

World 421

Chapter 421: An Assault In The Wilderness

His estimation was a bit off, only on the morning of the next day, on the eight-day after he arrived at this shrubland, that his Warrior class reached level 29. He was only a single level less from gaining access to the Elite class.

During the entire week he was grinding in this place, he also continuously summoned Runestone of Luck when he killed enemies. Although there was no boss here, he still summoned it. His purpose was to increase the proficiency of his runecrafting skill.

But because of this, he also found out that, unlike the other lifestyle runestones, this Runestone of Luck had a hidden cooldown time. He could not just keep on summoning every time he wanted. If the luck increase took effect when an enemy was killed, he would not be able to summon it again for some time. After several tests, he found out that the cooldown time was one hour.

So he used that Runestone of Luck every one hour. It didn't really make any difference when used again normal monsters. Most of the time even if he used the runestone, the monsters still did not drop anything at all. However, due to his persistent usage, his runecraft skill had upgraded to Advanced Apprentice. Now the maximum added luck stat was more when he was fully concentrating.

He didn't get many items as the monsters he was hunting were basic ones with majority elite ones. There were several special elites as well, but these normal wilderness monsters also didn't give out much. Most items if dropped were simply common or uncommon equipment.

The collected coins were rather decent. He had gotten 27 gold coins and 41 mana cores. There were also heaps of trophy loots which he could exchange for coins once he went back to the Hunters Association.

Many of his combat skill proficiencies had also increased. All this time, during the final phase of the expedition, the fight at the Bandit Outpost, till now. Several of his skills had already been upgraded due to continual usage.

Flame Strike, Parry, Swing, and Magic Shield had upgraded to the third star. Natural Body Recovery, Charge, Sword of Light, Barrier, and Life Burning Art had upgraded to the second star. While Adrenaline Rush and Shredding Fang had upgraded to the first star.

One star of Adrenaline Rush increased its effect duration by twelve seconds. Adrenaline Rush duration was only one minute. If all ten stars were activated, the skill would gain additional two minutes, making the total duration three minutes.

One star of Shredding Fang increased its effective range by one meter. If all ten stars were fully filled, this skill's original six-meter range would become sixteen meters.

Yet, Jack's greatest earning, as usual, was still the souls. From the end of the expedition until now, he had collected 89,846 souls. Almost half of them was from the single day when they raided the Bandit Outpost to claim their Guild Headquarter. Whether it was outlaws or soldiers, all those in Jack's vicinity had their souls went into the container.

He also reconfirmed another thing from these. Despite many who died during that outpost battle and the amount of hunting he had done this week, the souls were still not half of what he got from the Grim Sand Drake and the Grandmother Spider. Peniel had mentioned most of the soul he got that time came from the drake. Souls from Draconic monster truly was something else.

He used the 80,000 souls to level up his Shredding Fangs by 8 levels. He noticed that every five levels had added the number of fangs by one.

Shredding Fang, level: 11/20 (Active skill, range, required melee weapon), star: 1

Creates 5 giant energy fangs that traveled in five directions in a fan shape. Each fang deals 330% physical damage, 25% chance to cause Bleed.

Range: 7 meters

Cooldown: 2 minutes

Stamina consumed: 60

When he tested this leveled-up Shredding Fang on the Mouseant swarm, he also realized that the fan shape area that the fangs traveled had also increased. Probably, with more fangs, the affected fan shape area would also be wider.

Jack continued to grind at the place, fully intent on increasing his class level to 30 before he returned to the capital.

He had some worry because today was the day the protection status ended for their Guild Headquarter. He had no doubt that most guilds in Themisphere had learned about their headquarter by now. They had recruited a lot of members, almost fill up their full member quota in these two weeks. Jeanny had started to impose higher qualifications in accepting a member once their number reached 700.

With such a number of members, the existence of their headquarter was not possible to be kept secret for long. Not to mention some of the recruited members might even be the other guild's spies.

He sent a message to John, "You guys doing all right? No problem, right? Do you need me to go back to the headquarter?"

He soon received a reply, "Do you think this is a guild where it all depends on one single person? Do you think if you are not around, then we will be in trouble? With me here, there is no need for you! We are doing swelling well here."

'A*shole! I should have messaged Jeanny instead,' Jack thought. But reading John's confidence message, he decided to leave the guild matters in their capable hands. His central role was to be the guild's battle prowess, so it was imperative that he increased his level as fast as possible to be able to provide sufficient contribution when his strength was needed.

After resting for a while for a lunch at noon, he was just about to return to monster grinding when he noticed some blue dots approaching.

'Players?!' He thought in surprise.

There were five of those dots. They were going straight to where he was. Seeing the blue dots' movements, Jack stayed at his place. The five started to spread out once they were near. That kind of maneuver immediately informed Jack that these newcomers didn't have a friendly intention.

'Are these people from that World Maker guild?' Jack thought. Apart from that organization, he couldn't think of any other that could roam the wilderness as free as him and was also hostile to him.

Jack stood there with his back facing them as he waited. The five started to come at a much slower pace as they got nearer. This place was full of shrubberies, so it was not difficult to find something to hide behind. Jack found it strange. If they were from that World Maker group, they should know that he had the God-eye monocle. What's the point of sneaking like that?

While he was still pondering, the five suddenly picked up in speed once they were very close. They had lunged at him from five different directions.

Jack moved the moment they took action. He lunged as well to one of the five, while a spell formation started forming on his magic staff. Four who came to where he stood only caught empty space, while the fifth's eyes showed surprise when he found Jack appeared before him.

Jack himself was surprised as well, the guy he was lunging at was wearing a facemask. Not the cheap one like the one Blackjack wore before, but one that could prevent Jack from getting information despite his God-eye monocle.

Though surprised, the guy that came into contact with Jack was not a newbie. He shifted aside before thrusting out with Swift Stab. Jack could see from the guy's movement that he was a martial art expert. But his stab only hit an afterimage left by Jack's Flash Step.

Jack reappeared near his original position before he unleashed Ice Ring which spell formation had just been completed. Ring of Ice hit all five of his assailants. Freezing two while slowing the other three.

Jack didn't wait and dished out severe punishments on one of the two that were frozen. The other three tried to come to assist but their slowed movements could not catch up with Jack's high damage. Jack also activated Adrenaline Rush to increase his attacking speed, claiming the first victim of the five.

The guy with whom Jack first clashed, threw something to the ground as Jack was about to attack the others. Jack didn't take any risk and jumped back. A blast of smoke covered the area where the thing was thrown.

'Are these guys idiots?' Jack thought as he saw on his radar the four were taking formation to encircle him again. Didn't they realize already from the last clash that he could determine their position?

But then he also thought of something, how come they could determine his position? He didn't see any God-eye monocle from this team.. The cloud of smoke hindered everyone's view, so they should be affected as well, but the way they moved showed that they knew exactly where he was. Also, when they first came at him, they also didn't search around, they knew exactly where he was!

Chapter 422: Assassins Guild

'They are from the Assassins Guild,' Jack heard Peniel's voice in his mind. She was still flying around above the battlefield.

'Assassins Guild?'

'It's a league faction that specialized in assassination contract. They mostly only accept Rogue and Assassin classes, but any outworlder who has a sufficient record of kill counts on natives or other outworlders was eligible to apply as well.'

'If talking about kill counts, then I should be eligible then!'

'Yes, but do you want to? That faction specialized in assassination. You are too busy tackling the current factions already.'

'Yes, you are right. I'm just saying, doesn't really intend to join.'

Jack might be chatting with Peniel in his mind, but his action never stopped. He cast Energy Bolts, the eight balls went to look for their targets by themselves. Peniel had told him that the Assassins Guild mostly accepted Rogue or Assassin classes. He doubted there was anyone that had managed to become an elite class yet at this time, so although he couldn't inspect his opponents, all of them should be Rogues. This smoke trick they used had turned back to bite them. He soon heard surprised voices when his energy bolts hit them.

He didn't know how they could detect his position, but with the radar of his God-eye monocle, it only meant that they were fighting on equal ground. Jack rushed to the nearest opponents while the others were hindered by his Energy Bolts.

The one he targeted retreated back with haste. Though his rogue's speed allowed him to match Jack's speed, Jack still had other ways to catch up. Jack used Charge and immediately arrived in front of the fellow. The guy's eyes were wide with surprise when he saw Jack catch up to him.

He performed some fancy martial techniques that were meant to confuse and distract Jack, but it was clear to Jack that this one's martial expertise was not as good as the first one he fought. Also, Jack was not exactly martial illiterate. Jack managed to see through the guy's faint attack with ease and then deliver a counterattack in the form of Flame Strike to him. The guy was promptly sent to the afterlife.

The three were trying to come to rescue their comrade, but they stopped on their track when realizing how fast their comrades had fallen. Due to them rushing at him, they were grouped together. Jack didn't waste the opportunity, he used Shredding Fang in their direction.

Though the three couldn't see the Shredding Fang because of the smoke, they heard the rumble coming from the front. From his radar, Jack saw that one managed to escape his skill, while two were too late to act. Jack heard their anguish cries when they were struck by the fangs.

Jack rushed over to where the last assassin was. But as he ran, one of the two that he thought had been killed by his Shredding Fang, suddenly jumped to his side. Jack was startled but didn't panic. His magic shield parry this ambush. At the same time, the one Jack was originally targeting, also came by and sent his attack in conjunction with his partner. Jack parried this other.

The two performed rapid coordinated attacks. Each of them covered the other's flaw, Jack felt like fighting against a single being with four arms. They must have been used to cooperating with each other. It was a good thing he had killed the other three. He figured those five must have been a team that had used to work with each other. If all five of them performed such a coordinated attack on him, he would find himself in a difficult situation as well.

But at the moment, with only the two of them, Jack didn't feel much pressure. He used Swing which was dodged by the two, but he followed the Swing momentum as he spun around and do a roundhouse kick. Since they just made a dodging motion, one was late to dodge his follow-up kick. The other one, which was the expert that Jack first fought, still managed to evade this kick.

Jack shot burst ranged attacks at him, which caused him to continue to retreat, adding distance to his comrade.

The comrade who had tumbled from Jack's kick, received another leg swipe and fell to the ground. He then felt a heavy pressure pinning him to the ground.

"Move, and you die!" Jack said to him as he stepped on the guy's body with the tip of his sword aiming at the guy's head. Jack's enormous strength was not something a normal rogue could oppose, he was helpless on the ground.

The expert who had retreated, also stopped as he saw the condition of his comrade.

"All right, questioning time," Jack said. "How are you still alive after getting hit by my skill?"

Jack was asking the man on his feet. The man's HP was in critical already, but his Shredding Fang should still be able to kill a normal Rogue in one hit, unless the guy was wearing high-level rare grade armors. Yet, these five wore almost identical gears, which meant that they were unlikely to be rare grade ones.

"He probably had a skill that let him escape a lethal death," it was Peniel who answered him as she flew down. "Rogue had that kind of skill, though it was rare. Similar to that Hide skill of Life Runner. Or he could also have the Sacrificial Dummy, which we suspected to have been used by Scarface the last time you fought him."

"Okay then, next question!" Jack said. "How do you people manage to track my position?"

It was Peniel again who answered, "They most probably had you as their assassination target. Assassins Guild could have a quest posting someone to be eliminated, either outworlder or native. Someone must have paid this faction to issue you as a mark. However, not every mark can be tracked. In order for a mark to have a tracking ability, you must be in the list of VIP targets, that should be how they can track you."

Jack looked at Peniel, "lady, I was asking them. If you keep on answering for them, I might just as well kill them. By the way, how are you so sure they are from the Assassins Guild anyway?"

"From their face masks," Peniel answered. "Those are standard equipment issued by that faction once members passed their initiation phase and became full-fledged members. The masks provide protection to their individual's identity while at the same time told their target that it was the Assassins Guild that is coming for them."

"Is that true?" Jack asked the expert who was still standing warily not far away.

That expert didn't answer Jack's question. Instead, he asked, "how do you manage to find our positions in the smoke as well?"

Jack shrugged, indicating that he was not telling. He then said, "Anyway, you people are pretty stupid. Don't you do research first before targeting someone? Haven't you heard of me?"

"Don't be too full of yourself," that expert said. "I never believed the rumor about you anyway."

"So are you convinced by the rumor about me now?" Jack asked.

The expert made no comment.

"How much is my mark valued?" Jack asked.

"Enough for us to make an effort."

"How do you get here safely anyway? I know you follow my marker. Although I can't see your level, after our clash, I have a rough idea. How do you survive the monsters so deep in the wilderness here?"

The expert was silent. Seeing the guy was not talking, Peniel took the chance to explain, "They must have used a consumable tool unique from the Assassins Guild. It allowed them to evade monsters, similar to the Hide skill. It was a handy tool when they were chasing their marks."

The expert gave Peniel a questioning stare. He was wondering where Jack had found such an informative pet.

"Which a*shole put me as a mark anyway? Is it the Death Associates?" Jack asked.

No response, but Peniel gave her thought again, "I doubt any player group has enough coins for a VIP mark at this stage."

"Are you from Thereath as well? Or other cities?" Jack gave another question.

The expert was still not answering.

Jack sighed. "Fine then. Goodbye," Jack said as he stabbed the one beneath him. The guy immediately died, no more life-saving skill or tool this time.

When Jack killed the one on his feet, the expert took action at once. He threw another smoke bomb.

'Who the hell does he think he is? A ninja?' Jack thought. 'And didn't he already learn that this smoke makes no difference to me?'

As Jack was about to charge over to the remaining black dot, it vanished. Leaving Jack in bewilderment. He whirled around, 'is it an invisibility spell?' he thought.

"It could also be another of the rare Rogue skill," Peniel said. "Your monocle didn't seem that overpowering anymore at higher levels."

"Probably better this way, I shouldn't let myself relying on it too much anyway," Jack said. "But if what he used is a skill, it's better than Life Runner's Hide skill, since my monocle can still detect Life Runner when he was in hiding."

Jack waited a few moments but felt nothing. The expert must have used the skill to escape. He couldn't hear the guy's footsteps as well. The Ranger's Silent Step skill was indeed troublesome.

He started walking to go out of the smoke area. He felt an inkling to look back, something that he had learned to trust in the many years of his gaming experiences.. He looked back and was alarmed when he saw the smoke splitting apart forming a figure, moving rapidly at him.

Chapter 423: Another Assassin

He promptly summoned Magic Shield and put his sword in front of him, just as he felt a strong impact from the incoming shadow. As the impact happened, a person in a black cloak materialized. Jack was sent flying back from the force of the impact. He landed some distance away. He lost almost 400 HP from the strike.

Jack was on full alert. The force that he felt and the amount of HP that he lost indicated that this was not the same player that had vanished. In fact, he didn't believe that any players at this stage could inflict this high amount of damage on him after he had performed a shield block.

He looked at his radar and his suspicion was confirmed. After his attacker materialized. A dot had appeared on his radar, and its color was red, which meant the human in front of him was either an outlaw or an NPC.

"You managed to escape my sneak attack, how impressive," his attacker said.

The attacker was a man with a face that looked to be in his thirties. He had a thin chinstrap beard on his face, his eyes were narrow and appeared cunning. Around his neck was what appeared as a scarf at first glance, but then Jack realized it was actually the same face mask from the players who tried to ambush him just now.

Another assassin? But it was an NPC this time. And a confident one that felt no need to conceal his identity.

Jack used his God-eye monocle to Inspect this one. Since the person was not wearing the face mask, the Inspect was successful.

Oswald (Elite Human, Assassin), level 50

HP: 82,000

'Ugh, level 50?' Even though this NPC was only Elite grade, the level was too high. It would be like fighting against Lieutenant Bailey. He had no confidence at all to survive against such an opponent.

"You are from the Assassins Guild as well?" Jack asked as he stepped back.

"I am," Oswald replied, he took a step forward, maintaining his distance from Jack.

"You are after my mark too? Are you working together with those five?"

Oswald chuckled. "Don't be ridiculous, why am I associating with those weaklings? I noticed them going in the same direction so I assume they were going after the same target as me. I let them fight you first to gauge your strength. That last one was pretty lucky to run away when he did. I'm getting tired of waiting and I would have killed him together with you."

Since the assassin this time was way more chatty, Jack decided to try to pry more information, "To have a native member of Assassins Guild comes after me, the reward for taking me down must be truly generous."

"Hehe, you are on the VIP list, of course it is. Though I do wonder why such large reward for a weak outworlder like you."

"You mind telling me who put the mark on me?"

"Hehe. You are going to die, what's the point of knowing?"

"It's precisely because I'm going to die, so you tell me or not won't make a difference. In that case, why don't you just tell me and let me die a satisfying death?"

"A satisfying death, hahaha! You are my first victim to say that. Well, since you amused me so much before I kill you. All right, I'll give you a clue then."

"Just a clue?"

"Take it or leave it, boy. But this clue should be an easy one."

"All right, lay it out then."

"Heh, I like you, kid. You can be this calm despite your obvious demise. I almost feel pity to have you as my mark, I would love to make friends with you under different circumstances. The clue is, you shouldn't have pissed off a certain magistrate."

Jack never stopped walking backward slowly as Oswald never stopped walking forward. As his last sentence finished, Oswald suddenly lunged forward. Jack, however, had prepared for this assassin's assault.

Oswald was fast, but Jack Shooting Dash was faster. Jack aimed his two dashes directly opposite from Oswald, so he was immediately 14.5 meters further from the assassin. Jack sent a Sword of Light to the assassin followed by Energy Bolts before turning around and ran. He knew he stood no chance against this opponent.

He heard some crashing sound behind, he did not know how effectively his skill hindered the assassin. He added Charge to put more distance.

As he ran, Jack shoot ranged attack to the side, where there was a large mound. That shot hit the mound and soon after, a torrent of Mouseants came out and chased after Jack. Jack continued to run with the Mouseants behind him. Every time he passed a nearby mound, he attacked it and more Mouseants came out.

He never agitated so many Mouseants at the same time. However, he had no intention to fight those swarms at this moment. His purpose was to create a carpet of Mouseant wall between him and that

assassin. He could actually hear the sounds of slicing and shredding from behind him. He had no doubt it was the sounds of the Mouseants getting torn to pieces as the assassin trying to make his way. Jack never considered that the Mouseants would pose any threat to that assassin at all.

When Jack thought a sufficient amount of Mouseant hindrance had been lured out to block Oswald, he took out a whistle and blew it. His stallion steed appeared beside him. He immediately mounted and urged it to gallop away in haste. He was sure his movement speed was no match for the level 50 Assassin, but his steed's speed should be enough for running away.

Only after he was riding on his mount that he dared to look back. He saw Oswald in the middle of the Mouseant swarm. Their eyes locked for a moment. Jack could see the anger in Oswald's eyes as he saw his prey riding away. The assassin jumped and in an instant, his body turned into countless shadows. The shadows spread out in all directions and all the Mouseants that were passed by these shadows turned to mincemeat.

Jack was shocked by the display. He was indeed right to not engage that Assassin in combat.

Before Jack's shock passed, the shadows flew forward and coalesced back into a single being again, overshooting the remaining swarm. Oswald was now freed from the swarm's hindrance. He took out a whistle and summoned a steed as well. The steed was in the form of a weird horse with a wolverine head, its legs ended with clawed feet instead of hooves. The assassin jumped deftly onto his steed then promptly chased after Jack.

"Shit! His steed is fast," Jack exclaimed with trepidation as he saw the assassin's steed gaining on him.

"That steed should be a rare grade one," Peniel said. She was clinging to Jack's shoulder as they sped.

"Well, thank you for the explanation," Jack uttered with slight annoyance.

They were at the edge of Busculla Plateau, the side which shared a border with the Valley of Tempus. Jack could no longer run straight since there was a huge gorge in front, so he steered his stallion to run alongside the edge of the gorge. Because he had to turn sideways, Oswald managed to gain even closer to him.

Jack saw from the corner of his eye some flashes. He was still turning his head over to have a clearer view when he felt his stallion jerked. Two large knives had embedded on his stallion's side. The sudden jerk of the horse caused it to topple over with Jack getting thrown off.

Before Jack could stand back up, he saw Oswald made a superhuman jump and landed close to his stallion. The assassin was targeting his steed. Jack tried to unsummon the horse, but a shining rope suddenly shot out of Oswald's left arm and bound the horse. Jack's unsummoning attempt failed, that rope had the power to keep the stallion tethered.

Oswald's figure then turned into a blur as several slashing flashes went across the stallion. Its HP zeroed out. The whistle in Jack's hand crumbled into dust.

"Now, you have no means and nowhere to run anymore," Oswald said to Jack with a vicious grin.

Storm Breaker and Rapid Dazing Staff reappeared on Jack's hands. As the assassin's said, he had lost the means to escape. The only choice left was a fight to the death, which provided little to no prospect of

surviving. Even his strongest Lightning God Barrage would only take out a portion of the assassin's life. Not to mention the assassin most probably had a way to dodge his attack, he would have wasted the skill then.

Jack looked back at the gorge behind. Perhaps there was still a chance?

He stepped back while continued to stare at Oswald. Making it seem as if he was retreating out of fear. He stopped short of stepping over the edge of the gorge. He couldn't help but glance back and saw the fogged abyss below.

Oswald chuckled. "Is that your last attempt? Trying to trick me into falling into that gorge?"

Jack's heart sank. This NPC was not as gullible as he hoped him to be.

"Well, if you are so afraid to have a melee fight with a weak outworlder like me, then you can just attack me from afar like a sissy," Jack decided to just use a goading technique.

"Okay, then I will just attack you from afar," Oswald said as several throwing knives appeared on his hand.

'F*ck this assassin! Does he have no dignity?' Jack complained in his mind.

Chapter 424: Valley Of Tempus

Since tricking and goading were not successful, Jack decided to just attack. The worse was simply dying and losing one level, he still had the Immortal Soul he could count on. He cast Mana Bullet and jumped to the side, just as a knife flew past where he had been. Oswald had also made his move the second Jack attacked.

Several knives fleeted over, Jack never stopped moving sideways alongside the edge of the gorge as he parried and slashed at the incoming knives as he shot ranged attacks at Oswald.

The two continued to compete in range attacks, with Jack at an obvious disadvantage. Still, Jack was glad the assassin didn't execute the move he had used when he decimated the Mouseant swarms or when he killed Jack's stallion. Probably those skills had a long cooldown, he would have been one shot if Oswald used them.

Jack suffered a few knife stabs when he was forming a spell formation. The ground underneath Oswald flared up as Jack cast Arcane Turbulence. Oswald suddenly vanished when the torrents of energy spiraled up.

"Surprise!" Oswald uttered as he suddenly appeared in front of Jack. He stabbed forward and his dagger thrust through Jack's chest. Oswald frowned.

"Surprise!" Oswald heard Jack's voice behind him while Jack's image in front of him turned blurry.

Jack had activated Dragon's Eye the moment Oswald vanished from inside the Arcane Turbulence's area. He had expected a high-level assassin like Oswald was sure to have a high-grade evasive skill. That's why Jack didn't bother to use Lightning God Barrage. No matter how strong an attack was, it was useless if it didn't hit the target.

Without the Dragon's Eye's ability to slow his perception's time, Jack would have been stabbed by Oswald as the assassin's stabbing speed was so fast that it was as if his dagger had reached his body the moment the assassin appeared. With the time slowed, Jack could see the stab and used Flash Step to avoid the deadly strike.

Oswald was just about to move aside when a ring of light locked his body. Jack's Dragon's Eye allowed him to cast in extreme speed, so he used Magic Bind to stop Oswald's movement. He then sent Flame Strike to the assassin's back.

Oswald still managed to tilt his body and blocked the strike using his dagger, but the force of impact still pushed his body away. He was sent flying into the gorge.

"Yes!" Jack exclaimed victoriously. "I did it! Can't believe it really wo—"

His words were cut abruptly when a shining rope shot out and bound one of his legs. He then felt his body getting yanked forcefully. He was unable to prevent himself from being pulled into the gorge and down into the fogged abyss below.

His mind performed a quick-thinking as his hand thrust Storm Breaker into the wall of the gorge. The sword pierced deep into the wall and held his fall. Jack used two hands to hold onto the sword. He was not only holding his own weight, but the shining rope was still tying his leg and he could feel the weight of another person at the end of that rope.

That weight suddenly disappeared, replaced by rapid footsteps. Jack glanced down and was astonished to see Oswald was running along the gorge wall vertically towards him.

With the extra weight gone, Jack released his left hand and summoned his magic staff back. He then sent rapid shots at the assassin. Oswald's two arms swung with high speed, cutting every shot Jack sent at him. The assassin then gave a powerful kick at the wall and his body zoomed past Jack.

Jack looked up as the assassin was now above him. He could still catch the assassin's face that was grinning at him as he kicked the sword at Jack's hand. Jack watched in dismay as his Storm Breaker was forcibly ripped out of the gorge's wall.

The force of the kick sent Jack away from the wall while at the same time gave Oswald the push to run further up. Jack saw the assassin arrived safely back up to the edge of the gorge while he plunged further into the depth of the abyss.

The sight above was soon covered by thick fogs as he continued to drop. He could not see anything around him. He didn't know which side the gorge wall was at. But even if he could, his position was already too far to be able to stab into it again for a handheld.

The fog became thinner and he looked down. The vision of a rapidly approaching ground entered his view. Everything became black soon.

He had a thought during that brief darkness. 'Did I die? There was no pain from the fall. It just happened too fast. Well, luckily I have the Immortal Soul. Finally, that skill is put to use. I will revive in the capital anytime now. That Warren piece of shit! I'm going to get him back for this. He is the only magistrate I know that has a grudge with me.'

He could feel his body again. He opened his eyes, expecting to see the sight of the capital. But what entered his view was a dim barren landscape with fogs preventing the distant views.

He looked around, trying to make sure.

"I'm still at the bottom of the gorge? Did I survive the fall?" He asked, to no one in particular, but Peniel's voice answered him from above.

"You are still at the bottom of the gorge, and you did not survive the fall."

Jack looked up and saw the fairy floating down.

"Check your immortal soul, it should be on cooldown," Peniel said.

Jack opened his status window. That inherent skill was indeed on cooldown. There was a timer beside it indicating that it was still 23 hours and 58 minutes before the skill was active again.

After realizing he had truly experienced death, he promptly checked his inventories and other statuses. He realized that his God-eye monocle was missing. He looked around and found it on the ground not far from him. In a way, it could be said as good luck that he revived at the place he died, so he didn't have to come all the way here to pick this up.

No other thing was missing from his bag and equipment. Apparently, only the monocle was special. All his other skills, talents, titles, even his race age were still the same as before. The only thing that changed was his level. The Immortal Soul made it so that the penalty was only 50% experience of his current level. Since he had only leveled up both his classes not long ago, the 50% cut made his warrior level go back down to level 28 and his magician to level 27.

He thought at first the reduced experience from Immortal Soul would only eat up all his experience without reducing level, it seemed to not be the case. But at least he didn't lose a full level like the normal death in a safe zone, just a half one, so it would take him less time to return to his previous level.

After making sure there was nothing to be concerned about his status, Jack studied his environment again. It seemed like an empty place with nothing.

"This is the Valley of Tempus? It really seemed devoid of anything," He commented.

"Well, no one ever returned alive from here, so nothing was ever recorded," Peniel said.

"So, even you don't know what's in this place?"

The fairy just shrugged.

"I thought I'm going to revive back in Thereath. How come I'm still back here after dying? Ain't we supposed to get our rebirth in our registered safe zone?"

"That should be the case. But this place is strange, the mana flow around this place is very slow. It feels completely different from the world outside. Perhaps what the locals said about this place is true, those that fall here will not return back up again. Maybe that's why you can't revive back in Thereath."

Jack took out a Town Return Scroll to test the theory. He received the notification that the scroll was unusable due to this place being a restricted zone.

"Are you kidding me? Don't tell me I have to spend the rest of my life down here!" Jack was horrified by the thought.

"Hey, it's not like I want to be here as well. If you don't go back up, I will be stuck down here with you as well," Peniel uttered.

"All right, let's calm down. There should be a way up. Every area in a game is designed with an entrance and exit. If we can come in here, there should be a way out as well. We just have to find it."

"Although I don't like you referring to this world as a game, you are right, there should be a way out. So let's start searching already."

"How about you fly up there and see how high we have fallen? Maybe we can make a rope by tying vines together or something and you can tie it with something sturdy up there for me to climb."

"Can't do that. Have tried to fly up, but it is as if something is blocking me. I can't get through that fog."

Jack had a prudent thought to stay still at this place at first, at least until his Immortal Soul's cooldown was over. There was nothing on his radar, so it should be safe. If he started wandering around, he might meet monsters that were out of his league. If he was killed again, then it would really be game over for him.

But as immediate as the thought surfaced, he cast it away. Ever since he started playing games, prudent was never his style. Going into the unknown, venturing into new worlds, fighting new opponents. That kind of thrills had been what made him so captivated with gaming. He was not going to change now just because the stake was higher.

He walked around in a circle at first. He had fallen not far from the wall of the gorge, but due to the fog, he could not see clearly, but it should be nearby. Once he found the wall, then he would figure out a way to climb it.

'Strange,' he thought. He had been increasing the radius that he traveled, but there was still no wall in sight. 'No way I got blew so far away from the wall, right? I didn't feel that much draft when I fell.'

As he walked further and further, he suddenly caught movements on his radar. Red dots! Lots of them.. Heading his way.

Chapter 425: Shadows

'Damn!' He cursed within. So he still couldn't avoid misfortune. He thought about running the other way from where the red dots were coming, but what if there were even more hostiles that way. After a brief pondering, he decided to meet with the current enemy first. He needed to see how dangerous these hostiles were first before deciding. The movements on his radar were not particularly fast. If he decided to run away, he should still be able to do so after catching sight of them.

Problem was, in this foggy area, they would be rather close already when he caught sight of them.

Jack didn't waste time on hesitation, he rushed out to meet them. He paid attention to his radar and made sure he engaged the enemy by their sides. He didn't want to engage them in their center and ended up being circumvented by them and getting trapped inside their formation.

When he was close enough, he stopped advancing and waited. Soon, he saw shadows moving inside the fog. These shadows soon came out of the fog and revealed themselves to be... shadows?

Jack used Inspect on them.

Living Shadow (Elite monster, Magical), level 28

HP: 19,000

Luckily, they were not high-level monsters. However, all the ones he saw were elites, there was no basic monster. Fortunately, there was also no special elite one. He found it weird to see all these Living Shadows here had exactly the same level and grade. With these many numbers, he would expect a small variation at least. But he did not think too much about it. Since they were not too high level, Jack decided to engage them.

He slashed at one. The shadow had no blood. Jack felt as if he was slashing at an incorporeal being as he felt no resistance in his slash. But there was a trail of shadow that was dragged following his sword's slash and damage numbers appeared above the monster, so he knew his slash was effective.

The shadow, however, did not show any pain. It struck its clawed hand at Jack. Jack expected it to stagger a bit from his slash so he did not expect such a swift counterattack. His shoulder was clawed by the shadow. The damage was not large, but the other shadows were already pouncing at him. With how these monsters ignored their opponent's attacks, he would have to readjust his approach.

Jack used Swing while retreating. As expected, despite suffering damages, the shadows treated his Swing as if nothing and continued to advance. Some of the other shadows spat some kind of black smoke projectiles from their mouths.

Jack could not evade them all, so he evaded a portion and used Magic Shield to block the others. These shadows were not very strong, but because of their reckless-assault style that disregarded defense, it was also not possible for Jack to evade all attacks.

At one point, he received notification that he had received a Weakness status effect. This weakness status reduced his attributes. Luckily, the effect did not stack. With these many numbers of shadows he had to contend with, if the status stacked, his attributes would be reduced to negative already.

There were around fifty of these shadows in this wave, it took Jack more than an hour dealing with them all. He was getting more accustomed to fighting them after a while, so the speed picked up at the later half. These shadows didn't drop any items, coins, nor mana cores. All Jack got from fighting them was just exp points. He checked his Container of Souls and found out that these shadows also didn't contribute any souls.

Jack asked Peniel what this meant. She said she had no idea. Soulless monsters were usually illusions but these ones gave exp points so they were not simply illusions.

Jack didn't worry about it too much. His priority at the moment was finding a way out of this valley, so he continued to walk around again. He continued with his rotational movement. But after his rotation got bigger, he had trouble ascertaining his directions. He was not sure if he was still walking rotationally or was actually walking in a straight line. The fog made every direction looked the same, he had no point

of reference, and there was still no wall in sight. He opened his Map and saw that everything was covered with grey fog, including the spot he was at.

Even though he was confused, he had no choice but to continue doing what he was doing, as staying still would also not solve anything. Not long after, he saw another group of red dots on his radar.

"Again?" He exclaimed.

As the new wave of red dots arrived, he found them to be the exact same as the previous Living Shadows. So he engaged them again.

There was another monster wave coming not long after he finished with this second one. And then another fourth wave. He continued in this manner and found out that it was slightly three hours in between the waves.

"This is weird, how come the monsters came in a clockwork manner like this? It was almost like they were set to come at us at a set interval," Jack commented.

"Indeed. This whole place felt more like a training place," Peniel agreed.

"But I can't stay down here continuing like this, I need to find a way out!"

Peniel didn't reply, she was clueless herself.

"And how come we still have not found the valley wall yet? We have been walking for hours. How big is this valley actually?"

Jack lost count already on how many waves of Living Shadows they had encountered. He was feeling rather tired now. He figured a day must have passed already. It was difficult to know about day and night at this place since he couldn't see the sky.

After wiping out the last wave, he asked Peniel to wake him up two hours from now before the next wave arrived. Seeing that Jack was too tired, she didn't protest.

When the next wave arrived, Peniel had to hit him in order to wake him up, since Jack didn't respond even after she was yelling at his ears. Jack woke up drowsily when the Living Shadows arrived. He was fighting clumsily and suffered much damage. Peniel had to remind him that his Immortal Soul was still on cooldown before he snapped back in alert and put more focus on the fight.

He went back to sleep after that.

The next day, which he knew because his Immortal Soul was off cooldown already, his levels were finally back to Warrior level 29 and Mage level 28 again. After his Warrior was back to level 29, the next wave of Living Shadows turned out to be level 29 elite monsters. He was sure now these Living Shadows adjusted their levels following him.

Peniel was right. The setup of this place functioned very much like a training place. But if it was so, who built it and why it was hidden in such a place?

He continued to walk. He no longer tried to walk in a rotation anymore, since he couldn't be sure anyway. He just walked straight in one direction.

He tried to send a message to Jeanny and John, wanted to inform them that he might be unavailable for don't know how long, but he received a notification that his message was unable to be sent. Whatever this place was, it did not only kept him from leaving. It also kept him from contacting the outside world.

And so he continued walking. Days passed, or so he thought. As he continued to fight the waves. The exp provided was not as much as the ones from Mouseants swarm above the gorge, but it was steady. It took him around an hour to finish off a wave, and then two hours of waiting, so three hours for one wave. One day he got eight waves. After what he thought was a week of walking and fighting. His Warrior class had become level 30. He wondered how much longer he would be trapped in this place. It would be a waste if he kept on increasing in level and yet could not apply for the Elite class.

He was walking while contemplating when he bumped into something. He was not paying attention since all this time it was just flat terrain. He looked at where he had bumped into. A steep rock wall was seen. He put his hands on it to make sure that the wall was real.

'Finally found it!' He thought. It was the gorge wall. He looked above. The wall was very steep and flat. No visible gripping part and foothold. His heart sank again. Even though he had found the wall, he still could not see a way to go back up.

Unwilling to give up, he still tried to scale the wall. He was not even three meters up before he slid down again. He was right. This wall was not possible to be scaled.

Out of option, he continued walking, now following the wall.

Chapter 426: Therras Beast

It was roughly six hours after he discovered the rock wall when he found the end of the wall. He had dealt with another two waves of Living Shadows since then. He looked into the part of the wall where it ended. After observation, he surmised that the wall was not in fact ended, there was simply a very huge opening on this side of the wall. The wall still continued some distance away, but he could not see it because it was covered by fog.

The opening itself seemed like a quarter sphere shape, as if one section of the wall had been scooped out.

He did not doubt that there was something in this opening, as he saw one large dark red dot. From the size and its color, Jack could determine this was not a monster that he wanted to deal with. Such indication on his radar meant that this monster was much stronger than him.

Under normal circumstances, Jack would have left and avoided such an existence. But at the moment, he needed to find a way out of this place. And the existence of this monster could probably mean one thing, that it was guarding the exit. He would not let go of such possibility.

Before he headed over, Jack cast Body Double. He then crept forward slowly with his two other copies spread out some distances apart. He expected this large red dot to be a gargantuan existence similar to the Land Behemoth or the Grim Sand Drake. But even when the dot was rather close, he didn't see the gigantic outline of the creature.

There were several rocky outcroppings around, Jack was using these rocks as a hiding place as he advanced.

'Was the creature also hiding behind the rocks?' Jack thought. But the rocky outcrops around here were not that big. To be able to hide behind these rocks meant the creature didn't have a large build.

Jack slowly crept over, trying to make as little noise as possible. What he would give for Ranger's Silent Step skill at this moment.

He looked at the red dot on his radar and was sure that the creature was behind the rock just ahead. He peeked over in that direction. What he saw was some kind of a strange beast the size of a bear, laying lazily on the ground. Its skin was rough and hard as if a blend between wood and stone surface. Although it was not a giant creature, its limbs appeared thick and powerful. On its head were two large horns that had a yellowish sheen.

Seeing its horned head, Jack couldn't help but feel like it was familiar.

'That... That's a Therras Beast,' he heard Peniel's voice in his mind.

'Is it a special monster?' Jack asked.

'It's a monster that was thought to have been extinct.'

'Oh? A monster can go extinct in this world?'

Peniel didn't reply to Jack's last comment. Instead, she continued, 'A Therras Beast is considered a sacred beast for Themisphere kingdom. Do you still remember the kingdom's banner?'

'Ah! Now that you mentioned it. No wonder I felt this monster looked familiar. The horned head on Themisphere's banner was a Therras Beast?'

'It is. The first king of Themisphere conquered and built the kingdom with the help of a Therras Beast. He was a Beastmaster with a Therras Beast as his pet.'

'Wow, this monster is special then.'

'It is. Don't you try to fight against it.'

Jack inspected the monster using his God-eye monocle.

Therras Beast (Rare Elite, Beast), level 45

HP: 460.000

'Level 45 Rare Elite, I will be crazy to fight it,' Jack thought. He took his attention away from the fascinating beast and surveyed the surroundings behind the monster. His gaze at once fell on a large cave hole on the wall.

'That seemed to lead somewhere,' he thought. This place was devoid of any noteworthy landscape, even the wall he found was mostly flat without any discernible feature. So this distinct hole on the wall was obviously more than just a simple cave.

Now, all he needed to think of was how to cross over to that hole. Unfortunately, there were no more rocks big enough for him to sneak over. He would surely be spotted once he tried to run for that cave.

'How fast is a Therras Beast?' Jack asked.

'Its physical trait was one of its best assets. Despite its smaller size, I can say that its strength was not far behind that Grim Sand Drake if they were on the same level. Its speed, on the other hand, would be faster. If you are thinking of racing against it, you should abandon that idea. Furthermore, those horns weren't just for show. It can send a devastating range attack using them.'

Jack thought about the information given by Peniel. Trying to run for the cave just relying on his speed didn't seem like a good prospect. He thought about the time. After some pondering, he thought of a plan. He calculated the time that his Body Double was active, they should still be active when he carried out the plan. His level 10 Body Double could last 14 minutes, it should still be enough time. He should have cast this spell later, but no point in lamenting it now.

'What kind of crazy idea is going on in your mind?' Peniel asked.

Jack rolled his eyes at her, 'Are all my ideas that crazy to you?' He then added, 'we will wait.'

'Wait? Wait for what?'

'It should not be long now.'

'Hey, tell me!'

'Hehe, now you know what it's like, right? To be denied the answer you asked.'

'Hmph! Whatever.'

The fairy did not wait long before she got the answer. 'As I said, you and your crazy idea.'

Jack looked back and saw the swarm of Living Shadows rushing to where he was at.

"All right, showtime!" He didn't bother to speak silently in his mind anymore. He cast Barrier as he ran out. The Therras Beast immediately spotted him. It was still laying down leisurely on the ground when Jack rushed out, his head rose up as he looked at Jack.

The creature then stood up slowly and stretched its four legs. Jack could have sworn the beast was yawning as it did that.

Since the beast was looking down at him, he was not about to let it go to waste. He ran as fast as he could. Though he was running towards the hole on the wall, his eyes never left the beast. Jack saw it finished its stretching and aligned its body so it was facing him. And suddenly, it zoomed abruptly in his direction carrying a blazing trail. It was as if a meteor was coming at him.

Jack was expecting the beast to come at him with fast speed, but this speed was still more than he expected. Luckily, he had paid attention. He couldn't change direction in an instant with his current speed, but he could still use Flash Step. He moved several meters ahead. The Therras Beast's charge slammed onto the rock wall.

The solid wall rocked hard as cracks appeared at the point of impact. The Therras Beast turned its head at Jack, it was completely unaffected by that heavy impact.

At this time, the Living Shadows arrived as they pounced at Jack. Their large numbers swarmed the place where the Therras Beast and Jack were at.

When the nearest Living Shadows clawed at Jack, its attack passed through Jack's body as if it was air. They looked over at the other side where two Jacks were running towards the hole.

Jack had switched his body just before the Living Shadow touched him. These Living Shadows had the ability to track his position, so they won't be tricked by the false body. The Therras Beast, however, did not. With all the Living Shadows prancing about around it, it had lost sight of Jack.

Enraged by this disruption, the Therras Beast stomped and trampled wildly as it swung its large horns to the left and right. Every nearby Living Shadow was obliterated by its every move.

'It's working!' Jack thought with relief. Yet, he didn't dare to be careless. He didn't slow down his running as a spell formation started forming on his magic staff.

Jack's relief was short-lived, as he heard a very loud stomping sound. He looked over where the beast was and was shocked to see a large shockwave that sent all the still surviving Living Shadows up in the air. The Beast now had a clear view of Jack.

It shot forward with great speed. It did not use the meteor dash move anymore but the speed was still frightening all the same. With a few rapid gallops, the beast was just a few meters from Jack. It lifted its two powerful forelegs up as it stomped at Jack.

Jack executed his second body-switching and his Body Double skill ended, his two images disappeared. As the Therras Beast stomping legs came down and created a small earthquake, the ground underneath it glowed.

Jack completed his Myriad Ensnaring Chains spell as he used his last switch. Three crimson chains shot out from underneath the Therras Beast and coiled around its body.

Jack never stopped his running. He almost reached the hole already.. He then heard the sound of a chain snapping.

Chapter 427: Test Of Courage

'Holy cow! Already?' Jack exclaimed in his mind. If the chains could only hold the beast for this short time, he won't have the time to search around inside. He was betting that there was some kind of door, or portal, or ladder, or anything inside the cave that could prevent the beast from following. But at this rate, the beast would follow him inside the cave before he had any time to search around.

He stole a worried glance at the beast as another snapping sound was heard. There was only one chain left holding the beast's leg. When Jack glanced over the beast, it slashed its horn down. An energy wave was created from that slash, headed towards Jack.

That range attack had been too abrupt, Jack had no chance to dodge. He only had the time to put Magic Shield in front of him. The Magic Shield shattered immediately, his Barrier as well. He felt his body

getting punched by a violent force and he lost control of it. He slammed onto something hard before falling to the ground.

Feeling pain, which meant he was still alive, he quickly tried to get up, only to see the beast rushing at him with its horned head aimed at him. It was going to ram him to death. It was too late already, his pained body caused his reaction to slow. He watched with horror as the beast arrived.

'Shit, going to die again!' He had that last thought before a loud impact and vibration exploded in front of him. He recoiled backward and fell with his back on the ground.

"I'm still alive?" He couldn't help but ask. Then he saw the Therras Beast, just a couple of meters in front of him. It continued to ram onto what seemed like an invisible wall with rage. Jack looked around and found that he was already inside the hole.

"The beast can't enter this place?" He asked, to no one in particular.

"Apparently so," Peniel answered. She had flown into the hole following Jack.

Jack exhaled a relieved breath. While he was still on the ground trying to calm his taut nerves, he heard a notification voice, "You have entered the chamber of Trial. Received quest: Test of Courage."

"Huh?" He was bewildered by the notification. He then said to Peniel, "do you hear that?"

The fairy nodded, "yes. Apparently, again, this cave is not ordinary."

"Yeah, no shit!" Jack uttered while pointing at the Therras Beast who was still bumping its horned head angrily on the invisible wall.

He took a look at the quest he had just received.

Difficulty: S

Rewards: ???

Survive the Test

Jack was silent for a long time looking at the description. S difficulty. 'Ain't this swell?' He thought dejectedly.

Even an A difficulty was still a hurdle for his level, what more S difficulty? Will this cave throw him an over-leveled monster for him to fight with? The quest description was also not very helpful. Survive the test, sounded more like encouragement rather than instruction.

Jack sighed. No point to complain about it, might as well just go forward and see how the quest played out.

He stood up and looked at the depth of the cave which was nothing but darkness. His Dragon's Eye allowed him to see in the dark but he still could not see clearly. The darkness inside also didn't appear to be ordinary. It was as if there was black fog obscuring what was inside.

He looked back at the Therras Beast which had now stopped its tantrum. It was still huffing in rage while staring at Jack though. Jack turned back to the abyss again. He reequipped his sword and staff, then slowly walked into the darkness.

Since his Dragon's Eye's ability to see in the dark was dampened here, he cast the Illumination spell to light up the surroundings. This was a spell he had neglected. He had diligently practiced all other skills and spells except this one, simply because he thought he never had a use for it.

The cave was long and winded, and the ground was slightly rising. They were going up, which was a good sign for Jack because his objective was to escape this valley by going back up to the surface.

He was ready for confrontation inside this cave, but there was nothing that came at him even after walking for so long. There was not even any trap or puzzle like the ones he encountered in the dungeon inside the Temple of Divine Squall. 'What kind of trial place is this?' He wondered as he continued onward.

It was tiring to be on full alert for a long time without anything actually happening. After a half-hour of walking, he even half-prayed for that over-leveled monster he was afraid of to show itself, but there was nothing. Another half-hour of a tranquil journey before he arrived in a large cave hall, which was also devoid of anything.

He looked around. There was nothing there except for one opening that showed the outside. He walked over to that opening and peered. Because of the fog outside, he could not see much, but he could still faintly see the ground below and knew he was very high up. But not high enough to the Busculla Plateau up there. He looked up, the wall was still going up endlessly, with no visible scalable surfaces.

He looked at the interior again. There was no other opening or door. Just an empty hall with a way down and a window to the outside.

"What the hell?" He uttered. He peeked outside again. "Don't tell me this test of courage is asking me to jump out this bloody window, right?"

Peniel gave a shrug. She then said, "how about giving it a try?"

Jack looked at her and said, "this is your first attempt to make a joke and it is a terrible one. Shame on you!"

"So, what do you suggest? There doesn't seem to be anything here," Peniel said as she started flying around the room.

Jack also walked around the room studying it before he sat down leaning against the wall near the window. He was feeling tired. He had been having an unhealthy sleeping pattern this entire week where he could only sleep for a short two hours before he was interrupted by the Living Shadows swarm.

He was no longer afraid of the appearance of the swarm. Those Living Shadows couldn't enter here just as the Therras Beast couldn't. When the Therras Beast was slamming on the invisible wall down there, some surviving Living Shadows also tried to get inside, without success. So, he was safe here.

The feeling of peacefulness combined with his accumulated fatigue finally wore down on him. He laid down on the floor and closed his eyes. He didn't even bother to ask Peniel to keep watch. He was too tired. He fell to a deep sleep almost immediately.

He didn't know how long he had been sleeping. He didn't even know if he was dreaming. Everything was so calm. He hadn't had this kind of satisfying sleep for a long while. He was still unwilling to wake up when a persistent noisy sound continued to try to call him back to consciousness.

'Is it Peniel? Is there danger?' He thought absent-mindedly. But the sound was not a woman's voice. Nor was it a voice for that matter. It sounded like... an alarm clock?

In confusion, he forced his drowsy eyes to open. The annoying sound was still persisting. It was a sound that he had not heard for a long time.

After much struggle, he opened his eyes. Expecting to see the interior of the cave hall with Peniel buzzing him to wake up. Yet, it was an unfamiliar sight that greeted him. No. Actually, it was a familiar sight, only that he had not seen it for a long time already.

He blinked his eyes a few times. Trying to understand the scenery before his eyes. His eyes then laid on a small black boxy thing on a table with a timer on its front. It was buzzing with the annoying sound that had forced him awake. The timer on that thing indicated that it was 06:01 AM.

"What the...!" He sat up straight at once.

He looked around the place. Blinking a few more times again. As if the act was not enough, he used his hands and scrubbed both his eyes. Trying to make sure.

The scene did not change. He was on a bed, his bed, to be precise. In the apartment room he rented. He was even in his freakin' pajamas.

The alarm was still making that annoying sound. He put his hand on it and touched a button on top of it. Peace returned.

"Peniel?" He called out.

No reply.

He looked at both his hands. He tried to summon his Storm Breaker and Rapid Dazing Staff. His hands were grasping at air.

He blinked a few times then thought, 'was it all just a dream?'

Chapter 428: Returning To Reality?

Jack got up from his bed and searched for his handphone. It was there on the table with some clothes he had prepared. He turned his handphone on and checked the date. It really was that day. The day of Second World's beta test. He remembered he had been so fired up for this day that he had prepared everything the night before. He looked at the nicely folded clothes on the table.

'So it was all really only a dream?' Jack sighed. Did he get so enthusiastic about this day that he actually had such a vivid dream about it? Such a long vivid dream he might add. He was practically experiencing more than two months' worth of time in his dream. He had heard that the sense of time in a dream could be different from when awoke, but still, wasn't this a bit exaggerated?

He took his prepared clothes into the bathroom and hanged them on the side before taking a shower. He then brushed his teeth, put on his clothes, and combed his hair. He looked at his reflection in the mirror. After making sure everything was fine, he turned around.

What Jack didn't notice, was that his reflection in the mirror didn't turn around as he did. The reflection instead watched Jack's back as he walked out of the bathroom.

Taking his key and putting his handphone in his pocket, he did another check again to make sure nothing was forgotten. He checked his wallet and made sure his ID card was inside. The checkpoint on the beta testing site would want to check his identification. He didn't want to be denied entrance and had to run back here again to get his ID card.

After he was sure that he did not forget anything, Jack went out of his apartment room and headed for the stairs.

Somehow, he was not so fired up about this beta test anymore. After all, however cool this beta test was, it wouldn't be as cool as the dream he had. He was practically living the game in his dream, for God's sake. How were you going to beat that kind of experience?

But a dream was still a dream. When it's over, then it's over. No matter how much wishful thinking you coveted, it won't change reality.

He thought about all the friends he had made in his dream. Peniel, John, Jeanny, Bowler, Flame, The Man, and the others... So they were all only figments of his imagination? He was going to miss them. Even the natives he had befriended on the way, Amy, Samantha, Duke Alfredo, Commander Quintus, Prince Alonzo, Captain Salem. Heck, he was even going to miss his enemies, Red Death, Scarface. But then again, those two were famous people in the gaming community, so perhaps he would still meet them as long as he kept on playing games. Still, they won't be the same ones he fought against in his dream.

Jack sighed again. Could someone really miss their dream this much? If only he could go back to sleep and continued the dream.

His steps that were descending the stairs became slower. 'That's odd...', he thought. He felt that he had been going down the stairs for some while already, why was he still on it? This apartment only had six floors and he was living in a room on the fifth floor. Although he was daydreaming when he walked down the stairs, it still shouldn't take this long.

He peeked down from the railing.

'Huh?'

What came into view was many flights of stairs going down. The stairs were of the double winder type which had a U-shape, but he could still see from between the gaps at the middle to gauge how far the ground floor was. From the view, he still had roughly four floors to descend.

'Did I only go down one floor?' He was not sure now. He felt that he had made several turns when he walked down the stairs, which indicated that he had passed multiple floors, but now he was not so sure anymore.

He looked at the number on one of the doors in the corridor. There was a door to an apartment room right in front of the stairs. The number on that door started with four, 411, so he was indeed on the fourth floor. As he was about to continue going down the stairs, something caught his eyes from the far end of the corridor.

The stairs of the apartment were situated at the center part of the building. A long corridor stretched out to the left and right of the building. There were a total of twenty-one rooms on one floor, ten on the left-wing, ten on the right. The ten on each wing was arranged at both sides of the corridor, so there were five rows of doors on each wing. Then there was one door at the center opposite the stairs, which was the position Jack was at.

To save energy, the stingy landlord never opened the lamps on the two wings. So only the center part with stairs had light illuminating them. The two ends were dark. Many tenants had complained to the landlord, including Jack, but apparently, these complaints were simply ignored.

Jack was now staring at the right-wing side of the corridor. It was dark, but he could make out the shape of a person in front of the door at the far end of the corridor. From the outline, it appeared like a woman with long hair.

The woman simply stood there, unmoving. Jack couldn't see clearly because of the absence of light, but he had a feeling this woman was looking directly at him. He tried to think of the tenant who lived there. Couldn't think of one. However, if he did not remember wrong, the rooms on the right-wing of the fourth floor should all be empty. So, who was this woman?

Jack stood there as he also observed the woman. Unsure if he should greet her or not. Seconds passed, the woman was still, without a sound. Jack was getting uncomfortable. He felt his hair stood on ends. Finally, he couldn't take it anymore and decided to just go down the stairs, away from this creepy woman.

As he descended, he made sure to count now. One floor, two floors, three floors... four floors... fifth...?

'What the hell!!' He glanced down between the gaps of the stairs again and was greeted with the same view as before. There were still roughly four floors left.

He slowly turned to the door in front of the stairs and stared at the number 411 on the door for the longest time.

As he fought to try to make sense of this confounding matter, he remembered something and turned to the right side. There she was. The shape of a woman was still there, still the same place as previous. Wait! No, she was not in the same position as before. Last time she was in front of the last door at the end, which was the fifth row. Now she was on the fourth row. She was one door closer.

Jack gulped. Did this mean something?

He slowly backed away to the stairs. Then he ran down the stairs. He no longer walked, he ran. Jumping through two or three stairs at once on occasion. After passing through one floor, he ran slower as he leaned on the railing, looking at the floor below as he descended.

The sight caused him even more bafflement, which soon turned into a disturbing feeling. The lowest floor stayed the same distance as he descended. It was as if he was chasing a still picture. No matter how many floors he went down, he was still four floors away from the bottom.

He was panting when he decided to stop. All the running and the inexplicable situation had caused his heart to beat wildly. He was bending down with his two hands on his thigh, catching his breaths. Remembering something, his eyes slowly turned to the right.

The woman was now just three doors apart.

It was still dark, he still could not see the woman clearly, but it terrified him nonetheless. Jack turned around and settled for running back up instead. If he could not go down, then he would just go up!

He continued to run the stairs. There was an open roof at the top of these stairs. He had a strange feeling that as long as he could get out of this building, then things would go back to normal. However, he realized with dread that just as when he was going down, he couldn't get to the end of the stairs as well going up. He looked upward and saw that it was the same as when he was running downstairs. The top of the stairs kept on going up as he ascended.

He was tired of running, so he stopped again. He looked at the door in front. Its number was 511. He was back on the floor where his room was. He turned to his right. That creepy woman was on the fourth floor, so in theory, she shouldn't be...

"F*ck...!" He cursed out loud. The woman was there, standing still, in silence.. He was two doors away from Jack.

Chapter 429: Haunted Reality

Jack could still not make out the woman's features except for her long hair. The darkness still concealed her despite her close proximity.

Distress and anxiety caused Jack to throw away caution and spoke out against the woman in the dark, "lady! What the hell is your problem? Why do you..."

Jack didn't continue his sentence, as at this time, the woman moved, in his direction.

Without thinking much, Jack turned around and ran. He was running to the other side of the corridor. Towards his room.

His room was at the furthest end of the left-wing. His high-speed running made him bump into the wall before stopping. He put his hand on the doorknob and turned. It's locked! 'Of course, it's locked. F*cking retard! I was the one who locked it just now,' he cursed in his mind as he hurriedly took out the key from his pocket and inserted it onto the keyhole.

He stole a glance at the corridor. The woman had already crossed over the central section with the stairs. She was now inside the left wing with him. She was moving slowly towards Jack.

Somehow, Jack was glad that he didn't steal a glance when the woman passed through the illuminated central section. If he did, he would surely be able to see the woman clearly. Now, she was back in the shadow again. Jack had a weird feeling that if he saw the woman in the light, his panic would become even worse.

Still, his current situation was very disturbing. The creepy woman was heading towards him without a single sound.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Jack kept on cursing as his trembling hands tried to work on the key.

When it finally opened. He quickly went inside and closed the door hard. He leaned on the door as he was panting.

"What the f*ck is going on here?!" He yelled.

BAM! BAM! BAM!

As if to answer his yelling, a series of loud knocks echoed behind him. The knocking on his door caused him to jump forward in fright. He fell on his butt as he stared at the closed door. The knocking had stopped. But he watched the doorknob starting to turn and realized with horror, 'the damn key was still in the keyhole outside! The door is not locked!'

He hurriedly rose and slammed his body to the door just as it was about to open. He used his entire weight to stop the door from opening while his hands grabbed on the doorknob to prevent it from turning. Luckily, there was a latch on the inside of the door. He promptly used it to lock the door.

Only after the bolt of the latch slid into the hole and locked the door, did Jack exhaled a relief breath. But his relief was short-lived, another round of loud knockings caused him to jump back again. He watched the door as the knockings continued.

After a while, he couldn't take it anymore. He had to say something or he would go insane. "F*cking crazy woman! Do you have a problem with me? Why don't you go be crazy somewhere else? Why are you here terrorizing a fine good-looking and healthy young man like me? If you are still disturbing me, I will call the police!"

Jack himself was not really thinking as he did his rambling. He simply said whatever came to mind because if he did not, the fear that was gripping his heart would become bigger. As he uttered his last sentence, he suddenly thought, 'police!'

He quickly fished out the handphone in his pocket. "I'm calling the police now, lady! I have warned you!" He proclaimed as he dialed the phone. The knockings on the door were still ongoing.

Luckily, his call was soon connected. He was worried at first that his call would just go to voice mail.

"Bay City police station, how can I help?" A female voice from the other end was heard.

"Ma'am, I would like to report a disturbance. A crazy woman was trying to gain unwarranted entry into my apartment room!"

"Calm down, sir. Can you inform us of your location?"

"Of course, I am inside my apartment room. It's the apartment Sky Residence on the fifth Alesworth Street. Please send officers to this place as soon as possible."

"That will not be a problem, sir. In the meantime, how about you open the door?"

"Huh?" Jack was slightly taken aback by the request.

"We only want to play. Please open the door so we can play together."

"Wha... What do you mean?"

"It means that we can play together. Don't you like playing? Hihihihhi." The sound of the female officer turned rather high-pitched. Especially her giggling at the end, it was getting shrill the longer she giggled that it was almost a cackle.

"I... I am going to hang up now..."

"Open the door first, please. Please open the door... Open the door...! OPEN THE DOOR...!!!"

Jack was so distressed hearing the voice he ended up throwing the handphone away. It smashed on the wall beside the door and broke to pieces. The banging on the door was still going on, even growing in rapidity now. The sound was truly unsettling.

'What the heck is going on here?' Jack asked in his mind as he turned around. Maybe he could find a way down from the window. His room was five-storey height, but probably there were enough footings and handholds to allow him to climb down to the ground.

As he was walking to the window, he stopped. He stared at the outside with bewilderment. It was dark outside. Didn't he just wake up in the morning before he went out of this room not long ago? How did it turn dark so soon? Nothing was making any sense!

He then realized a horrifying thing. The knockings had stopped. In their absence, there was a squeaking sound. He recognized the sound as the one made by his front door's hinges when it was opened. He turned around slowly back to the front door.

The front door was indeed open. Before it was a woman. He could see her now. She was wearing a long white dress. Her long hair was covering her entire face so Jack couldn't see her look.

'F*ck! Why did she look like that ghost that comes out of the TV? I swear I will not watch any horror movie again from now on!'

The woman was not moving as she stood in front of the open door. Jack was as still as a statue as well. He was afraid that if he moved, the woman would move as well.

Yet, it was just wishful thinking. The woman took a step inside.

That one step caused Jack to lose all his nerves. He ran to the other door in that room. It was the door to the bathroom. He knew he would get trapped inside the bathroom with no way out, but he didn't care. He would go anywhere as long as he was not in the same room as this ominous woman.

He heard more footsteps. F*ck! The woman was chasing him.

He quickly opened the bathroom door once he reached it, entered, and slammed it shut behind him. He felt as if his heart was about to leap out from his chest.

While he was expecting to see the interior of his bathroom, he instead saw the living room of a house. He was confused at first as his mind was all over the place, but he soon recognized this living room. It was the suburb house where he stayed with his grandfather before he left for college.

He was about to leave the door to look at the familiar room before he remembered the thing behind the door. He quickly turned around and made sure the door was locked. Only after that did he take some steps away from the door. Oddly, there were no knockings on the door this time. Not that he hoped for them though.

After making sure that the door held, then only he allowed his sight to wander elsewhere. He now walked around the living room. It was exactly as he remembered it. Every piece of furniture and their placements were as the last time he saw them before he left for college.

The TV in the living room suddenly came to life. It was a static screen. Jack had a growing premonition watching the static TV.

'If that screen shows that f*cking woman, I swear I'm going to smash it to pieces!' Jack made a resolute thought as he picked up a quarterstaff hanging on the wall. It was one of the weapons his grandpa like to use when training with him.

Jack was ready to run over and brutally murder the TV when its static screen was replaced by the screen of a man in formal attire. It was the newsman.

"Good day to you, folks.. Today we bring you the hottest news. For the first one today, the parade to mark the celebration of five hundred years since the regime of evil dictator General Amon was brought down, had been canceled due to weather conditions..."

Chapter 430: Grandfather's Doppelganger

It was just a normal news show, Jack thought in relief.

He looked around the room again. This place brought back the memory. This was originally his parent's house. His parents had died in a car accident when he was still a baby. He had lived with his grandfather since then. They were not living in this house at first. His grandfather owned a martial art training school. It was not a large school, but all the ones training there were amongst the best. His grandfather was, after all, an internationally renowned martial art grandmaster.

His grandfather enjoyed teaching martial arts, he had goaded Jack to learn it since he was small. Jack, on the other hand, only show little interest as he did it partly as a normal hobby, and the other part was simply to honor his grandfather.

He did enjoy watching his grandfather's pupils in training though. His time living in his grandfather's training school was also full of fondness until an incident claimed the life of his grandfather's most talented student. This student had just won the national championship and was just about to head out to compete for the world championship title, but he was murdered. The news said that it was an

incident involving underworld gangsters, but his grandpa never believed it. He knew that this pride student of him would never involve himself with that kind of bullshit.

After that incident, his grandfather lost interest in teaching anymore and closed his training school. He and Jack went back to stay in his late parent's suburb house. This one.

The last he remembered, his grandfather still stayed in this house, enjoying the peace of suburb in his old age. He wondered if the geezer was still here.

"hihihi..."

While he was pondering about his grandfather, the giggle of the eerie woman was heard again. He swiveled and saw the woman on the TV screen.

'Holy merciful lord! That b*tch really shows up on TV!'

Jack was lost down the memory lane that he completely forgot about what had led him to this place. That unnerving cackle had brought him back to reality.

Intending to keep his words, Jack lunged at the TV. He saw the woman was about to touch the screen from the inside. He had to do it before the bloody thing came out! He was not sure if he was brave enough to hit it if it came out.

"F*ck you!!" Jack yelled as his quarterstaff smashed violently onto the TV. His dread and anxiety caused him to not hold back at all in his swing. The flat and light TV set was practically being hit to a home run as it was flung from one side of the room to the other, hitting and bouncing off the wall in the process.

Jack was not done, he chased after the TV which was now on the floor. He brought his quarterstaff up in the air, then swung it down without reservation. A hard smashing sound was heard as the quarterstaff cracked the TV. Jack continued to hit it again and again. All the while screaming, "let's see how you get out! Let's see how you get out!"

Only when the TV became multiple unrecognizable pieces on the ground, did he stop. He was panting as he used the quarterstaff to help him stand.

As he was panting, his eyes caught something at the opening that linked this living room to the kitchen. There was a head peeking out from behind the wall. It was the woman with her hair still covering her face.

Jack was frozen by the sight, he even forgot to breathe.

The peeking head disappeared back into the wall.

Then only Jack's lungs returned to suck air. But before he could make anything out of the scene just now. A very long naked leg suddenly came out from that opening. Soon the owner of the leg showed itself in all its splendor. It squatted down and ducked its head to fit itself through the opening. The head was still the woman with its long hair covering the face. The body, however, was a deformed shape of grotesque that composed of a large belly and four very long limbs. All of the body was naked with cracked skin.

"Why don't you want to play with me...? Why don't you play with me...?!!" The monstrous creature screamed as it approached. Each step of its long legs made a loud stomp and caused the flooring to crack.

Jack turned back and ran without hesitation. This was not something he could fight with a mere quarterstaff. He ran upstairs to the second floor. Half the way up he unconsciously thought of the past when he used to mock those victims in horror movies. About how when they were chased by killers, seven out of ten they always ran upstairs while they should have run out the front door. But in his defense, the front door was where he came from, so it was not his first choice when he ran.

He continued to run through the corridor after arriving upstairs. His quarterstaff was somewhere in the middle of the staircase. It had hindered his running through the narrow staircase so he let it go. He could hear the sound of the creature's heavy footsteps as it climbed up the stairs.

Jack tried to open every door he encountered.

Locked!

Locked!

Locked!

'What the f*ck! I remember the doors in this house were never locked! Why are they all locked now?'

The fourth door that he tried, which was also the one his grandfather used to sleep in, was fortunately not locked. He already saw the creature's leg turning the corner when he barged into his grandfather's room and hurriedly closed and locked the door.

'How many times have I done this already? All I did is run, open a door, close a door. This is getting very annoying.' While he was grumbling in his mind, he heard a familiar voice from behind, "Afei?"

Jack looked back and saw his grandfather with his back to him. He unconsciously approached. "Grandpa! I am so worried about you. There is something really wrong here. Do you..."

His words halted abruptly when his grandfather's head turned to him. Problem was, only his head turned. His back was still facing him while his head turned a hundred eighty degrees to him. His grandfather's face was full of unnatural wrinkles while his two eyes were absent. In place of the two eyes were two large empty sockets with the darkness inside that seemed to suck anything into it.

Anyone would have been scared shitless by the horror of the sight. However, instead of feeling the horror, a deep rage instead well up inside Jack. His hand clenched into a fist as it shot out. This fist of fury connected with the head of the abomination in front of him and sent it reeling back.

"Screw you! Do you think you are scary? My gramps is way scarier than you. How dare you impersonate him!"

He had had it with these constant scares and surprises. He lunged forward and sent a roundhouse kick at the abomination.

His kick was stopped by a strong grip of the fake grandfather's hand. The mutated head of the grandfather swiveled back to a normal position. Its mouth started speaking, "okay, kid. It's enough."

Jack was not hearing, he was already up in the air when his one leg was grabbed. He spun in the air and delivered another downward kick targeting the fake grandpa's head.

"Hey, I said it's enough!" the fake grandpa shouted. A shockwave stopped Jack's second kick on track before it pushed him flying back. Jack crashed on the door before bouncing back and landed on all four.

"Damn, kid. You are really energetic," the fake grandpa said as he massaged his chin which had been the target of Jack's punch.

Jack quickly stood up and put on a fighting pose.

"Hey, you still want to go on? I said enough already. You have passed the test," the fake grandpa said.

"Test?" Jack was confused. "What do you mean?"

While he was talking, Jack realized something. He looked down at himself and saw that he was in a full armored suit. It was the ones he last wore in his dream before he woke up.

"This..."

He then heard a notification voice, "Congratulations, you have passed the Test of Courage."

He received a generous sum of exp points. This exp pushed his mage class past level 30. Now both his Warrior class and Mage class were ready to become elite classes.

"It's not a dream?" Jack asked absent-mindedly. He was still having trouble absorbing all this. He summoned his status window and looked at the stats.

"It's really not a dream?" A strange kind of relief washed over him. The feeling of losing something important and then rediscovering it again.

"Congratulations, young man." Jack looked to the front to the source of the voice. The grotesque face of his grandfather's doppelganger was very close to him.

"Holy mother of...!" Jack took out his Storm Breaker and was about to attack again.

"Hey! Hey! Can you calm down already? The test is over!" The fake grandpa uttered.

"Then stop freaking me out with that damn face! Can't you change it? Don't tell me your real face is a mutated version of my grandfather?!" Jack shot back.