opportunity to test my potions!"

"How is it? How is it? Have you tested the new ones? Do you have any reviews for them now?" she asked in a single breath as she was filled with enthusiasm.

Shin sighed when he heard her before shaking his head. "I have not tested them yet. I don't have the opportunity for that since I have been busy."

"But your Stealth Potions is very useful," he added as he remembered his job earlier.

Adept Hands rolled her eyes when she heard that. "Obviously! They will not be in demand if they are not. They are different from the other stealth potions out there!"

Tinker shook his head before chiming in. "Let's save that for the later. How about we discuss the more urgent matters for now?"

Shin turned to the chief engineer of the Trading Firm and nodded his head. "Let's go inside first. This is not a good place for discussion."

He swept his gaze at the surroundings before leading the two chiefs inside the tent.

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Chapter 1308 The 'Withering' (Part 4): Underlying Plots

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Atlas World

At the very edge of the land of the Aurora Continent, the first continent that was available for the players, a group of people were currently gathered.

At the forefront of the group, a man stood at the edge of a cliff while looking at the horizon. He was clad in a set of golden armor that highlighted the handsome features that he had.

His shoulder-long purple hair danced along the wind of the coast as he looked at the far end of the world. He seemed to be in deep thought as he gazed at the horizon.

His hands were crossed behind him while holding a golden mask with exquisite patterns. The patterns on this mask looked like a rune sequence that seemed to be a part of a magic circle.

He stood at that spot without moving an inch for a couple of minutes before putting the mask on his face. The moment when the mask was worn, his demeanor and the air around him suddenly changed. It seemed like he had become the center of the world at this very moment.

Standing a couple of meters behind him, a pair of players were patiently waiting for him to snap out of his thoughts.

One of the players was a tall and muscular man. He had the build of a true warrior of ancient barbarians. He was wearing a set of leather equipment that was barely able to hide those properly toned muscles,

which indicated the powerful strength that they possessed, especially with the bloody tattoos that were drawn all over his body.

There was a white leather hanging over his shoulders that seemed to be made from the skin and furs of a beast. The same as the ones wrapped around his forearms, shins, and the belt around his waist. This indicated that they came from the same set.

He wore an orcish helmet that hid most of the features of his face but also gave him the impression that he was a humanoid monster rather than a player. Those pairs of rounds, huge, and bull-like horns attached to the helmet greatly enhanced this impression.

On his back was a huge, spiked club that seemed to come from the spine of a certain monster. It looked like this weapon was extracted directly from a powerful beast monster given the bloodthirstiness that it was emitting.

Beside this person was another player, who had a lean and slender body. Compared to the previous player, this guy seemed to be weak.

But that was only when someone focused on his appearance. It was because the threat level that this player was emitting was not losing to the other guy in the slightest. He might even be more dangerous than the previous player in comparison.

If the first bulky and muscular player was like a monstrous beast hiding in human clothing, then this person seemed to be the personification of death. He was releasing a dangerous threat on whoever was looking at him, which seemingly indicated that he would kill them once he caught them looking at him for more than a second.

He wore a set of light armor, which perfectly fit the swordsman and assassin classes. But given the pair of daggers sheathed behind his waist, it was clear that his class belonged to the latter.

There was a set of chains wrapped tightly around his forearms while emitting a mixture of black and jade colors.

He was also wearing a sleeveless coat that seemed to be made from the skin of a snake. It also had a hood that was hanging over his head to hide his face under its shade.

But when someone looked closer to it, they would be able to notice the creepy-looking mask that he was wearing that seemed to be made from human skin. It was frozen with a laughing expression, which resembled the face of a smiling clown without makeup.

The person in golden armor suddenly turned around at this point. He walked over to the two while asking. "How is the progress?"

The main assassin class bowed deeply before asking. "Paimon has just returned and currently meeting the other leaders."

As it turned out, this man in golden armor was Lucifer, the mysterious leader of the Pandemonium Descendants, while the other two were his closest and most trusted aides.

Lucifer slightly nodded his head before asking. "Did he bring the item that we are looking for?"

"He has brought it," said the latter while nodding.

"Then tell them to proceed as planned. I don't have the time to monitor everything since I have to do something in the real world," said Lucifer as he walked away.

"Are you not going to lead the meeting this time? But they are already gathered and waiting for your instructions!" the assassin suddenly raised his head and looked at the back of Lucifer.

His respectful attitude suddenly disappeared as it was replaced by a casual one as if he was talking to an old friend.

Lucifer did not mind as he waved his hand without looking back. "The matters here inside the game are important, but I also can't ignore our mission in the real world."

"Moreover, Master will be visiting in the next few days, so I must accompany him to make sure that he will not do something that will risk our mission. Given his temper, I am sure that he is very eager to see the guy from our report."

"We must be careful at this time since we are currently not on our home turf – we are inside the territory of our enemies. We can't be too reckless in our actions."

He then paused for a moment as he thought of something. "I will leave the matters here to the two of you. Make sure to prepare thoroughly for the opening of the portal. Once we have completed all the requirements to summon the first Demon Lord, the rest will smoothly follow."

"At that time, we can do whatever we want since the world will be plunged into chaos. We will have an easier time hunting for the information everyone is looking for while most players are busy with this war."

After that, he suddenly disappeared as if he had never been there.

The two players that were left behind stared blankly at the spot where Lucifer disappeared for a long time before turning to each other.

Even though they could not see the expressions that each other was making due to the orc helmet and clown mask, the two knew that they were feeling helpless.

At times, this leader of theirs was very responsible when dealing with everything, but there were also times when he was going off the rails, especially when his master had got involved.

"What can we do? It is the Palace Leader. We can't do anything about it," said the muscular guy while shaking his head in full helplessness.

"Tsk! This is why I don't want this position. It is better if I am just a member of the troupe members," said the assassin, complaining about their situation.

"I heard that Mephisto is throwing tantrums right now?" asked the muscular as they walked toward the tent where the meeting was going to be held.

The assassin groaned when he heard that before saying. "Let him do what he wants. It is his mission anyway. All we have to do is focus on the tasks that we are assigned to."

Then the muscular guy suddenly remembered something. "Do you think that the Sacred Light Kingdom is more than enough for the sacrificial ceremony?"

The assassin thought for a moment, before shrugging his shoulders. "I am not sure either. But it will be enough to fill most of the required lifeforce that we need."

Sacred Light Kingdom

The guild leaders of the previous Big Three were currently holding a meeting in one of the corrupted nests that they had built, discussing their next course of action.

"I can't contact the representative of the Corrupted Cult. It seems like something has happened to him," said Fenix as he looked at the two.

Heckles did not seem to be bothered by it and just casually said. "Then let's proceed without him. I am sure that he has been targeted by the opposing side just like what Sir Paimon has said."

Fenix felt a little uncomfortable with this news and suddenly asked. "Are you not bothered by this? This can also happen to us. Thrown into the bin after being used."

"What can we do? We have already stepped into this trap right after we met that guy Paimon. Whether we are useless pawns or important pieces of the board depends on what are going to do next," said Heckles as he fully understood their positions.

All they had to do was follow the orders that were given to them and execute them well if they did not want to be thrown away by their new masters.

Kellin, who had yet to talk up until now, did not want to dwell on this topic and chanced it. "Enough with that. Let's talk about our next move."

He paused for a moment as he opened a virtual map in front of them before continuing. "We have already attacked and destroyed almost all the towns and cities around the Maze Forest. It is now completely isolated from the outside and will take some time before their reinforcements arrive."

"Given the distance that the nearest cities where the players from the outside of the kingdom can use as their starting point, our time will be more than enough to break the defenses of the Maze Forest. This is the best time to make our moves now."

Fenix thought for a moment before asking. "How about the Dragon Centipede? I heard that it has broken out from its cage and currently wreaking havoc somewhere. Have we found its location yet?"

"My people are already tracking it. They have already found the traces that it left behind, so it is just a matter of time before we locate," answered Heckles almost instantly.

Kellin thought for a moment before shaking his head. "I think we can give up on it for now since we don't have anyone who will be able to control it. Even if we try luring it toward the direction of the Maze, I doubt that it will blindly bite on it given that it has already regained its intelligence."

Fenix considered it for a moment before nodding his head. He agreed with this and did not pursue the matter. Instead, he focused on another problem that they were facing. "Then what about the mysterious people that kept on appearing in the kingdom one after another? How are we going to deal with them?"

"That is the tricky part. It seems like they are experts who heard about the event and want to join the fun for event points, which will earn them extra profits. Dealing with them will be troublesome," said Heckles as he remembered encountering a few.

"As long as they don't gather and form larger groups of people, we can pretty much ignore most of them. Our focus is still on the Maze Forest. If manage to take it down, then everything will be over," said Fenix.

But Kellin had a different thought and warned. "If we leave them be, it will be a matter of time before they realize our goals."

"They may be competitors in this event, but sooner or later, they will realize that they have to bond together to win this war," he added with a heavy tone.

"That is why we have to make haste and prepare our next move. We must attack the Maze Forest as soon as possible before those people gather around," refuted Fenix with a strong point.

"We still have the hordes of monsters on our side. We can sweep that base as long as we prepare a good sieging plan," he added, trying to convince the two.

"You should not underestimate the opposing side. I heard that Battle God Sickarius is there. That guy is famous for his battle prowess due to the recent battles that he has, but the intel clearly says that he is a skilled tactician as well," said Kellin.

He had thoroughly read the information that Paimon had given them, so he was familiar with the people on the opposing side.

The other two fell in deep thought before turning to Kellin before asking. – "So what do you suggest?" –

Kellin smirked before saying. "Forget about testing the waters. Let's go all-out from the start, but we are attacking from behind."

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Chapter 1309 The 'Withering' (Part 5): Sudden Dread

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Sacred Light Kingdom

At the entrance of the Maze Forest, the place had become a true battlefield as the players and NPCs fought against the continuous horde of monsters flooding at them. They were doing their very best to protect the base behind them.

Owen and Ithilien stood at the far back of the defense formation as they oversaw the entire battlefield. They were tasked with this job to make sure that everything was going according to their plan.

They had to keep the proper order in this chaotic battlefield and a clear chain of command.

The players gathered here were mostly independent players or people from a small guild or organization or an adventurer team. Due to this, controlling everyone was quite challenging, especially when some of these groups used to be rivals or even enemies with each other.

With this kind of conflict, working together would not be easy, especially when every expert had their pride.

Fortunately, dealing with this kind of problem was also quite simple. Putting these rival groups away from each other and stationing them at the far end of the formations would do the trick.

Moreover, using the pretext of defending the land where they reside was the perfect encouragement for most of them.

The players that belonged to certain guilds, adventurer teams, and other organizations were to stay in their respective groups to avoid any more conflict and to make it easier for them to control.

The leaders of these groups had joined the group chat for commanders, where Ithilien and Owen were the main admins and were responsible for passing the commands that Shin was giving them.

Every adjustment in the formation and other forms of commands that came from Shin were immediately sent to the two before they issued it to the leaders through this chat group. Then the leaders would tell their respective groups to execute it.

It was a simple chain of command, but it would be the best for the current situation.

The larger groups were stationed at the very front of the formation while the most elite members were leading these groups to fight the incoming horde of corrupted monsters and demonic creatures.

While the smaller ones were stationed right behind these groups to take down the monsters would be able to break through the defenses of the frontline players, and to fill in the gaps in their defense.

Behind them was another line of defense that would be formed by random players who joined the event. They were to help the second line of defense if the people in front of them were unable to hold on.

The Corrupted Monsters were hard to deal with, but with this kind of formation, where the players could lure them inside their formation and swarm at it or bombarded it with skills and spells, taking it down would not be a problem.

The stronger monsters were to purposely break through the inner defenses one at a time, while the elite group under Ithilien's and Owen's direct command took them down.

These elite groups were composed of elite players and experts who did not belong to any kind of group or organization. They were independent individuals, who liked to work alone.

They were the lone wolves of the kingdom.

These players were to form a small party with a team composition that would perfectly complement each other. The class composition of this team was very balanced with a small number of members.

These teams would be the special operation units that were tasked to move around the battlefield to help the places that were having the hardest time in the battle. They were to relieve the pressure from those places before moving to another.

They were to have a small number of people so that they could move as fast and as freely as possible. It was for them to have a very flexible maneuver within the battlefield.

Aside from this, some of these small units were also tasked with hunting down the stronger Corrupted Monsters and Demonic Monsters that could not be taken down by the others in the defense formation.

This kind of arrangement was quite simple, but it was very effective and efficient. They were able to hold their ground without having much pressure.

Aside from the special operation unit that was arranged by Shin, the ones who were the busiest among everyone were Lorraine and her adventurer team, the Secret Society.

Along with her three vice commanders, Lorraine was running around the whole eastern part of the Maze Forest, hunting down the strongest monsters that were able to break through the formation.

They were the bigger version of those special operation units, and the area that they covered was also larger.

Fortunately, the eastern side of the Maze Forest was assigned to the people of the Titan Guild. They were to guard the entrance on that side. Given the size of the guild, they sent quite a lot of people as a reinforcement, which was more than enough to hold one of the entrances of the Maze Forest.

The force on this side was being led by one of the commanding generals of the Titan Guild. It was very clear that these people put a lot of importance in this operation, especially when the guild leader of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm had contacted them personally.

How could they refuse the offer of this guild leader when she had laid a lot of benefits that they could get by helping this falling kingdom?

Aside from that reason, they were also here to see how the famous Battle God of the Empyrean Talons would solve this problem. They were quite curious about this particular Godlike Player, who was gaining fame recently.

They were also to see how strong a player with a Tier 3 Class could be.

Unfortunately for them, Shin stayed at the center of the Maze Forest to oversee the purification ceremony and make sure that there would be nothing wrong with it. It was also to avoid any form of accidents. After all, they still had to guard against the traitor hiding in their ranks.

Samael and Huahua were also there, guarding.

Aside from the Titan Guild, there were also the other 'reinforcements' that Shin had invited.

After a serious discussion among themselves, the higher echelon of the HeadHunter Guild had also sent their people to help the kingdom. The benefits and other things that Shin had listed were very alluring to the eyes of the HeadHunter Guild, particularly the thing concerning the reputation of the guild.

Due to their members mostly being ex-convicts and gangsters from the real world, the image that they had in the eyes of the public was not the best. It was even the worst since there were a few criminals in their ranks.

This was the perfect opportunity to at least lessen that image and make everyone see them in a new light.

Of course, they were also doing this so that they could get the slice of the pie that Shin was offering. Being one of the overlords of this kingdom once they successfully defended it also played a large part in coming up with this decision.

To make sure that the people see their 'sincerity', the main headquarters of the guild even sent a couple of their elites, who would also be left behind to be stationed in this place once they were successful.

Due to this, the number of people that they had sent was larger than the ones that were sent by the Titan Guild. They did not even need any help from the special operation units that Shin had prepared because of this, making those units to be stationed in another place.

The entire western part of the Maze Forest was under their protection as well as the entrance in that part.

To make sure that there were no accidents, Cruelty even arrived here to personally lead the defense. Amanda, the Bewitching Goddess, was also with him to lead her group that came from the branch of the guild in the Saint Heaven Kingdom.

With all these defenses, the entire battle was currently in their favor. Even the continuous horde of corrupted monsters and demonic creatures were unable to completely break through it.

But everyone did not let their guard down despite this being the case. It was because the forces of the previous 'Big Three' of the Sacred Light Kingdom had yet to make their entrance.

Their forces seemed to have vanished in thin air after attacking the final city that completed the isolation of the Maze Forest from the outside help.

Everyone knew that this battle would last for quite a while. It would be extremely draining.

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In the meantime, Shin, who was guarding the elven seer and the purification ceremony, was currently in deep thought.

He just finished all the arrangements needed for the base defense. Unless there was an extremely serious threat that would be impossible to be solved by the others, he did not have to do anything or issue another command.

Right now, his responsibility was to ensure the safety of this elven seer. He had to protect him from any outside harm that would disrupt the purification ceremony.

Samael and Huahua were also to help him with this task, and they were seriously scanning the entire place with their sharp eyes.

While there was still nothing big was happening, Shin started to contemplate the current event that was happening.

After his previous experiences with similar huge events, he knew that there must be a trigger or at least an underlying reason that started this event.

He understood the reason for the 'Corrupted Cult' since all they wanted was to spread the corruption. It was all similar to the past events that he had experienced.

The problem was the Demonic Churches. After his previous encounters with these people, Shin knew that they had a certain 'purpose' in every operation that they had.

Just like what happened in the Elven Kingdom, Beast Glades Kingdom, and the Dwarven Kingdom. All the commotions that they had created in these three kingdoms were just for the sake of that huge sacrificial formation.

If Shin and the others had not figured it out, then at least one of these kingdoms would be erased after being sacrificed.

There was also the encounter with the people of the Pandemonium Descendants in the Frozen Kingdom.

All the events in the Saint Heaven Kingdom were just a distraction as the main purpose of these people was the 'corpse' of Dracula, who was supposed to have a contract with a certain Great Demon King.

From the clues that Shin and the others had gathered at that time, it was for the sake of awakening the Great Demon King and opening a portal that would connect the Atlas World to the Devildom and Underworld.

If not for Shin and the others' interference, and Dracula's sacrifice to free the kingdom from its curse, then everything would have already become ugly. The current update of the game might not be the one that they were experiencing.

Thinking of this, and aligning his line of thoughts with it, Shin seemed to have been enlightened. He seemed to have realized the scheme that the Pandemonium Descendants was plotting.

"The event is called the 'Withering'. At first glance, it seems like the corruption is spreading in the entire kingdom. Given the appearance of the monsters and the dark miasma that the forests are making, it is not strange for the people to think that this is some sort of corruption."

"But if we think about the state of the plants and trees, we can see that all of them are rapidly being dried. They are in a state of draining, shrinking, wilting, and fading. It is as if they are being in the middle of extreme drought rather than being corrupted."

His thoughts slowed down as he mumbled. "It is as if their life force is being drained by something."

When he reached this point, his eyes suddenly turned wide as he finally realized this oddity. "That is right! The entire Sacred Light Kingdom is rich in this form of power, the lifeforce of nature."

"This is the main reason why the natural minerals are rich here and there are a lot of magical plants and herbs in the kingdom! It is because of the life force of the kingdom!"

"What if the main target of the Demonic Church is the life force that the Sacred Light Kingdom has?" Shin asked himself, a sudden thought flashed through his mind.

"F*ck! They must be planning to use such an overwhelming amount of energy to open a dimensional portal!"

He then suddenly turned to the ongoing purification ritual and cursed. "F*ck! We have been duped! Their main target is the lifeforce indeed!"

"If the purification ceremony is successful, then the World Tree that is going to grow and the Spring of Life that is going to be built along with it will release a rich and pure lifeforce that will purify the entire land of the Sacred Light Kingdom!"

"With that, they will have an endless supply of lifeforce! It will be more than enough for what they need!"

Shin suddenly felt a sense of anxiety when he realized this. The problem was they had already fallen too deeply into the trap, and it seemed like it was already too late to stop it.

"No wonder the traitor did not make any movements up until now. It is because everything is going according to their plan," he now realized why everything seemed to be going too smoothly for them. It was all part of the plan all along.

Shin was now caught in a dilemma. He did not know if he had to stop this ceremony or not.

If he did the latter, then the horde of monsters outside the Maze Forest would run them down destroy the final fortress that they had, and everything that they had done up until now would be going to waste.

But if he let the purification ritual continue, then the Demonic Churches would harvest enough life for their underlying plot.

He was left with a choice whether he had to let the Corrupted Cult succeed or give the Demonic Churches what they wanted.

Shin had to decide fast since he knew that his time was already ticking by, and it was in his favor. He knew that once the purification ceremony reached its peak, there was no longer hope of stopping it.

But he was still stubbornly holding onto something. "There must be another way out of this! There has to be a solution somewhere."

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Chapter 1310 The 'Withering' (Part 6)

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"There must be a way to stop it," mumbled Shin as he thought about the solution to their current predicament.

It was at that moment when he thought of something. "If they want to gather all the life force from the kingdom, then they have to store it somewhere. Now, the question is, where is that place?"

While Shin was in deep thought, he suddenly received a message from Tinker, who was stationed at the back of the Maze Forest.

Tinker: Young Master Shin, you've guessed it right. Those guys are trying to enter the forest through the back door.

Tinker: It is funny how they are trying to detour around the Maze Forest and break through the high-level map behind it.

Tinker was laughing hard as he watched the view being projected in front of him. He had scattered some mechanical birds in the forest and let them enter the nearby maps around the Maze Forest.

Through them, he was able to see what was happening on three different battlefields while also monitoring the neighboring regions.

Behind the Maze Forest, there was a hunting map that was yet to be fully explored due to its high requirements. The monsters there were all elevated to the third evolution, which was equivalent to the Tier 3 Class of the players.

This region was one of the maps that was supposed to be explored once the players finished their promotion quests. This was the map that the players were supposed to explore if they failed to fill up all the qualifications to enter the Awakened Continent.

Such maps were scattered in every Kingdom and Empire within the first continent, the Aurora Continent.

Usually, it would be hard to enter such maps since the monsters there were too powerful for the current level of the players. But since the Big Three had a horde of strong monsters on their side, which were the Corrupted Monsters and Demonic Creatures that were left under their care.

They were confident that they would be able to break through the monsters within the map and reach the Maze Forest that was next to it.

Unfortunately, they had underestimated the might of these monsters. They suffered a great loss when they entered, and it was already too late to back down at that point since the sacrifices that they made would be in vain if they did.

The good part about this was they only had to sacrifice most of the Corrupted Monsters and Demonic Creatures that they had brought with them. Most of the members of their guilds that came with them had also been killed by those powerful monsters on the map, leaving them with almost under half of their main forces.

But for the three leaders – Kellin, Heckles, and Fenix – all of these were worth it. Those were necessary sacrifices to achieve their goal.

And they were right. They arrived at the edge of the map, right at the border between it and the Maze Forest.

They could now start their real operation and take down the base of the opposing side.

They might have lost quite a lot of people, but they still left with more than enough number that could invade the opposing side.

With that, they fearlessly entered the Maze Forest while having decent morale. They were expecting an easy victory when they entered the base of their enemies.

Or so they thought.

They were not expecting that every move that they made would be monitored by the mechanical birds that Thinker had scattered in every corner of the forest.

Right after the forces of the Big Three entered the Maze Forest, they felt something strange. But they mostly ignored it since they just went through a very difficult map. They did not believe that this forest would be much worse than that.

When they went deeper into the forest, Fenix, who was carefully observing their surroundings, finally noticed something odd.

But before he could warn the others, mechanical sounds suddenly rang from every direction, surprising everyone.

Casting their gazes at the sources of those sounds, they saw a large number of mechanical guns scattered in every direction; some were hiding behind the bushes, others were attached to the tree trunks, and the rest were hanging on the branches above them.

These mechanical guns were pointing at them, aiming for their lives.

"Turtle Formation! Knights, cover every direction and use 'Shield Wall'!"

"Mages, cast 'Magic Barrier' now!"

Kellin and Fenix shouted almost at the same time as they were first to recover their composure.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was at that moment when mechanical guns started firing. They poured the group with a rain of bullets.

"Ah!"

"Urgh!"

"Argh!"

The fast ones were able to react in time and set up their respective defenses, saving themselves. But those guys that were slow to react were immediately shot and suffered serious damage.

The damage of each bullet was not that strong, but they were painful enough to disrupt their formation. Moreover, with the number of mechanical guns surrounding them, the accumulated damage that they had was more than enough to make them suffer.

The continuous damage and the constant pain that they were receiving, were more than enough to throw them into chaos.

Fortunately, the three leaders were experienced enough to deal with their current predicament.

Once the Knights were able to cover a decent defense and the Mages managed to save their healers at the center of the formation, they immediately issued a series of commands one after another.

"Marksmen, you guys shot those mechanical guns. It doesn't matter if you are not able to destroy them in one shot, damaging it is more than enough!" shouted Fenix as his two guards protected him from the bullets that were flying everywhere.

"Mages cast 'Ice Wall'! Buy enough time for the marksmen to destroy enough mechanical guns before proceeding! Healers, keep the knights' HP Bars healthy!" yelled Kellin as he saw that everyone was standing to regain their composure.

Heckles, who was sharply scanning the surroundings waved at the frontline members. "Berserkers and Swordsmen, charge ahead and make way for us. We must prepare to break through once the firepower of these toys decreases."

Each group responded to the commands given by the three leaders and executed them well. They were quite quick to respond and were able to achieve their goals within a couple of minutes.

But when they were about to heave a sigh of relief and continue moving forward, the Berserkers and Swordsmen that had separated from their formation earlier to pave a path ahead suddenly shouted and cried in pain.

"Ah!"

"Awk!"

"Argh!"

Casting his gaze ahead, Heckles suddenly saw a group of hooded players attacking their people. From his observation, he immediately realized that each of these players was an expert. They were highly trained elites who underwent special training like the clubs within the powerhouse guilds.

In a matter of minutes, all the Berserkers and Swordsmen that separated from their group were quickly annihilated.

Noticing the same thing as Heckles, the other two leaders, Kellin and Fenix suddenly wore a grave expression on their faces.

It was not because the opposing side was powerful – their side also had the same number of experts on their side. It was also clear that the opposing side only had a limited number of people. Their side had the advantage in this area.

The problem was they saw someone walking forward from behind the formation of the opposing side. It was a man who seemed to have a class and race of Berserker Lionkin.

This man released an arrogant and savage air that suffocated everyone the moment when he entered the scene. Right after he stepped onto the battlefield, the focus of everyone seemed to be directed to him, which seemed to put the opposing side in despair.

Seeing the signature Lion Head Helmet that this man was wearing, the three leaders from the other side immediately realized his identity.

"War God Simba!" mumbled the three heavily as he saw him.

It was at this moment that they realized that they had overlooked these members of the Empyrean Talons who did not show themselves during the entire war.

How could they forget these people when they were legends that were out of their league?

They might have the advantage in terms of numbers and possessed a group of powerful Corrupted Monsters and Demonic Creatures, but all of these were nothing in the eyes of this person.

The number was nothing but a number in front of this legendary figure. One of his achievements was taking on a whole guild, which was comparable to the super guilds within this game alone.

What was crazier about it was he annihilated that guild all by himself!

They might have an army behind them, but the three leaders clearly understood that the person in front of them was more than enough to take them on.

But they could not back down right now, they had to continue moving forward if they did not want to be thrown away by their new master. They had already risked quite a lot when they turned their backs on their previous organizations and converted to the Evil Faction.

There was no turning back now!

All they could hope was for their side to defeat the rest of the people on the opposing party and let the monster break through them and continue moving ahead.

So long as these monsters broke through the defenses of the Maze Forest and caused havoc within the center of the forest, where the main base of the opposition was located, everything would be worth it.

"Kellin, support me. We will take on Simba and buy as much time as we can for the others," said Heckles as he unsheathed his sword.

Kellin did not say anything and just nodded his head. He took out a pair of daggers as he quickly entered stealth.

Seeing the actions of those two, Leonard licked his lips under his helmet before mumbling. "Nightmare Swordsman Heckles and Untraceable Shadow Kellin, these guys shouldn't be that bad."

"I just hope that fighting two Maverick Gods with a decent caliber should be enough to entertain me," he added as he turned to the side.

"You two and your people will be fine by yourselves, I guess?" he asked, looking over his shoulder.

"I suggest you do not underestimate our group, God Simba. We will be fine by ourselves," said Aragorn as he repeatedly rolled his shoulders and gently twisted his neck left and right to produce a series of popping sounds.

"God Simba, since you have gone all the way to our side just to invite us, we must prove ourselves. We may be completely outnumbered by them, but our men are not that shabby to use that as an excuse," said Legolas as he took out his bow.

He paused for a moment before smirking. "We have trained especially for this kind of occasion. We now have time to do some practical 'training'."

He then looked over his shoulder and said to the people behind them. "The one who died first will be doing paperwork for a month while the one with the lowest number of people to kill will be on cleaning duty of our workshop."

The rest quite groaned when they heard those words. Some even started complaining.

"Boss, there are only punishments. What about the guys who killed the most?"

Legolas laughed when he heard that before saying it in a provoking tone. "Say that to me when any of you beat me and Aragorn in this contest."

"Ah!"

The group seemed to come back to their senses when they realized that these two leaders would be joining them.

Seeing that they would be fine, Leonard turned his head back ahead of them before smirking. "Alright. I will be making my move first."

Bang!

After saying that, he suddenly stomped on the ground and launched himself forward, fearlessly charging toward the huge army of enemies in front of him. It seemed like the combined forces of the players and monsters in front of him were nothing but a bunch of punching bags.

Swoosh!

Seeing him charging straight at them, Heckles did not hesitate and immediately poured all his strength on his sword as he charged ahead.

He infused a large amount of mana on his sword as he swung it down when Leonard was almost upon him.

Swoosh!

Boom!

It was a strike that seemed to be able to destroy the forest given the blinding light that it had. But to everyone's surprise, Leonard just stood in front of Heckles while the sword of the latter was being held between Leonard's fingers.

At the same time, his other hand was also stretched to the side seemingly pinching another sharp weapon in the air.

It was at that moment when Kellin materialized right beside Leonard. It seemed like he was planning to launch an ambush on the latter when he was busy dealing with Heckles. But it was not so successful.

Maintaining his position, Leonard looked at the two before saying. "Don't you guys have converted to Evil Faction? If you don't use either Corrupted or Demonic Transformation now, then you will regret it later."

After that, he made a pulling motion before throwing the two into different directions.

"If you guys don't use everything you have now, then I will not waste my time here and play with the Dragon Centipede instead," he added as he stood a few distance away from the opposing side with full confidence.

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