

Destiny 711

Chapter 711 The Training Grounds Of The Five Penances

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Excalibur, one of the legendary swords within the «Destiny's Fate». The lore about it inside the game was almost no different from the legends that Shin had read in the real world. The only difference that they had was the historical note about this particular artifact. The game developers fitted its description in the main lore of the game.

This legendary artifact was the holy sword that the leader of the legendary knights of the round table, King Arthur Pendragon, had used in the past.

During the Repelling Era, one of the forces that led the human race to their victory was the Knights of the Round Table. And with King Arthur's lead, the knights killed countless demons during the war against the invading races from Hell.

But after a particular incident within their group, a rift was formed between the best knights of the round table and made them walk their own path after the war against the Demonic Races.

There was no more information about this particular event on the official site of the game since it was meant to be discovered by the players of the game. And at this point in time, it seemed like the scattered pieces of the broken Excalibur were one of the clues that were needed to uncover the secrets of the past.

"Tsk! Too bad, I only have a couple of the broken pieces. I can't learn more about this particular event. I am pretty sure that this will be a major hidden quest," muttered Shin after reading the lore about the holy sword Excalibur.

"It looks like the owner of the largest piece of the Excalibur has the most clue about this matter. I wonder if he also inherited the Legacy of the Knights of the Round Table. It looks like a very strong Legacy," he added after remembering the notification that he received from the system.

The group already cleared all of the other training grounds that they needed to investigate while looking for more clues about the missing knights of the Righteous Church.

But unlike what they were expecting, each of the training grounds did not train the main five senses of a living being. Instead, it was meant to train the other senses that most of the players had neglected inside the game.

At first, Shin and the others thought that Five Penance Training Ground was meant to train their senses, especially when they saw the sub-name of the first training ground – eyesight.

But after experiencing the second training ground, they immediately realized that the original thought that they had was actually wrong.

The word 'eyesight' in the first training ground actually stood for 'the first light that a warrior would see'. It was a famous phrase that everyone would hear after deciding to learn about Martial-Arts and Mentalism.

It meant that just like an infant, who was opening their eyes for the very first time, a person needed a light first before they could see a whole new world.

In the real world, this phrase was not taken literally. Instead, it meant that a person needed to learn about the world first before living in it.

In the first training ground of the Five Penance, the Penance of Eyesight, Shin and the others needed to close their eyes to know more about the 'world' inside the game. And by closing their eyes, the game was telling them that they were currently living inside a magical world where Mana, Elements, and other types of energies existed.

Next was the training ground for oneself, or more likely called the Penance of Oneself, Shin needed to learn more about their own battle style.

Just like in the real world, an individual needed to know more about themselves before being able to fit in the world that they were living in.

Some people might think that they don't need to fit into society to live their lives. But the truth was their choice of not socializing with the others was actually a way of fitting in the world.

Moreover, a simple action such as buying in a convenience store, paying for their internet connections, and walking in the street was actually also a way of fitting into society. It's just that their way of living was different from the other people.

On the other hand, in the training ground of the Penance of Oneself, Shin and the others needed to learn more about themselves to improve their battle styles. And since it was meant to identify their

respective strengths and weaknesses, this particular training ground needed to be cleared by each member of the ground by themselves.

They needed to go through the test of the training ground for them to progress further. Or to be more precise, each of them needed to face a copy of themselves during their time within this place.

Out of the five training grounds, this one was the most beneficial for Shin since it was exactly what he currently needed.

,m Since he had multiple Legacies, his current battle style was pretty messy. Even though the complexity of his style and irregular rhythm were benefiting him during his battles, the fact that he hadn't fully mastered any of the styles that he had still remained.

He might achieve some enlightenment during his battle against the Demon God Justin, but he still knew that it was not enough if he really wanted to compete against his brothers on an equal footing. After all, those two had full control over their respective Elemental Possession. And on top of that, they were also familiar with the creation of 'Secret Fusion Skills' which were the combination of Elemental Possession and Class Fighting Style.

After fighting his doppelganger, Shin became even more familiar with his own styles and learned a couple of their weaknesses. He might not be able to fully cover them in a short amount of time, but he was still able to become aware of how his opponents were going to counter him in his future battles.

What came after that was the Penance of Adversary. And as the name implied, this training ground tested Shin and the others on how they were going to defeat the enemies that were unfamiliar with them.

The training method on this place was as simple as battling a different set of monsters in an enclosed arena. The monsters that the party encountered in this test were actually not recorded in the official bestiary of the game where the monsters that the players had discovered during their adventures were documented.

This could only mean that these monsters haven't appeared in the current stage of the game. Due to this, Shin and the others needed to study these monsters carefully to find their weaknesses.

After they went through all of the monsters in the arena, they suddenly got a special bestial that was unique to them. And the monsters that they just defeated were recorded in that virtual book instead of the universal bestiary on the official website of the game.

After that training ground was the Penance of the Battlefield. And with its name alone, Shin could already tell that these three training grounds of Oneself, Adversary, and Battlefield were based on the art of war written by a famous general and strategist in the real world.

The famous phrase "Know yourself, know your enemy, and know the terrain," was a simple yet effective method to win a lot of wars and battles.

So, just like what was indicated in the book, the training ground for the Penance of the Battlefield tested Shin and the others' flexibility when facing their enemies in an unfamiliar environment and complex terrain.

The training ground had a special function where it could change and mimic a particular place that looked like a habitat of the monster that they were facing. It changed from a dense forest to a hot desert to a snowy mountain and many more.

Shin found it quite amusing since they were able to experience different kinds of environments in this particular training ground. And this was also the reason why he was very excited when they finished all of the tests. He even checked the blueprints that they got as one of the special rewards for clearing the training ground.

And the last training ground was the Penance of Unity, a training ground where Shin and the others tested their teamwork.

On top of that, this particular training ground also tested what they all learned from the previous training grounds. Not only did they fight some groups of monsters, but they also encountered a couple of military platoons that were generated by the training ground.

Since humans had a more systematic method in battle, fighting them was much harder than mindless beasts that were only fighting based on their instincts.

The party fought a couple of battles and struggled at them before they were able to clear this particular training ground.

And after going through all of that, Shin and others finally 'graduated' from all of the training grounds which granted them a couple of amazing rewards aside from the growth that they got after experiencing all of the so-called 'penance' of this place.

Chapter 712 Approaching The Summit

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System: Congratulations on completing the Five Penance Training Ground! And as the very first group of players to complete all of the challenges of this place, you will receive a hefty sum of rewards!

System: Calculating the accumulated rewards...

Ding!

System: The rewards have been successfully sent to your inventory space!

After reading the notifications, Shin quickly checked his inventory. And right after he opened it, he immediately saw the items that were sent to him by the system.

But unlike what he was expecting, the rewards that he got were not as amazing as he was thinking. It was not like the rewards were trash among the thrash, they were just not appealing to his eyes.

For a person who was already wearing an equipment set that transcended most of the equipment available in the game, the top-notch materials that were sent in his inventory were nothing in comparison.

Not even a skill book was given to him.

Well, that was understandable.

After all, aside from him, the other members learned a new set of skills after everything they went through. Even Cloe learned a skill or two.

It really made him envious of them every time he said that they learned a new skill and added it to their arsenal.

Well, it was not that he didn't get anything, he was just a little disappointed.

It looked like he already hit a wall.

But at the same time, he was also quite happy about it. It was because this was proof that he was almost reaching the summit within the game. He was starting to see what the other top Godlike Players were seeing.

"What I really need right now is to fully master the skills that I currently have and hone them to their peak. And alongside it, I also need to merge all of my styles in battle into one," muttered Shin to himself while clenching his fists.

"A bit more. Just a little bit more and I will stand on the peak alongside them," for each and every word that he said, a strong conviction was accompanying them.

When Arthur first mentioned the game to him, Shin was pretty skeptical about it since he was not familiar with the world that his brother had discovered since young.

During that time, Arthur was the type of person who would immediately get bored of something after he experienced it once. But that immediately changed when he discovered the joy of playing games.

Shin thought that Arthur became addicted to games like what happened to most young men of their age. But after discovering that he was slowly getting stronger as time went by, Shin became a little curious about this world that his brother was living in.

Naturally, he trained even harder to make sure that Arthur would not surpass him in Martial-Arts.

But that was only a fist battle. After all, during that time, he knew that he was no match with Arthur when it came to wielding their respective weapons.

Though, it might not be the case right now.

Putting that aside, Shin only agreed with Arthur to play this game because of his curiosity. But it slowly became a hobby when he learned that he could practice Martial-Arts in this game without restraint.

The Energies inside the game might be different from the real world but the concepts were pretty much the same.

And when he learned that there were a lot of players within the game that were more powerful than him, his curiosity about the game immediately transformed into an urge to test his limits by challenging them.

After a long train of thoughts, Shin proceeded at checking the materials a little more until a particular pair of ores with completely different properties caught his eyes.

Item Name: Moonfrost Shard

Item Type: Miscellaneous

Item Rank: Lesser Legendary

Details:

A special ore that contains the purest energy of Ice Element.

Legends said that this particular ore came from the surface of the moon that was chuckd down and fell to this land after the battle of two legendary beasts.

Item Name: Sunfire Fragment

Item Type: Miscellaneous

Item Rank: Lesser Legendary

Details:

A special metal that possessed the potent energy of the sun.

This metal ore was said to be found in the peak of the highest mountain of the Atlas World where the sun was said to never set.

After expositing itself to the energy of the sun, this particular metal ore became the only material that had the purest energy of the Fire Element.

Shin stared blankly at the two materials for quite some time before grinning from ear to ear. "So, I finally got my hands on these, huh?"

After that, he immediately opened his quest information panel to look at a particular quest that he got during his early days within the game.

Quest Name: Peak Potential of [Yamato]

Quest Type: Special Gathering Quest.

Quest Difficulty: Chaos (Highest Difficulty)

Quest Details: You've heard from Grandcraftsman Berlin how to recover the peak form of the [Yamato].

Quest Conditions: Gather all the required items for the upgrade of [Yamato], before going back to Grandcraftsman Berlin.

Quest Progress (90%):

- Fruit of Nirvana 0/1
- Lunar Essence 0/1
- Sunfire Fragment 1/1
- Moonfrost Shard 1/1
- Ancient Void Metal 6/3
- Heart of Abyss 7/5
- Lava Cores 8/5
- Earthen Charcoals 30/10

Quest Reward:

+5 Levels

+20 Skill Points

+10 Legacy Points

[Yamato] Obsidian Rank

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Quest Penalties:

None

It has been a while since he last looked on this quest since he really had a hard time looking for the materials listed in it.

Some of the materials listed on it were given to him by the people from Ethereal Hope and Secret Society to fulfill a part of their contract with Shin. It was some sort of tribute given to him alongside a couple of Master Rank Blueprints in exchange for the right to garrison their adventurer team in the Calderock City that he was about to build.

On the other hand, he was a little lucky to stumble upon the other materials during his travels within the game.

At this point in time, it looked like he was finally reaching the end of this quest. He was now only lacking two materials listed on the list. And since based on their names alone, Shin could already tell that it was most likely the hardest materials to obtain.

"Fruit of Nirvana and Lunar Essence, it looks like they are materials that can only be obtained after defeating a particular monster boss," muttered Shin as he looked at the last two items listed on the quest. "Should I look for some information about them after we are done with this quest?"

Currently, Shin was wearing a full set of equipment in Black Mithril Rank. It was a set of equipment that was on the same level as the top Godlike Players on the list.

Items on that rank were said to be the current peak of the game, especially the personalized ones that were crafted by great blacksmiths and weapons created by forgemasters.

But compared to items that in Obsidian Rank such items were nothing in comparison. Though, no one was able to find such equipment yet due to the restriction of the game.

It might be called restriction but in truth, no one was really able to meet the requirements to unlock those things yet nor acquire the materials needed for such items.

But that was not the case anymore. After all, a lot of leading players were slowly approaching the milestone where they could earn the rights to challenge their Tier 3 Promotion Quest.

Level 150

There were a lot of powerful players that were slowly reaching this level just like Shin and the other members of the Empyrean Talons, Arthur and Leonard in particular who were both one level away from it.

Remembering that, Shin immediately opened his character status window and looked at his current level. "Level 147, huh? I didn't expect that I will be almost behind those two when it comes to level. Maybe because they are mostly sparing with each other more than grinding some EXP."

"There is a rumor that the Sword God Zero already surpassed that milestone. I wonder if he already challenged his promotion quest. After all, he already meets the minimum requirement for it," he added after remembering his first encounter with Zero.

"That guy is really strong. Though, I am not sure who is stronger between him and the current Arthur," said Cloe hopped beside Shin.

Shin gave her a sidelong glance before asking. "So, are you saying that Arthur is stronger than Leonard?"

"For now, yes," said Cloe without any hesitation before quickly supporting her claim. "After all, he is currently ahead of Leonard in their current scores."

"What is the current tally of their sparring matches?" asked Shin curiously.

Cloe pursed her lips for a moment before answering. "I am also not sure about that, but I heard that Arthur is up by two at least."

After that, she quickly turned around before dragging Shin towards the others. "Anyway, everyone is already familiarizing themselves with their new set of skills and quite eager to test them out in the battle."

"So, where are we heading next?" she asked after arriving where the other members of the group were gathered.

Hearing that, Shin opened the quest information panel for a moment before opening a virtual map. He then looked at the others before saying. "Our new destination is already indicated on the map. So, we are heading in that direction next."

"I am really suspicious about this quest but since it is giving us quite a lot of rewards, we can't just ignore it, do we?" he added with a smirking tone.

Chapter 713 Cursed

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After traveling for quite some time, Shin and the others arrived at their next destination. And when they arrived, they were immediately greeted by a sight that they didn't expect.

The village was in total ruins, the fences that were supposedly protecting the village were all broken while the gates were on the verge of collapsing. And when the party entered, what they saw was a total ghost town.

No one was around and the house seemed to be abandoned for a very long time. The rundown walls, the broken windows, and roofs were full of holes, these were the things that Shin and the others saw while roaming within the village.

"It looks like this place has already been abandoned. Are you sure that we are in the right place?" said Owen while sweeping his gaze on their surroundings.

"Or is the information that we got wrong? After all, not everything that comes from NPCs is very accurate, they are only clues most of the time," added Akailu.

Shin taught for a couple of moments before giving his instructions. "Ithilien, go scout. Luck, try to survey the surroundings outside the village with your undeads. If you find anything suspicious, inform us immediately."

After that, the two quickly executed the instructions that were given to them.

Ithilien jumped from a roof towards another with light but quick movements. She was moving as swiftly as the wind but also as light as a feather. Moreover, each of her steps didn't even make the slightest bit of sound as if she was running on air.

On the other hand, Chaotic Luck summoned a ground of skeleton soldiers with blazing heads from the ground with a simple gesture of lifting up his fingers. And immediately after that, his eyes suddenly glowed with a purple light which he shared with his undeads.

"Go!"

With simple instruction, the skeleton soldiers immediately scattered in every direction and headed outside the village.

In the meantime, the group continued to walk ahead as they were also trying to look for more clues. But the longer they walked around, the more they found nothing.

"Strange, this is really strange," muttered Cloe with a soft voice.

Hearing what she said, Shin quickly turned to her before asking. "In what way?"

Cloe thought for a couple of moments before replying. "I mean, the state of this village is too ruined. Moreover, it looks like it has been abandoned for ages. But the Chief of Misty Village seemed to be very confident that there are other villages aside from theirs."

Shin nodded his head and immediately added. "Moreover, he also said that the other knights that were sent in this place alongside him were also the heads of respective villages. But how come this place looks so rundown to the point we are thinking that no one is living for a long time?"

"So what are you implying?" asked Cloe with a knitted brow.

Shin smiled at her mysteriously before saying. "You will know about it later. But first, let's wait for the other two to finish their scouting."

"Hmph! You are always like that!" said Cloe while pouting her lips.

Not long after, Ithilien finally came back and regrouped with them while Chaotic Luck regained his focus.

"So, how was it?" asked Shin at the two.

The first to reply was Ithilien to investigate the state of the village. "The entirety of the village is indeed ruined in every corner. And I can't even see anyone aside from us within the village."

"But..." she paused for a moment as she hesitated before continuing. "But I still found some signs of living in a couple of areas."

"Just like?" asked Shin instantly.

Ithilien thought for a moment before answering. "I saw a couple of traces of human footprints. They may look a little old but not as old as these rundown villages. There are also some traces of human activity in a couple of houses. I saw some charcoaled woods in them. They are pretty new, at least 2 days old at most."

p After that, Shin turned to Chaotic Luck before asking. "How about outside? Did you see anything strange?"

"Strange? If we are talking about something strange, then the traces of battles are more than enough," responded Chaotic Luck instantly before falling into deep thought, trying to remember what he saw through the shared vision.

"What is even stranger about it is there are no heavy footprints of a monster in the ground even though there are a lot of claw marks on the trees outside. Aside from a couple of human footmarks, I have nothing else on the ground," he added while knitting his eyebrows deeply.

"Claw marks on the trees but not monster footprints? It can be a flying type monster such as birds and bats," said Akailu. As someone who bore the title of Beastmaster, he needed to be pretty knowledgeable about monsters within the game at the very least.

"That may be true. But is there any flying monster with five claws? And it is not ordinary claws either. It needs to be long claws like swords or sort," said Chaotic Luck with a serious tone.

Hearing that, Akailu couldn't help knitting his eyebrows before saying. "Is there even a monster like that? I haven't heard of something like that nor read it from the official Bestial Records."

"That might be the case currently but have you forgotten about the monsters that we encountered in the Five Penance Training Grounds?" asked Shin in return.

"Ah!"

Akailu immediately realized what he was trying to say as he also knew that the monsters that they had encountered in that particular training ground were indeed not recorded in the bestiary in the official website of the game.

Seeing that Akailu realized what he was trying to say, Shin immediately turned to Chaotic Luck and asked. "Can you show us the traces that you saw?"

Hearing that, Chaotic Luck immediately nodded his head and quickly projected a virtual screen in front of them before sharing his vision with one of his skeleton soldiers once again.

Shin focused on the traces both on the ground and the trees while knitting his eyebrows. From what he could see, it seems like the people in there were fighting a fellow human instead of a monster, or humanoid creature at the very least.

He then focused his attention on the claw marks on the tree while trying to think of what kind of monster was fighting in there. 'It is definitely not sword marks since all of those marks left on every tree are made at the same time.'

'It was impossible to live with such battle marks even for a very skilled swordsman. And if it is a strange weapon... no, it is impossible either. Those marks seemed to be left behind by a human with overgrown claws.'

When his thoughts reached that thought, he suddenly remembered the steel-like claws that Vladimir had. 'Wait! If it is indeed a humanoid creature, then it is most likely the case.'

Unfortunately, he couldn't communicate with his Elemental Spirits right now due to the special nature of the region, or else he already asked their opinions earlier.

"Tsk! What a pity," blurred out Shin unconsciously which made the others look at him.

Hearing that, the other members of the group quickly turned their heads at him while wearing a weird look on their faces.

"What's wrong? And what do you mean that it is a pity?" asked Cloe from his side.

Shin smiled awkwardly before saying. "It is nothing, I am actually thinking about something else."

This time, the other members knitted their eyebrows and stared at Shin with an expression that seemed to be saying. – "You are thinking of something else?" –

Shin became even more embarrassed when he saw the look on their faces before trying to change the topic. "I know I know what kind of monster we are dealing with this time."

Even though the other members were quite skeptical of his words, they still nodded their heads and waited for him to continue.

"I think we are going to face a Vampire this time," he said with a serious tone.

Hearing that, the faces of the others suddenly turned stiff as they immediately realized how troublesome this mission was going to be.

A Vampire?

What is a vampire?

It was said to be one of the strongest monsters that anyone could encounter within the game. And out of the records that were documented in the official bestiary, there was only a single encounter posted in there.

And the person who encountered it was a famous Godlike Player who was ranked a hundred in the ranking list. And Based on the battle video, that particular player struggled to fight that vampire as it was very powerful.

"I think it is better if we have Alucard accompanying us right now. It is pretty obvious that his current race is a vampire," commented Akailu after recovering his composure.

Meanwhile, the others nodded their heads after hearing his words.

Chapter 714 The King Is Back!

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Vampires

It was said to be one of the most powerful monsters that were currently known in the game. It was either a higher type of undead or a powerful demon.

They had a very strong mental prowess and unrivaled strength. They also had powerful magical prowess and were skilled in blood and dark magic. On top of these, vampires were known to have a very high regeneration rate.

Mostly, the longer the vampire lived the stronger it was.

These were the basic information that the top players had regarding this particular monster. There was not much information about them yet since it only appeared a single time.

Based on the calculation of the theory crafters of the game, the players would encounter these kinds of monsters in the highest-grade maps that were going to be available once most of the players reached the tier 3 rank of their respective class.

Meaning, these monsters could only be matched by players that reached tier 3 if they want to fight it in a one-on-one battle.

But if they were going to fight a vampire with the current levels of the players, then they needed to treat it as a Raid Boss that was at least as strong as a Level 175 King Class Monster Boss or a Level 150 Overlord.

This information was the only thing that Shin could read in the online forums and official website of the game. But he knew that it was still not enough since the information about it was very vague and most of them were only speculation.

"This is not enough. I guess we need to contact Alucard about this matter," muttered Shin as he closed the virtual screen in front of him.

He then looked at the others who were currently doing their own thing. The group chose to rest for a moment while they were gathering some information about the monster that they were going to face.

After all, they couldn't afford to be careless in this matter since a vampire was said to be very strong. Dying once or twice was not going to be a problem to the others since the quest would give them enough levels.

Gaining a single level at their current level might be troublesome and time-consuming. But it shouldn't be an issue for them given that they had a series of high-ranking quests that needed to be done. It shouldn't be a bad trade for them.

But it was a different case for Shin. After all, he had quite a lot of things that were droppable from his inventory the moment he died.

The party was currently inside one of the houses within the abandoned village to take shelter from the cold. The temperature within the Sky Deceiving Valley was already cold but it was getting much colder when the night inside the game arrived.

"Should we log out for a moment? It looks like we can't continue our investigation for the time being due to the strange temperature in this place. It is much colder than the other parts that we have explored so far," said Shin to the others.

Hearing his words, the others turned silent for a couple of moments before Owen opened his mouth.
"Are we not going to wait for Alucard?"

Shin shook his head and quickly answered. "Well, they said that they are already inside the dungeon but it looks like they encounter a couple of troubles. The NPCs over that place seem to be getting stronger the more of them get killed. So, they are most likely going to need some time to clear the entire dungeon."

"And since we currently need detailed information from Alucard, he needs some time to completely share everything that he knows about vampires with us."

"From what I heard, he is part of the main force, so he will have a hard time looking for a window to protect himself from the raid," he added.

Shin looked at the group for a couple of moments and saw the disappointed looks that they had. Aside from Cloe, of course. After all, this girl was more likely going to log out of the game, so that she could have some time to 'visit' Shin in the real world.

Unfortunately for her, Shin seemed to have changed his mind and told the group. "Then should we investigate the human activities that Ithilien discovered earlier?"

The mood of the group immediately turned bright when they heard those words. It was pretty clear that they became excited after hearing what he said.

But this time, it was Cloe's turn to become disappointed. She sighed helplessly and said to herself. "This dense guy."

She then glared at Shin sharply, making the latter turned his head at her with an expression that seemed to be asking. – "What now? Did I do something wrong?" –

"Hmph!"

Cloe turned her head away from Shin, making him even more confused. 'Honestly, did I do something wrong again?'

After explaining a couple of these to the others and assigning them to the locations that they needed to investigate respectively, the party quickly walked out of the simple house that they were staying in before heading towards the locations that they needed to investigate.

While a lot of things were happening simultaneously inside the game, the official website of the game was also in its busiest time, especially the official forums.

Different kinds of articles were appearing left and right and slowly gained their respective popularity.

Most of the articles were about the ongoing guild war happening in the Saint Heaven Kingdom. And since both sides were Powerhouses of the game, such articles tended to get such popularity. Though, most of them were practically telling everyone the same thing. The Wing's Alliance would definitely triumph over the HeadHunter Guild.

But those were already old news and they were not the only topics that were attracting a lot of attention. There were also a couple of big articles that shook the entire gaming world. And one of them was about a particular player who was rampaging in the 'dark side' of the game.

Rumors said that this particular player was traveling from Dark City to another, challenging every Dark Arena in those places. And he was not only doing ordinary matches, but he was also gambling everything that he had as he was only accepting a 'Winner-takes-it-all' challenge, a practical deathmatch.

Dark Arenas were different from most of the Arenas within the game since they could gamble almost everything in every match. But asking for a deathmatch in every challenge was beyond crazy in the eyes of these people.

Moreover, the players in every Dark Arena were not that weak either. They were at least at the level of Maverick Ranker in terms of skill levels and techniques. They were even some hidden Godlike Players in those places!

This particular player did not only win every match that he went through, but he also won all of his matches one-sidedly. Regardless of their ranks, skills, or assessment levels, all of them suffered the same fate. All of their accounts got deleted after suffering a crushing defeat in his hands.

For a long time, this player remained mysterious as he didn't reveal his real identity.

No.

It was more like no one was able to uncover his real identity in every battle that he went through. It was not like his opponents were too weak, it was just they all got overwhelmed by him regardless of their class or specialties.

Some of the Top Fighters of Dark Arenas already had their suspicions after watching his battles and seeing his battle style, but none of them dared to name the player since they were still not sure about it yet.

And at the same time, they also didn't dare to challenge this player to confirm their suspicion since they were all afraid that what they were thinking was right.

Moreover, they needed to sign a deathmatch against him if they wanted to uncover his identity. And if they happened to be right about their suspicions, then they were practically doomed to delete their accounts if they dared to fight him.

With the commotion that he was creating within the 'dark side' of the game, it was natural for this player to attract the attention of the executives of the Powerhouse Guilds and other top organizations within the game.

They also started doing a full-scale investigation about this mysterious combatant of the Dark Arena. It was only until recently that they managed to identify who this player was.

The person who confidently identified this particular player was the 'God of Thunder Zeus', the Guild Leader of the Titan Guild himself. And it was immediately seconded by the leaders of the other Powerhouse Guilds.

"It was definitely 'Khing'."

"I can't be wrong since I fought against him multiple times in the past. That player is 'Khing' himself!"

With such a confident claim, no one was able to question his words, especially that the other famous Godlike Players supported him.

'Khing'

This name shook the entire virtual world before with all of his amazing feats. But he suddenly disappeared for some unknown reason and never appeared again.

And there was no Godlike System during his time, he didn't earn a Godlike Title for himself. But during that time, he was the sole player who dominated all of the ranking lists before the Sword God Zero and Dragon God Siegfried were able to stabilize their foot in the virtual world.

There was even a claim that he was the King of the Virtual World of that time. And now that this 'king' set his foot in this world once again, everyone couldn't help but anticipate what was going to happen at the current ranking list of the game.

And with the commotion that he was creating throughout the 'Dark Side' of the game, he was practically announcing his return. It was as if he was saying – ...

"The King is Back!"

Chapter 715 Underground Dungeon (Part 1)

...

A couple of hours before Shin and his group cleared the Five Penance Training Grounds.

Maple Cloud City.

Arthur and the others were waiting for the reinforcements that were going to assist them in clearing the open dungeon underneath the city.

They were surveying the area to make sure that no one was lucky enough to stumble upon the entrance of the dungeon while they were still making their preparations.

Not long after, batch after batch of hooded players started to appear at the place, signifying that the members of the Trading Firm finally arrived.

Shiella strictly instructed Delusive Smile to make sure that no one would notice their movements in the city since it was going to be troublesome if their rivals noticed their actions. With that, she decided to split the members that they were going to send into small groups and let them enter the city in their respective ways.

This strategy would help them dodge the scouts of the other organizations and let them enter the city without arousing any kind of suspicion.

After a few moments of roaming around the city streets, the groups started moving towards the location that Delusive Smile had given them.

The first leader of the group who arrived was Tinker who immediately met Arthur and the others.

"It has been a while, Young Master," greeted Tinker the moment he saw the Dragon God.

On the other hand, the other members of the group couldn't help but turn to Arthur when they heard how the Chief Engineer of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm addressed him.

Well, of course, aside from Leonard who already knew about their real relationship between Arthur and the Trading Firm.

Though, the expression on his face immediately turned stiff when he heard how Tinker greeted him. "I hope you've been well too, Sir Simba."

The corner of his mouth suddenly twitched after hearing how the Chief Engineer addressed him. No matter how many times he heard it, he still couldn't bring himself to get used to it, especially when he knew that Tinker was a few years older than him.

'Even though I don't like to admit it, I somewhat prefer how those butlers in their place greeted me,' he thought to himself before nodding his head at Tinker.

In the meantime, Arthur looked at Tinker with a skeptical tone before sneering at him. "You are still addressing me that way yet you are still not giving me any discounts when I am commissioning you."

Hearing that, Tinker smiled bitterly before replying. "We are just following Young Miss. And you should know better than anyone what will happen if we disobey her orders."

This time, the expression on Arthur's face turned dark while refuting. "But I heard Adept Hands, Harmony, and Black Hammer are giving Shin special treatments!"

The smile on Tinker's face became even bitter before answering. "But that is a different matter, Young Master. I heard that Young Master Shin is providing them with high-class materials during the production."

"I can do that too!" refuted Arthur angrily.

Unfortunately, Tinker quickly dodged the topic and turned his attention back to Leonard. "Can we hear the details about the dungeon? And we also need to have an estimate of the dungeon's size."

Leonard chuckled a little when heard those words before inviting Tinker to join him while walking around the area.

While all of that was happening, the other members of the group were conversing with each other.

"I already had some suspicion when I read our contract. But I still do not expect that they have that kind of relationship with the Hand of Midas Trading Firm," commented Alucard after seeing how Tinker addressed Arthur.

Hearing that, Daulla slightly nodded her head before adding. "And from the looks of it, that Young Miss is the guild leader of that merchant guild."

As an experienced player of the game, she obviously knew what kind of power was the guild called Hand of Midas. It was the very first merchant guild that rivaled the powers of the Powerhouses of the game.

Moreover, their influence was able to reach every part of the virtual gaming world, which was also why those powerful guilds were wary of them.

Having a connection with them was more than enough for most of the players.

No.

It was not an exaggeration to say that it might be the dream of most players.

Yet, right now, their Adventurer Team seemed to have a connection with this particular powerhouse of the game. And a very special relationship at that.

"Looks like choosing to join this team is really not a bad decision after all," muttered Alucard while wearing a smirking smile.

Hearing his words, Daulla couldn't help but nod in agreement. At first, she only joined this team since she was curious about their members. She wanted to know how a player could become so strong.

Moreover, Archimedes seemed to also respect each member of the group, especially the trio of monsters who were clearly leading them, Shin in particular. She wanted to know what this person said to her 'father' to convince him to join them.

Meanwhile, S.Tigris and his group couldn't help but stare at the scene with weird faces on their faces. They didn't know how to react to the current situation.

They also knew that the 'reinforcement' that the Dragon God mentioned was not going to be simple. But they still couldn't believe that he just summoned an elite team from the Hand of Midas Trading Firm. And on top of that, it was pretty obvious that he was pretty close with them.

"D*mn! Now I fully understand why the Alliance Leader is asking for some assistance from them," said S.Tigris after remembering what the Golden Slaying Feather said to Arthur.

Raven, Ringo, and Ara nodded their heads in unison when they heard his words. They now seemed to have a little glimpse of how much influence the Empyrean Talons had.

While they were still distracted by their respective thoughts and drawing their own conclusion inside their heads, Black Hand seemed to be frozen in his place as he stared blankly in the air.

It took them a few moments before S.Tigris was able to notice the strange reaction that his friend had. "What's with that look? Is it really that shocking for you to be that stunned?"

Hearing those words, Black Hand finally came back to his senses and quickly turned to S.Tigris. "Heh! I also don't know why I am acting this shocked either. It is not like we don't know how influential the Dragon God and War God can be."

"Anyway, I am going to investigate the guards within the dungeon first. Would you guys want to join me?" he said before walking towards the direction where Leonard and Tinker were headed without waiting for their reply.

"Strange! Old Black is really acting strange!" said Raven loudly as if he was the only one who noticed.

"You don't have to shout! We can see it too!" snarled Ara while hitting the Master Twilight at the back of his head.

"Ah! Is hitting me really necessary?!" snarled Raven back while glaring at Master Archer.

In the meantime, S.Tigris stared at Black Hand's back while knitting his eyebrows. He was also suspicious but didn't voice it out.

"It doesn't look like we need to worry about it. Given his personality, he will tell us about it already if it is something that he can share with us," said Ringo before patting S.Tigris's shoulder. "So, don't put much thought into it."

Hearing that, S.Tigris smiled bitterly before nodding his head. "You are right. If it is him, then we don't really have to worry."

After that, he waved his hand at the other three and followed after Black Hand. "Let's go. We also need to know how we are going to deal with those guards on our own. We can't just rely on them when we start the raid. It is going to be embarrassing."

"Tsk! Tsk! As if we are going to let that happen," said Raven while clicking his tongue repeatedly.

"Then don't drag us down," said Ara sneering after hearing his claim.

Hearing that, the Dark Elf Master Twilight quickly turned his head at her and glared sharply. "You know what? You really are picking a fight with me."

The White Elf Master Archer returned his sharp glare before saying with a mocking tone. "As if you are going to have a chance to fight me."

A fight was obviously about to break out when their sharp gazes met in the air. But fortunately, Ringo quickly put himself in front of them and prevented the worst-case scenario. "Alright, alright! I know that you two are eager to prove who is better between the two of you. But you can just do it later when we start the raid."

After that, he put his arm around Raven's shoulders before urging him to walk forward and follow after their party leader.

"Hmph!"

Seeing that, Ara quickly walked ahead of them while pursing her lips.

Chapter 716 Underground Dungeon (Part 2): High Risk, High Reward

...

After a few more moments of waiting, the other top elites of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm finally arrived.

"You are late!" said Tinker sharply while glaring at the hooded player walking towards him.

Hearing that, that player seemed to smirk at Tinker before refuting. "You are talking as if you don't know why I am this late. If you didn't leave those pillars behind, then I will be the one to arrive here first."

Black Hammer removed the hood of his cloak when he arrived in front of Tinker. "Young Miss said to seal off the entire place while we are waiting for her arrival."

Tinker looked at Black Hammer mockingly before replying. "Do you think I don't know that? I already sent the others to scout the surroundings to look for the perfect location to set those pillars."

Black Hammer ignored the look that he was getting from the Chief Engineer of the Firm before signaling to the players behind him. "Did you hear that? Coordinate with the engineering department and set up isolation pillars!"

"Understood, Chief!" said the players behind Black Hammer in unison before scattering in every direction. And not long after, they joined the people under Tinker's department and quickly started to do their jobs.

,m They took out a group of strange black metals from their respective inventories before assembling them and building a black pillar that was stuck deeply on the ground.

In the meantime, the engineers working with them were busy installing strange apparatuses beside those pillars before connecting them one after another.

Tinker and Black Hammer observed the work of their subordinates working near them before turning their attention back to each other.

"Let's go, Young Master Siegfried is already doing the initial investigation inside the dungeon," said Tinker while leading Black Hammer.

Black Hammer didn't say anything this time and just quietly walked behind Tinker. He observed their surroundings while moving ahead and quickly discovered the corridor that they were taking did not have ordinary walls.

"Magic Mithril coated with liquified Mana Crystals? This is interesting! This place is really made to be an unbreakable hideout," said Black Hammer after checking the walls for the corridor.

For someone like him, who was an experienced blacksmith within the game, identifying the materials of the walls of the corridor was pretty easy.

"This is a labyrinth-type dungeon with a lot of traps installed everywhere. Sneaking inside with a small group is pretty easy, but clearing the dungeon with a large group is pretty troublesome," said Tinker without even turning his head.

"And the type of monsters inside?" asked Black Hammer out of curiosity.

"Tch!" Tinker clicked his tongue when he heard that before replying with a bitter tone. "That is the most problematic part. We are not dealing with monsters this time."

"The guards within this place were NPC guards with at least a Knight Rank. Moreover, we are getting Sin Points every time we kill each one of them," he added heavily.

"Tsk! That is indeed a little problem. With the scale of this Open Dungeon, we will not have enough pardon cards to clear out the 'Red Tags' that we are going to get," commented Black Hammer noddingly.

"No wonder the Young Miss summoned the experts stationed in the other kingdoms. That way, we don't need to care about the Sin Points," he added after assessing their current situation.

Then Tinker quickly continued with an even heavier tone. "But that is not the most problematic part that we discovered."

The corner of Black Hammer's mouth suddenly twitched when he heard that tone. He was pretty familiar with Tinker. After all, they were already working with each other since the founding of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm. And from what he could remember, it was pretty uncommon for this guy to say that they were facing a 'problematic matter'.

Given that Tinker was admitting that this dungeon was something 'problematic', Black Hammer could already tell that the situation was pretty serious.

Tinker sighed for a moment before saying. "The dungeon has a pretty strange nature. Aside from the traps installed everywhere, there are some places in this dungeon where the guards can get some buff."

"The Spawn Rate of the guards is pretty low which is pretty much a good thing. But to balance it out, those guards are gaining a considerable increase in their stats every time we kill a certain number of guards."

Black Hammer's face immediately turned weird when he heard those words and couldn't help but to give a comment. "I don't think we can call it 'balancing'."

Tinker nodded his head in agreement before continuing. "We are still not done calculating the exact increase of their strengths because we can't get the exact number of guards that we need to kill before the boost happens. But based on our vague estimate, it seems like they are at least a quarter stronger than their previous stats."

"But in exchange with that, the drop rate of rare materials is pretty high. They are also dropping some materials in Black Mithril Rank from time to time. And on top of that, the Experience Points that they are giving are not that bad either."

"Oh~!" Black Hammer couldn't help but smile when he heard that information. "So this dungeon is pretty much a 'high risk, high reward' sort of thing."

Tinker nodded at his remark once again before his tone became even heavier. "And that is where the main problem arises."

"Eh!? That is not the main problem yet?" reacted Black Hammer as he was taken aback.

Tinker smirked a little when he heard those words but didn't ridicule this time. After all, just like how Black Hammer knew him, he also knew the latter pretty well.

This guy was a blacksmith that mostly worked based on his instincts. It didn't mean he was not thinking when he was forging a weapon and equipment. He already knew what was the perfect material he needed after learning the basic features that his customer wanted.

On the other hand, engineering was a little different. Tinker needed to consider a lot of things first before creating a design and while following the blueprint. And he adapted this nature in almost everything. And this was the reason why he immediately got a rough estimate of how difficult this Open Dungeon was going to be after hearing some basic information from Arthur.

"Do you know what the difficulty of this dungeon is?" asked Tinker all of a sudden.

Black Hammer knitted his eyebrows for hearing such an obvious question. But he still answered it regardless. "Obviously, it is in Nightmare Difficulty at the very least."

"Currently," pointed out Tinker, emphasizing the current state of the dungeon.

Black Hammer was confused at first but he immediately realized what Tinker was trying to say after a couple of moments. "Don't tell me-...."

Tinker nodded his head and confirmed what Black Hammer was currently thinking. "As we kill more guards, the other guards within the deeper parts of the dungeon are slowly getting stronger."

"Their Ranks are not getting affected which is pretty good news, but their stats are slowly getting higher and higher. And if we don't clear the dungeon with a single run, then the other guards are to respawn, making it complicated for us."

"And after some time, the difficulty of this dungeon is going to be at least 'Hell Rank'. It may even reach 'Abyss Difficulty' if some conditions are met."

"You should know that the difficulty of every dungeon is greatly affected by its Boss," he added, emphasizing his point.

Then Black Hammer suddenly realized another thing and quickly asked. "Then what about the Boss of the dungeon? Is it also getting stronger as more guards get killed?"

Seeing that his colleague was starting to understand their current situation, Tinker suddenly smiled bitterly before replying. "Unfortunately, it is just like what we are expecting."

"Sir Simba already scouted ahead. And from what he can see, it seems like the gate where the Boss is located is absorbing the 'souls' of the guards that have been killed."

Black Hammer immediately turned stiff when he heard that. He then fell silent for a moment before suggesting. "Then it is better if we kill the boss first before clearing the entire dungeon."

Tinker nodded his head as it was also what he was thinking earlier. But that was until they discovered something else. "But it is not that simple."

"That is the original plan, but we immediately put it on hold and decided to wait for the Young Miss to arrive before deciding what to do," he said with a bitter smile.

On the other hand, Black Hammer quickly frowned his eyebrows before asking. "Why is that? You should know how Young Miss deals with this kind of matter. She is the type that will choose efficiency over anything else."

Tinker couldn't help but smirk at those words before quickly replying. "That is exactly why we chose to put the plan on hold."

He then stopped and turned to Black Hammer before explaining. "While we are investigating the rate of growth of the guards inside, we also discovered that the drop rates of the materials increase significantly."

"The system has always been fair. Since we are practically increasing the difficulty of the dungeon by killing more guards, the rewards that we are going to get are also slowly getting better."

Black Hammer suddenly froze in place when he realized what Tinker was trying to say.

Seeing that Black Hammer seemed to finally understand their current situation, Tinker helplessly shook his head before confirming what his colleague was thinking. "So now, we are stuck at choosing between two choices."

"Whether we are going to kill the Dungeon Boss first to clear the dungeon as fast as we can or..."

"We are going to kill all of the guards inside the dungeon and slowly fatten the Dungeon Boss to get the highest reward possible."

Chapter 717 Underground Dungeon (Part 3): Brothers?

...

Bang! Bang!

Boom!

Black Hammer could already hear the sound of battle as he continued to walk towards the Open Dungeon alongside Tinker. Not long after, he saw Arthur and the others battling a large group of guards by themselves.

Boom!

A few distances away from them was another group of players who were also battling with another batch of guards. The size of their team was a little larger than Arthur's party and each member of their team was also quite skilled. Though, they were slightly lacking compared to Arthur and the others.

That group was the experts that the Hand of Midas had sent. Based on the features of the guild badges that they had, Black Hammer could easily tell that they were from different branches of the guild. But despite that being the case, their teamwork was no less than the top veteran adventurer teams within the game.

Black Hammer nodded his head in approval when he saw that, feeling proud of the combat force of their guild. After that, he turned his head towards Arthur and the others.

After observing them for a couple of moments, Black Hammer nodded his head once again and commented. "As expected of Young Master, their team is really good. To think that they already have this level of understanding with each other despite creating their team just recently? They sure are skilled."

A few moments later, he suddenly noticed that the team was actually working with another party. And after a close inspection, he managed to identify a couple of them. "Eh! Isn't that the 'Saber Demon' from the Wing's Alliance? Why is he here?"

Tinker, who was standing beside him, quickly answered. "Oh! That? I heard from Young Master Siegfried that they are currently working together. It seems to be related to their quest."

"Don't worry too much about it. The Young Master already asked them to sign a confidentiality contract, so the information about this dungeon will not leak yet," he added as he understood what his colleague was concerned about.

Hearing that, Black Hammer slightly nodded his head. He then turned his head and swept his gaze at the other members of the group, trying to get a rough estimate of their skills.

But as he was checking their respective skill levels, his gaze suddenly landed on a particular person which also made his eyes turn wide. "That person-...!"

After being stunned for a moment, the blacksmith suddenly kicked the ground underneath him and launched himself towards that person.

...

In the meantime, Black Hand was currently occupied with leading the team to make sure that their formation was not going to crumble in front of the pressure that the guards were giving them.

It might be a little unnecessary since Arthur and Leonard were good enough to cover the possible gaps that might become the opening for the dungeon guards.

Moreover, there was also the trio of Archimedes, Daulla, and Alucard. They were properly providing enough firepower to support the frontlines. And despite the high damage output that they had, they never exceeded the threshold that could mess the aggro of the guards.

"Such a high level of control over their firepower. As expected to the team that the Dragon God and War God have created," commented Black Hand after seeing the combat prowess of the Empyrean Talons up-close.

Ara was about to nod her head when she suddenly sensed something charging at them with incredible speed. And when she turned her head towards that direction, she suddenly saw someone carrying a huge hammer lunging towards Black Hand.

"Old Black, watch out!" she shouted while preparing to provide some cover to their team's priest.

Hearing her call, Black Hand quickly waved his hand and instantly cast Blink without any hesitation.

Boom!

Then a loud explosion could be heard as a hammer landed on his previous location.

"Huh? What's that? Are we being ambushed right now?" asked Arthur in confusion before looking at Leonard and signaling him to take a look at it. He was currently occupied with the dungeon guards in front of him, so he couldn't leave his post right now.

Seeing that, Leonard immediately nodded his head and quickly headed over to their backlines. But when he arrived, he suddenly became confused about the current situation, especially when he saw who was the one who attacked them. "Huh? Isn't that Black Hammer, Chief Blacksmith of Hand of Midas Trading Firm? Why is he doing this?"

Then there was an awkward silence that surrounded the group.

Ara and Raven who were planning to provide support to Black Hand suddenly halted their actions the moment when they saw Black Hammer. They knew that they suddenly got attacked but they were not sure what was going on since the man who ambushed them was the Chief Blacksmith of their Trading Firm.

It was also the same for the other members of Empyrean Talons. They were practically confused at the current situation. But at the same time, they also didn't stop continuing their current task in hand and helped Arthur to clear the wave of guards in front of them.

The silence continued for quite some time until Arthur and the others managed to clear all of the dungeon guards.

Arthur didn't know what really happened, so he walked towards Leonard and quickly asked. "What is going?"

Leonard looked at him and shrugged his shoulders. "I also don't know."

Arthur slightly knitted his eyebrows when he heard that he turned his head towards Black Hammer. He was about to say something but he was immediately stopped by Tinker who suddenly appeared beside him.

"Let them be. It is a problem that they need to deal with on their own," said the Chief Engineer.

Arthur was still confused but he chose to follow what Tinker had said, observing the situation for the time being.

In the meantime, Black Hammer continued to glare at Black Hand while the latter stared back at him with calm eyes.

And after a long time of silence, the Chief Blacksmith of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm finally opened his mouth. "You, brat! Do you know how much trouble we have gone through just to look for you?"

– "Brat? Did he just call Old Black a brat?" – this was the thought that was running inside the heads of Black Hand's teammates when they heard those words. S.Tigris even frowned his eyebrows.

But that was only the beginning.

It was because they couldn't believe the words that came out from Black Hand's mouth immediately after. "I'm sorry, Big Brother. I just really want to do what I really want during that time."

– "Big Brother!?" – the members of the S.Tigris' group almost had a heart attack after hearing that. Even their captain who was the closest to Black Hand seemed to be also shocked with what he heard.

On the other hand, Arthur was starting to enjoy the sudden development. "Oh~! This is interesting! It is like a scene in a soap opera that my mom liked to watch when I was still a toddler."

"Even though I am not a fan, I don't mind witnessing the real deal," he added before turning to Tinker and asked. "Are they long-lost brothers or something?"

The corner of Tinker's mouth suddenly twitched when he heard that before nodding his head. "Yeah. It is something like that."

Going back with the so-called long-lost brothers, Black Hammer suddenly clenched his teeth and tightened his grip on the huge hammer that he was holding before saying. "Following what you want? Hey! Our family supported you on everything that you wanted, yet you suddenly ran away from home while leaving a letter that said you want to become independent?"

"Then I suddenly discovered that you just joined a Gaming Workshop composed of you friends! Do you know how much you worry our mother?!" he shouted before launching himself at Black Hand once again.

Unfortunately, the priest was quite fast to react and managed to dodge in time.

In the meantime, Black Hand's teammates couldn't help but cover their faces with their hands, ashamed of what they heard.

"Hey, Boss. I thought Old Black didn't have any family members when he joined us," whispered Raven to their Team Captain.

Hearing that, the corner of S.Tigris' mouth suddenly twitched before answering. "That is also what I thought."

"I did not inquire about his family background that much since he is always dodging the subject whenever I try to bring it up. I think it is a very sensitive topic so I don't try to pry much about it."

He then paused for a moment and tried to look at his friend before continuing. "Now, I understand his awkward expression whenever I mention some family matters to him."

"Are we not going to help him? If this continues, he will surely get beaten up by Black Hammer sooner or later," asked Raven.

Ara rolled her eyes when she heard that and quickly said. "It is a sibling fight. It is not for us to get involved in their family problems."

"So, are we going to continue watching?" asked Raver again.

This time, Ringo couldn't help but laugh at him while Ara continued to criticize him. "Do you know? I'm really starting to wonder if the reason you pick your IGN is because of that bird brain of yours."

Chapter 718 Underground Dungeon (Part 4)

...

Black Hammer only stopped when he was satisfied at beating his brother. This blacksmith sure was cruel. He controlled the strength of his attack where it could only be enough to hurt Black Hand but not enough to threaten his life. And wherever the priest's HP reached the critical level, he would always slow down his attack or stop completely to make sure that Black Hand could heal himself.

Naturally, Black Hand didn't have a choice but to heal himself and recover his health bar since they were currently in the middle of a raid. And if he suddenly respawned in the Resurrection Hall and the scouts of their guilds spotted, then he would only risk their operation and leak it accidentally.

All he could do right now was to let his big brother beat him until he vented out all of his anger. After all, he would stop sooner or later once Black Hammer became exhausted. Unfortunately for him, the Chief Blacksmith of the Hand of Midas Trading Firm was not someone who would get exhausted easily which was why the beating lasted longer than expected.

"You better visit our parents next weekend or else I will post a commission on our guild to hunt you down until you quit the game," said Black Hammer with a fierce glare.

Hearing that, the members of S.Tigris' group couldn't help but shiver. They already saw how strong the elite group of the so-called 'Merchant Guild' was just earlier, so they could already imagine what kind of hell they were going to face if Black Hand didn't comply with Black Hammer's words.

And as if adding oil in the fire, Arthur even added. "Tsk! Tsk! Unfortunately, protecting you from the people of the Hand of Midas is not part of the contract."

This mischievous guy even exaggerated words and shook his head. "And since it is a commission posted by the Chief Blacksmith of the firm, I am pretty sure that a lot of assassins will swarm at it to curry some favor from him. Heck! I may even accept it if not because of the contract that we have."

Realizing what he was trying to say, S.Tigris and the others quickly turned their heads at Black Hand and glared at him as if they were ready to kill the moment when he refused. They obviously didn't want to go through that kind of hell.

The corner of Black Hand's mouth suddenly twitched when he saw them looking at him like that. And since he didn't have any other choice, he could only nod his head at his brother. "You don't have to put it that way."

"Hmph!" Black Hammer then turned around and walked away. And with those actions, everyone went back to their respective jobs while waiting for Shiella to arrive.

...

Not long after, the one that they were waiting for finally showed up when the others were recovering their strengths.

When S.Tigris and his group saw her, they couldn't help but stare blankly at her for a couple of moments before Raven was finally able to open his mouth and said stutteringly. "I-isn't that t-the... Frost Goddess Snow White?! What is she doing here?"

Unlike him, the other members of the group immediately put the pieces together and immediately realized her identity.

"So she is the one who is being addressed as Young Miss," commented Ringo.

Nodding his head, S.Tigris immediately seconded. "I never expect that the identity of the mysterious guild leader of the Hand of Midas is the Frost Goddess herself."

"No wonder she rarely appears in any kind of official events. It turns out that she is managing such a large guild," said Black Hand with a bitter smile.

"I heard some rumors saying that she is stronger than Siegfried and Simba even though her rank is way lower than them," muttered Ara while pursing her lips.

She was also an elite female player herself, so it was pretty natural for her to be aware of the news regarding top players who were the same as her. After all, it was pretty rare for female players to rank on top of the rankings.

But to her surprise, Black Hand's answer came in confidence. "That is not just a rumor. It may even be the truth."

"As I said earlier, she rarely appears in any kind of ranking matches, so it is natural for her not to get an update on her ranking. But if we are just talking about the past and her previous achievements, then I must say that she is no way weaker than the top 3 players of the game."

Hearing that, both Ara and Raven were suddenly taken aback before turning to Black Hand with an astounded gaze.

Seeing the expression that they were making, the priest couldn't help but smirk before saying. "Back in the days of «True Era» online, she was one of the Monster Class Players that can be ranked on the very top of the game."

"And if you go further back, she used to be the fierce rival of 'Khing'," he added after pausing for a brief moment.

"Eh!? Khing? That guy who is crowned as the King of Virtual Games and second only to that 'God' of the previous generation?" asked Raven in disbelief.

This time, it was S.Tigris who answered that question. "Yeah. Moreover, she and Khing are known to be candidates to become the greatest players of our generation."

"Though, we are still not sure if that is still the same right now. After all, the current Godlike Players in the top of the rankings are not that weak either," he added while looking at Shiella with full interest.

Black Hand nodded his head before giving another remark. "So, she still hasn't broken through the 'Ethereal Opening Stage', huh."

"Not yet, for now. But based on the aura that she is emitting alone, I am pretty sure that she is very close to reaching the next stage," said S.Tigris.

Hearing that, Black Hand shook his head before saying bitterly. "Such a pity, anyone who reaches the 'Void Manifestation Stage' and above can no longer enter any games that had a simulated world like this one."

When Raven heard that, he couldn't help but become curious and suddenly asked. "Already heard about this matter, but I still can't understand it. Why can't they enter a simulated world if it is giving us a lot of benefits."

Black Hand shook his head when he heard that and quickly answered. "First of all, it is because they can no longer get any kind of benefit even if they manage to enter this world. Let's not complicate the details since you will not understand it anyway."

"Second, forget about the gaming helmets, just know that there is no gaming cabin that can contain the powers of the weakest Void Manifestation Expert."

"With the 'power of void' that they can get after reaching that stage, even the sturdiest gaming cabin can't contain the energy that was coming from their bodies when they tried to play the game."

At this point, S.Tigris suddenly took over and said. "You should know that our bodies are releasing some of our powers when we are playing. It is because our minds are thinking that we are in a real battle which is why it is ordering our bodies to respond."

"To contain that energy that is leaking from our bodies, the gaming cabin was going to restrain our power movements and fool our senses a little. It can even circulate that energy according to our breathing."

"This is the reason why gaming cabins are recommended to every Martial-Artist and Mentalist playing the game."

Hearing that, Raven knitted his eyebrows for a moment before asking. "Then isn't it dangerous to use the gaming helmets?"

The others understood his point since Raven started playing games in the workshop which was why he didn't experience playing with gaming helmets.

"It is slightly different. Because the stimulation level in gaming helmets is much lower and it was not enough to stimulate our minds and bodies to release those energies," answered Ringo.

"Oh! So, that is why the synchronization rate for gaming helmets is pretty low," said Raven in realization.

"Precisely. After all, those gaming helmets are originally created so that ordinary people can experience the joy of the virtual world," answered Black Hand.

He then paused for a moment before continuing. "The 'Power of the Void' is pretty strong to the point that it will make the circuits of the gaming cabin explode. No matter how much the developers strengthen the durability of the cabin and increase its energy capacity, it has always been futile since the power of the void is closely related to the space itself."

"And after experiencing countless failures, everyone decided to give up on developing such a device, especially since it was going to be useless."

"After all, experts on that level are going to just train themselves in the real world instead of here. On their level, venturing in the unknown lands of our world is much better than bullying the players here."

With all of that, Raven nodded his head silently as they watched Shiella walk over Arthur and the others.

Chapter 719 Underground Dungeon (Part 5): Shiella's Arrangements

...

Shiella swept her gaze at the surroundings right after she arrived. She couldn't help but frown her eyebrows when she saw S.Tigris and his group but she didn't mention it.

She already got a rough understanding of the situation after hearing the details from Tinker earlier. Given that, she immediately started making plans inside her head while also trying to calculate how much benefit they would get in this raid.

After a few moments of thinking, she turned to Arthur and Leonard before gesturing at them. "You two, come with me for a second."

The two were quite confused when they were called. But they didn't voice out any complaint since they knew that Shiella seemed to already have a rough plan inside her head.

They followed Shiella in the deeper in the dungeon and stopped a few distances away from a group of guards.

"Go! Separate them into two groups and deal as much damage as you can but don't kill anyone yet," said Shiella, ordering the two.

Hearing that, Arthur and Leonard quickly lunged forward without any hint of hesitation. And during their change, the former threw his spear before accelerating forward.

Bang!

He managed to hit one of the guards and impaled it on the ground. Because it happened a little too fast, the guards first turned their heads towards the direction of the explosion to see what just happened.

NPCs were quite different from monsters as they were intelligent creatures. The first reaction that they were going to do when they got ambushed was to look at what happened to their colleague before anything else. And they were only going to react after confirming that they were being attacked.

"Ambush!"

"Intruders!"

Shouted a couple of the guards before simultaneously turning their heads in the direction where the attack came from.

But the moment they turned their heads, a golden light suddenly flashed in their eyes before flying past them and heading towards the spear that was impaling the other guard.

Arthur grabbed the spear and pulled it out from the ground, releasing a guard that was being impaled by it. Shiella instructed him not to kill any of the guards, so he left that particular guard on the ground before swiping his spear horizontally and releasing golden energy from it.

Boom!

Since he was standing right in the middle of those guards, all of them were blasted away by his attack, sending them flying in different directions.

They were a couple of guards that were fast to react and able to avoid the crisis. But before despite that being the case, they were still pushed back by the impact of Arthur's attack.

Scattered, they didn't have enough time to build an encirclement where they could entrap Arthur. But since they were being attacked, they had no choice but to respond to it and fire back.

The ones with melee weapons quickly charged at Arthur while releasing an enraged roar. And while they were doing that, the guards with crossbows in their hands started firing rapidly.

Despite being surrounded by the attacks that were coming from different directions, Arthur maintained his calm while sweeping his eyes at them.

His eyes released a golden glow as he read the trajectories of the incoming arrows. And before they could even reach him, he was already making his move to defend against them.

Cling! Cling! Cling!

Obviously, the arrows were the first to arrive. But none of them managed to hit him since Arthur skillfully moved his shield to block all of them. He even deflected a few of them and redirected their trajectory towards the incoming guards.

Then a melee battle immediately started the moment when the guards reached him. But despite being attacked from all directions, Arthur was able to fend off all of the attacks with ease while using his foot technique.

Successfully pulling the attention of the guards towards him, none of them was able to notice the predator lurking from behind.

Leonard quickly blocked a few of the guards and prevented them from assisting the others. And with how intimidating his aura was, he was able to push them away from the rest, dividing the guards into two separate groups.

When they were successful with their task, Shiella finally made her move!

She first lured a couple of guards from the backlines, also separating them from the others. She observed them for a couple of moments before sending a barrage of ice arrows at one of them, lowering its HP down to half. And right after that, she turned that guard into ice and locked its movements.

Then she switched her target and did the same. But this time, she lowered the health of the next guard down to a quarter of its total HP before also locking its movements. She continued doing this until she was done freezing all of the five guards that were chasing her.

Each of the guards that she froze had a different percentage of their respective Health Bars. And after making sure that everything was done right, Shiella turned to Arthur and Leonard before giving her next instruction. "Finish them off!"

Hearing her order, Arthur and Leonard quickly adjusted their rhythm and started killing the guards one after another.

While they were doing that, Shiella also released the guards that she just sealed and let them chase after her.

She didn't attack any of them this time. Instead, she closely observed their strengths and compared them to the previous assessment that she had earlier.

Seeing what she was doing from a distance, Arthur couldn't help but knit his brow before walking towards Leonard. "What do you think she is doing?"

"Beats me," replied Leonard while shrugging his shoulders.

They already killed all of the guards around, so it was pretty natural for the guards chasing after Shiella to be slightly stronger than the ones that they had taken down.

But the moment that thought entered their minds, the two couldn't help but turn their heads at each other before blurting out simultaneously. "Could it be-...!?"

Just like what they were expecting, Shiella finished off the guards chasing her before calling them over. And when they arrived, she immediately told them her discovery. "It looks like the Health Bar of the guards in this dungeon didn't affect the boost that they were receiving."

"It doesn't matter if they are in full health or on the verge of death, all of them will receive the same amount of boost regardless of their health."

"Do you understand what I mean?" asked Shiella while looking at the two.

Hearing that, both Arthur and Leonard quickly nodded their heads without any hint of hesitation. They were also experienced at the game, so the current plan that Shiella wanted them to do was clear as day for them.

"So, what are you waiting for? Go inform the others and tell them to do the necessary preparations!" said Shiella while waving her hand.

"Yes, Big Sis!" answered Arthur before heading towards the others alongside Leonard.

Shiella watched them leave for a couple of moments before opening a virtual screen to see what was the news that she missed when she was rushing towards this place.

After a few browsing for quite some time, her attention was caught by a particular topic about a certain player. She read the whole article for a few moments before her lips suddenly curved upwards. "So, he indeed came back, huh? I am looking forward to our next meeting in this world."

...

In the meantime, Arthur and Leonard were currently discussing the plan that Shiella had prepared.

"We are going to divide into two groups. One is responsible for clearing all of the guards within the map while the other group is going to chuck down the Health Bar of the boss as much as they can while also waiting for the first group to clear the entire dungeon," said Arthur while looking at the others.

The others quickly nodded their heads since they already heard from them earlier that the guards would get an equal boost in stats regardless of their health bar.

Arthur stared at them for a couple of seconds before continuing. "As for the group that is going to clear the guards within the dungeon, they need to act as fast as they can so that they can regroup with the first team if possible."

Then he turned to Tinker and Black Hammer before suggesting. "Since the teams from the Hand of Midas have a larger number of members, I think they are more suitable at clearing the guards."

The two chiefs of the firm didn't say anything and just nodded their heads. From their perspective, such an arrangement was pretty reasonable.

Moreover, the team that was responsible for the Dungeon Boss needed to be composed of the strongest members of their group. With Arthur, Leonard, and Shiella on their side, that role was more suitable for their group.

"S.Tigris and his group will be coming with us then," said Arthur while turning his head to the other group. And when the other side saw that, they quickly nodded their heads.

Then Arthur finalized the plan. "We are first going to advance together since the first floor of the dungeon is almost just a single path."

"We are going to clear as many monsters as we can while moving forward, but we are not going to clear the other rooms. It is the Clearing Team's job to clear those guards when we separate our paths in front of the boss room."

"After all, we can't afford to boost the strength of the boss to the degree that we can't handle," he added while the others nodded in agreement.

Then Shiella suddenly arrived and quickly added. "Tinker, Black Hammer, give me a constant update so that we can have a rough estimate of your progress.

"Understood, Young Miss," responded the two in unison.

Shiella thought a couple of moments before adding a few more conditions. "And keep an eye on my message. If I tell you to stop, then immediately pause your operation until I give you the permission to continue."

"We need to adjust our rhythm regularly to make sure that we can properly hold the Dungeon Boss on our side. We can't afford to make any careless mistakes during that time, or else we are going to get wiped out if we can't handle the sudden increase of its strength."

Hearing that, the two chiefs immediately bowed their heads and quickly replied. "We will keep it in mind, Young Miss."

"Good!" said Shiella with a nodding head before turning around and heading back to the dungeon. "If you are already done with everything, then let's move out. My schedule has been pretty tight recently."

Chapter 720 Underground Dungeon (Part 6): Manipulating The Team's Morale

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The guards in the underground dungeon were getting slaughtered by Arthur and the others as they advanced forward.

With the composition of their team, this kind of raid was bound to be a walk in the park. Forget about the three top gods within their group, the skill level of other members accompanying them was high enough to be ranked at the top of any Ranker's List.

The group slaughtered their way towards the deepest part of the dungeon where the boss was located.

That floor was filled with guards that were looking out for any intruder that might dare to enter the huge metal gate behind them. And based on the auras that each of the guards were emitting, it was pretty obvious that this place was one of the locations that could buff the guards.

Shiella looked at the group of guards guarding the gate and tried to estimate their current battle prowess. Given that they killed quite a lot of guards just to get here, it was not a surprise for them if these guards reached the combat level of a powerful 'Royal Guards'.

Not long after, Shiella clicked her tongue before informing the others. "Their current strength is almost comparable to Royal Guards."

"But it shouldn't be that much of a problem for us. After all, it is only comparable and not the real deal yet. Moreover, their current level is quite low, so we will not get suppressed by a 'Suppressing Aura'," she added while turning her gaze to everyone.

The current level of those guards was only 160 at most. And since most of the members of their group were already approaching the level 150 mark, their average level shouldn't be that bad.

"What I am concerned about is the boss behind that metal door. We killed quite a lot of guards already, so its current strength should be at least double of its original," she said with a slight frown.

This time, Tinker nodded his head and quickly added. "Based on our analysis, this dungeon should be at least in Nightmare Difficulty. Or it may even be in Hell Difficulty. And if we go with how the system arranges things, the boss of this dungeon should be at least in General Rank."

The corner of Black Hammer's mouth suddenly twitched while commenting. "It is comparable to Emperor Rank Monster Boss."

"But its level shouldn't be that high," added Arthur with full confidence. And after a brief moment of pause, he turned to Shiella. "Its level should be around 175 at most based on the average level of the guards here."

Shiella nodded at him but quickly added. "But that is the original strength of the dungeon boss if we haven't killed a single guard. And now that we have slaughtered quite a lot of them and are about to slaughter more, its strength will obviously go higher."

"Worst case scenario, we are going to meet a boss that is comparable to a Level 200 Emperor Rank Monster Boss from the get-go," her tone was quite heavy this time as she could already imagine how troublesome this raid was going to be.

"Should we ask for more backup then?" asked Arthur as he frowned his eyebrows quite deeply.

But Shiella shook her head. "We can't do that. My business rivals are always keeping an eye on our firm's movements. Recalling these experts already attracted their attention, so if I summon more of them, those sly foxes will immediately notice our operation."

She then turned to Arthur with a sharp glare while asking. "Where are the other rascal and your other members?"

Arthur suddenly trembled when he heard that before replying stutteringly. "Ahm... they are currently doing another mission."

"Can they pause it for a moment and come over here?" asked Shiella with an even sharper tone.

Arthur gulped his saliva before answering. "I'm afraid they can't. From what I've heard, it is also somewhat related to our main quest."

"Tsk! We don't have a choice then!" said Shiella as her tone became solemn. "You better go all-out right off the bat when we enter that gate. Or else we are going to get wiped out in an instant."

"There is only a single Emperor Rank Monster Boss that is recorded in the official bestiary of the game. And it is taken down by the Titan Guild and Dragon Pavilion during their joint operation."

"It is a level 250 boss and it almost wiped out their 200-man elite expedition group. And they barely killed it after exhausting a lot of high-level scrolls that had a de-buffing effect."

The corner of everyone's mouth suddenly twitched when they heard those words. All of them had a single thought. – "That was definitely not good news." –

Then Shiella continued. "I already watched the battler recording and got a good grasp of how strong an Emperor Rank Monster boss is."

"When we enter, listen carefully to my words and follow them without any hesitation. A momentary lapse is definitely unforgivable, so I need your full concentration during the raid."

Her words were pretty heavy and put a lot of pressure on the other members that were going to join her at the raid. They knew that they couldn't afford to make even the tiniest of mistakes, or else they were going to risk the safety of everyone.

Well, aside from two people, Arthur and Leonard.

These two were smiling excitedly as they couldn't wait for the raid to start. Their eyes were burning with passion while their bodies seemed to be undergoing an adrenaline rush.

It had been a long time since they felt this feeling, this excitement for facing the unknown, and this pleasure of having the chance to fight to their heart's content.

These two gods could clearly feel their hunger for feeling this exhilaration again. This was the familiar feeling that they had when they first set their feet in this unfamiliar world!

This was what a real adventure truly meant!

Shiella would naturally sense the change from them given her current level. She was no way weaker than them, and since she was also on the same level as them, she definitely understood how they currently felt.

In fact, she purposely mentioned the information that she said earlier to arouse the sleeping battle spirit that these two had.

If she wanted to take down the dungeon boss waiting for them behind that door, then she really needed these two to unleash their full potential. And with these two 'beasts' on her side, she at least had some insurance in this raid.

'Too bad, one of my 'pets' is missing,' she thought to herself while thinking about the other guy who was not present.

If Arthur and Leonard heard those words from her, they were most likely going to cough out some blood due to anger.

Now that she had at least two power pieces on the board, Shiella didn't wait any longer and quickly ordered. "We are advancing but maintain the formation."

She paused for a moment and looked at the two and seemed to become disappointed at her words. Seeing that, she couldn't help but sigh a little and thought to herself. 'Tsk! This is really a double-edged sword.'

'But I can still use it to our advantage,' she added inside her head before closing her eyes and acting to release a sigh once again. Then she waved her hand at them while saying as if she was being forced. "Fine, you do your own thing and heat up your engines."

Boom!

The two didn't even reply to her as they quickly kicked the ground and charged ahead, separating themselves from the group.

They were charging ahead as if they were a pair of wild beasts that were released from their cage.

First, Arthur shouted loudly, attracting all of the guards in front of them. And when he saw them charging at him, he quickly accelerated without any hesitation while also using one of his most powerful skills.

'Class Fighting Style: Breaking Through of the Divine Dragon'

Roar!

Arthur released a golden aura while charging forward before transforming it into a golden dragon. And the moment when he collided with the guards running towards him, the golden dragon already opened its mouth and devoured everyone on its path.

Hu~!

Arthur exhaled softly when his charge stopped before quickly spinning around while also swinging his spear at the same time.

Swoosh!

Right after he did that, the residual mana that was left from his previous attack quickly gathered together before revolving around him and creating a small tornado.

Roar!

Then they suddenly transformed into multiple dragons that seemed to be the smaller version of the one from the earlier attack. They coiled around Arthur and ground all of the guards surrounding him.

'Class Fighting Style: Dance of the Nine Great Dragons'

But despite the powerful attacks that Arthur did consecutively, there were still a lot of guards that survived the attack. They charged at him with their weapons in hand and seemed to be planning to gang up at him.

Unfortunately for them, their target suddenly leaped high up in the air, making them helpless in their current situation.

But that was not the end.

The moment they raised their heads to look at him, what they saw was a figure with a glowing crimson aura and was currently falling towards them like a meteor descending from the sky.

'Class Fighting Style: Tyrant Destruction'

Swoosh!

Boom!

The impact was so powerful that it created a lot of cracks on the ground and even sent a shockwave that sent all of the guards standing on it to float in the air for a brief moment.

They might suspend in the air for a very brief moment but it was more than enough for Leonard to execute his next move.

Right after he landed on the ground, he tightly gripped the battle-axe with both of his hands before swinging it in a very powerful manner.

Swoosh!

Then a very strong gust of wind suddenly appeared and circled around him before creating a cyclone that swept all of the guards that were currently floating in the air.

'Class Fighting Style: Calamity Annihilation'

Aside from Shiella and the two chiefs of the Hand of Midas, the other members of the group couldn't help but stare at the scene agape.

Even the other three members of the Empyrean Talons also had a hard time closing their mouths as this was their first time seeing the real strengths of these two peak gods of the game.

The first one to react was naturally Shiella.

She casually waved her hand and summoned a large group of spears made of ice above the group before sending all of them forward.

Each and every spear found a target and finished all of the guards that were still able to survive the attacks of the two.

And when the group saw how good her control and precision were, they couldn't help but gulp a mouthful of saliva as they suddenly regained some confidence about this rain.

Unknown to them, it was actually all according to Shiella's plan.