

Chapter 141 - 141. Underground lakes

"Thanks, Vance, you really saved us out there."

Noah nodded, sitting on the ground.

The effort of vanquishing the fog in the entirety of the fourth floor had tired him greatly, he needed to rest.

"As for the things that you saw when we were inside the illusion..."

Noah raised one hand and interrupted him.

"Don't worry, everyone has its traumatic experiences."

The other three nodded and lowered their heads, they were quite ashamed that they had been seen when they faced their most painful memories.

Another pile of goods, bigger than the previous one, appeared in the middle of the layer.

Errol laid his back on the terrain and spoke in a calm voice.

"I wonder why we are given this much time for each floor."

Nigel answered.

"It's probably in order to let the participants safely approach every test. If it wasn't for Vance, clearing this floor might have taken a while."

"So, what do we do now?"

June asked.

She was a bit annoyed that Noah had saved her and she kept her head lowered the whole time.

"We wait for Vance to recover and then we inspect the rewards. We should also take those purple crystals in the terrain, they seem valuable."

They all rested for an entire day.

Noah had to refill his mental energy and dantian and sleep to get rid of his fatigue while the other three weren't in the mood to do anything after reviving their painful memories.

In the end, they divided the rewards and spent another day gathering the crystals on the terrain.

A rocky passage had appeared in one of the hills in the environment which led to the lower layer.

"We should be more careful from now on, the tests are beginning to change. There was only battle prowess tested in the first three layers but here there was the requirement for a strong mental sphere. I don't really know what to expect next."

Nigel warned the others in his group.

'He is right. There is also the problem of the environment that always favors the magical beasts, increasing the difficulty of the floor. I wonder when the first rank 4 will appear.'

The beasts that they met till then were, at best, in the middle tier of the third rank, only their numbers were incredibly high.

'More than three hundred River crocodiles and around a hundred Fog goblins. If we consider the goblins as an exception, we should meet five hundred or so rank 3 beasts in the next floor.'

The students went through the passage and exited in a sultry mountain location.

Black smoke came out from the top of each mountain, they seemed volcanoes ready to explode.

There were six spots where the smoke came out while every exposed area seemed deserted.

Nigel spoke in a soft voice to the others.

"We should check the cavities from which the smoke is released."

They nodded and followed him to the nearest fuming hole.

As they peeked downward, a red lake became visible.

It was a subterranean lake made of magma and two meters long carps calmly swam in it.

"Lava carps."

Noah whispered.

They were rather weak magical beasts.

They had a decent defense and they could spew out bullets made of lava but, except for that, they weren't a threat.

The problem was the location which increased the difficulty of their hunt by several folds.

Noah turned toward Nigel and expressed his doubt.

"How do we kill them?"

Nigel shook his head.

"Let's first inspect the other cavities, once we have a complete idea of this layer, we will think of a plan."

They went to each mountain and noticed no differences: there were six lakes made of magma with Lava carps swimming inside them.

The students sat in a circle and reviewed ideas on how to clear the floor.

"We might launch spells until all of the beasts are dead."

Errol spoke.

"What if they hide at the bottom of the lakes? At that point, our only option would be to go down there and face the magma."

June answered.

"Can you send your puppet there?"

Nigel asked Noah.

He shook his head.

"The distance with the surface is too much. My mental energy will be drained after a few kills."

They stayed in silence, deep in thought, thinking of a way to handle the situation.

At some point, Noah had an idea.

"What if we destroy the mountain?"

June replied.

"We would be submerged by the lava."

Noah continued.

"No, I mean, if we break only their top and cover the lakes with their rocky ceiling, wouldn't almost every carp die? Then, we can always walk inside and kill those alive."

"It would take a lot though."

Said Nigel.

"We have five weeks of time since we are in the fifth layer. It should be enough."

They thought a bit more but there was no other feasible approach.

They went at the top of the first mountain and placed themselves in four opposite spots.

"Let's start!"

Nigel gave the order and the students released their attacks on the terrain.

The rocks were hard, tempered with the high temperature of the lake below, but they still cracked in many spots due to the might of the students.

Little by little, the top of the mountain was being cracked in many spots.

They were only focusing an area of one hundred square meters but the rocks became harder as they neared the empty space above the lake.

It took them five days to successfully crack the ceiling and make it fall on the area beneath it.

Massive boulders rained down on the red lake, covering it almost completely.

There were too many rocks and the lava was not enough to dissolve them all.

In the end, the lake solidified, creating an uneven dark plain inside the mountain.

Nigel hurriedly yelled.

"It's doable! I will inspect for remaining living beasts, you can start with the second mountain."

A rope materialized in his hands and he bound it on the terrain to descend in the cavity.

The others went to the nearest mountain and began to launch attacks on the ground around the second fuming hole.

Chapter 142 - 142. Forest

As they kept on destroying the terrain, they became faster in the process.

The second mountain took five days to crumble while they managed to destroy the top of the third one in four days.

When they were done with the last mountain, almost four weeks had passed.

They laid on the terrain, they had launched attacks non-stop for the whole time, they only rested for a few hours every day and used many potions to keep their dantian and sea of consciousness full.

They were in desperate need to recover.

However, they still paid attention to their surroundings, they didn't dare to relax before the rewards arrived.

In about ten minutes, the inscriptions on the walls lighted up and another pile of goods appeared.

The students heaved a sigh of relief.

"It seems that we won't have to inspect the crumbled areas again."

Nigel smiled, he was happy that he could finally relax.

"How much do you think it's the total value of the rewards of the three layers that we cleared?"

Errol spoke, staring at the mountain of items and Credits.

"It should be around ten million Credits. The Royals sure a rich to give away this wealth just for rank 3 magical beasts."

Said Noah while he calculated the number of Credits he would receive due to his agreement with Thaddeus.

'It's already more than three hundred thousand Credits without adding the little extras that we are keeping for ourselves. I've already surpassed Thaddeus's initial offer.'

Nigel shook his head and spoke in a calm tone.

"These are just Credits and common inscribed items, nothing too important. The really valuable things in the eyes of the Royal family are the techniques and the spells. Once you reach that status, money loses importance. What's the point of having that amount of wealth if you can't buy the things that makes you powerful?"

The other three nodded, the importance of personal power was clear in their mind.

They had achieved their status as students of the academy through power after all, money was mostly a tool for them.

"Must be nice though to live the rest of your life in a mansion, uncaring of anything regarding the cultivation world. Once my life as a soldier is over, I want to raise my own noble family and forget about the struggles for wealth."

Errol spoke, raising his gaze at the sky.

'A peaceful life, there was a time when I also desired something similar.'

Noah thought.

He had been at a dead-end in his previous life.

There was nothing that he was really interested in, he simply wanted to do a modest job and enjoy his few passions.

'But that was because everything seemed so pointless. You would have remained a simple man both as a dishwasher and as a successful director. It was all so futile. Here, you can become a deity, undisputed among living beings.'

He had no doubts regarding what he would do during his life, the test of his nature had confirmed his already rooted desires.

He raised his gaze at the sky too, trying to look for the distant stars in that fake firmament.

'When will I be able to walk there freely?'

In the end, they decided to use a full week to rest and to return at their peak form.

A path had opened in the terrain leading to the sixth layer.

There was no need for warnings, their teamwork was quite solid since everyone became used to the other members of the group.

'We had a test of endurance, one of will, and one of wits. I wonder what's next.'

Noah sorted his thoughts and focused, he had completely stopped wearing his upper clothes by then.

When they arrived on the other side of the passage, a forest unfolded in front of their eyes.

The leaves of the trees were large and green, creating a dark environment on the ground.

'No illusion nor anything out of the ordinary for now.'

Noah used what he learnt in his course about magical beasts to guess which type of creatures might appear.

Nigel pointed in a direction and the others advanced behind him.

There was the faint sound of a battle in the distance and they quietly moved toward it.

After a few hundred meters, they saw two packs of beasts fighting between each other.

"Earth monkeys and Toxic monkeys."

Noah spoke softly.

There were two different kinds of monkey-type beasts fighting.

The number of specimens in each pack amounted to almost one hundred and there clearly was some peak rank 3 among them.

'Earth monkeys are physically strong and slightly bigger while the Toxic ones use their feces to poison their prey.'

Those magical beasts were not big, only about one and a half meters tall, and their individual strength was average.

However, they were adept in fighting as a group, capable of attacking from every direction due to their high agility.

"How should we approach them?"

Nigel turned to Noah.

They had understood by then that his knowledge regarding magical beasts was deep, he had managed to point out every creature that they found in four layers after all.

"There is usually a leader in each pack. With monkey-types magical beasts, it handles most of their battle tactics so it would be wise to kill it first. They are quite wary of humans though, if we attack now, they will most likely stop their battle and focus on us."

Nigel turned his gaze back on the fight.

"So, we wait for them to disperse?"

"We should wait for them to go back in their lair and then strike."

Nigel nodded and added something.

"We don't even know if these two are the only packs in the forest. Even if there seem to be a few peak rank 3 specimens, only this number is too little for the sixth layer."

The group moved and carefully inspected the entirety of the forest.

They found five more packs, all of a different kind of monkey-type magical beasts.

"In total, there should be more than seven hundred rank 3 magical beasts. Each of them has different abilities and we should carefully plan our assault based on them."

Nigel summarized.

The students created a hole in the trunk of one of the biggest trees and drew a map of the sixth floor as they debated on how to face the beasts.

Chapter 143 - 143. Blessing

Seven packs of monkey-type magical beasts to defeat in six weeks of time.

They had all the time needed to carefully plan their approach, they had just to be careful not to cause too much ruckus.

In the end, they chose a simple tactic: Noah would be the bait and expose each leader and the other three students had to kill it.

Then, they would regroup and apply a different combat formation to better exploit the weaknesses of each kind of beasts.

Earth monkeys and Spiked monkeys relied on their bodies so it was better to fight them as a group in a solid and stable formation, using strong attacks to kill each specimen in one strike.

Fire monkeys and Toxic monkeys were adept in spells with a large area of effect, the students chose to fight them separately, dividing the creatures' attention into four different areas.

Wind monkeys and Dwarf monkeys were fast and nimble, Noah and Errol had to stay in the center of their packs to attract their attention while June and Nigel did a pincer attack on them.

The last pack was composed of Enlightened monkeys.

They were not extremely strong but their intelligence was high.

They often ran away seeing that they had no chances of defeating the students from the academy.

The only option of Noah's group was to slowly corner them until all their specimens were dead.

As for why Noah had to play as the bait, it was because his martial art and his blood companion were the most suited to handle large numbers of enemies.

"We are finally done!"

Errol exclaimed happily as he slowly raised his blood-stained mace in the air.

Below him, there was the crushed corpse of the last magical beast of the sixth layer.

"Yes, it's finally over."

Nigel said, releasing a fatigued sigh.

It took them three weeks to kill all the monkeys, these long and constant battles had placed a heavy burden on his mind.

Noah and June were not better off, they too felt extremely tired.

'I wonder if I could have done it alone. With my Demonic form, just this number isn't enough to defeat me. However, I have to consider the amount of mental energy expended in the process.'

Noah analyzed the test and compared its difficulty with his actual battle prowess.

'They won't be able to defeat me but I will probably be exhausted before the last one of them is dead. I guess it's fair since the power of my spell is incredible.'

The inscriptions on the walls of the floor lighted up and converged at the center of the forest.

The trees were tall and their leaves were thick, they could not see the rewards from their position.

"Let's inspect the rewards and then rest for a whole week, I'm afraid that we might face hundreds of peak rank 3 beasts in the next layer."

Nigel spoke and they moved toward the central area.

As they went deeper in the forest though, the density of "Breath" increased drastically, so much that it surpassed even the one of Noah's current accommodation.

"How is this possible? We clearly inspected this zone before."

June spoke and the eyes of the four students sharpened.

When they arrived at the location where the rewards appeared, their mouths unconsciously opened due to their amazement.

On the terrain of the forest, there wasn't the usual pile of items and Credits that they received in the previous three floors.

Instead, a five meters large and four meters tall blue stone was placed on the ground.

Noah had once seen a similar mineral at the bottom of an underground lake.

"That's a "Breath" blessing!"

Noah exclaimed.

'I never thought that they could be this big! Its value should be immense!'

The other three youths stared with wide eyes at the imponent stone.

The density of "Breath" was so high around it that a few drops of "Breath" were slowly accumulating on its surface.

"The concentration is at the point where the "Breath" changes state by itself! My friends, I think that we struck it rich!"

Errol spoke excitedly and moved with his mace to hit the stone.

Noah appeared in front of him and stopped his advance.

"Errol, what are you doing?"

He answered in a confused tone.

"Well, I wanted to divide it so that we can share its frame in our space-rings."

"It will lose value if we divide it, it's better to store it in one piece. I will take it, as the appointed captain for this mission, it's my responsibility to handle such a valuable item."

Nigel spoke from behind him.

"I think you are all underestimating the addiction that he has for cultivation."

June spoke calmly as she sat on the ground near the stone and closed her eyes.

Nigel and Errol looked confusedly at her gesture and then moved their gazes on Noah.

He was smiling slightly as he stared with a fervent gaze the "Breath" blessing.

Sensing that the two students had their eyes on him, he turned and explained what June had already understood.

"Since we cleared the test, we don't have a time limit anymore. The sooner we advance, the sooner we would have to give this precious object to the Royal family. I say that we can cultivate here for a month or so before going in the seventh layer, we are advancing rather quickly anyway."

He then moved his gaze back on the mineral and sat near it.

There was no need to think if it was day or night on the outside world, the limitation in his technique existed only because it was required a higher concentration of "Breath" of the darkness element to make it work.

However, near the mineral, the "Breath" of each element was so abundant that any restriction was pointless.

Noah hastily used his Yin body and his Dark vortex cultivation technique at the same time and began to cultivate.

June was doing the same in the opposite corner of the stone.

Nigel and Errol looked at each other and smiled happily before occupying the other two corners and starting their meditation.

Like that, a month slowly passed in the sixth layer.

Chapter 144 - 144. Seventh layer

"I think it's time to move."

Nigel said as he stood up.

Errol also stood up and looked at the other two students still sitting on the ground.

June opened her eyes and nodded, joining the others in their stare at Noah.

Noah had no other choice but to stop his meditation.

'If I had this stone for a whole year, I would reach the second rank of the dantian way easily.'

The density of "Breath" near the mineral was more than twice the one in his accommodation.

They had spent more than three months in the inheritance ground which didn't allow them to train much.

However, just by cultivating for a month in front of the "Breath" blessing, Noah felt that his advancement could match those that he would have obtained if he had spent that time in the academy.

'I think they actually surpassed them by quite a margin. Well, that's also due to the fact that I only focused on my dantian and body.'

Since there were no restrictions on his technique in front of the mineral, Noah chose to put momentarily aside the training with the Kesier rune and focus only on the Yin body and on the Dark vortex technique.

'A twofold density coupled with twice the amount of time that I usually spend in meditation, it's as if I cultivated for more than four months! Considering that we used two months concentrated only on clearing the layers, I basically gained one month of training for free!'

He was always satisfied when he shortened the time required for his breakthroughs, he only felt disappointed that it had to end so soon.

"I have to say, your dedication is admirable."

June spoke when he stood up.

"I agree. You basically never slept for the entirety of the month, we should take a day or two to stabilize our gains and to recover from our intensive training."

Noah's eyes lit up and nodded but Nigel continued to speak.

"Without the "Breath" blessing in front of us. I'm honestly afraid that you might forget about our mission if you keep cultivating like this."

Noah wanted to argue but he noticed that the other two students agreed with Nigel's opinion.

He sighed seeing Nigel taking the mineral inside his space-ring and went to one of the branches of the trees to rest.

Only then he realized how far he had pushed his limits, his mind was exhausted and his dantian showed signs of instability.

He slept deeply for one entire day and focused on stabilizing his power on the following one.

On the third day, they were ready to enter the passage for the seventh layer.

They slowly crossed a wooden door that had appeared on one of the trunks and moved carefully.

On the other side of the passage, a desolate area appeared in front of them.

It was a plain with a tall mountain at its center.

There were few traces of vegetation and many holes in the terrain, it was as if someone eradicated all the plants and trees that were supposed to be there.

The mountain was devoid of any life too and there were many cavities on its sides.

They resembled small caves and there were more than three hundred of them.

However, the students sensed no trace of life at all, the layer seemed completely empty.

'Those should be nests for bird-types magical beasts but with that number, we should at least feel them even if they tried to hide.'

Noah analyzed, he had a bad feeling about that environment.

For some reason, his instincts told him that the situation was similar to Twilboia Cliff.

The students advanced cautiously, they were looking for anything that might reveal the entity of the test.

"Vance, what do you think?"

Nigel broke the silence and asked for Noah's advice.

Noah gazed at the mountain before speaking.

"It's strange. This place was clearly supposed to contain various lifeforms and I also believe that those cavities up there had to be the nests of a bird-type pack of magical beasts. However, the layer seems to be completely empty."

Nigel's eyebrow arched.

"Are you saying that they starved to death? There had to be at least one hundred peak rank 3 magical beasts here according to the increase in the difficulty."

At these words, Noah finally realized the situation they were in.

His eyes widened and he raised his head to the sky.

The sky was filled with clouds that obscured the artificial illumination of the floor.

"I think that we should retreat."

He said, slowly taking a few steps backward, his gaze never moved from the clouds in the sky.

"Why do you say that?"

Errol said frowning.

At that point though, a small black dot appeared in the clouds.

Noah shouted and turned to run in the direction of the passage.

"RANK 4!"

The eyes of the other three students widened and June immediately followed him.

Errol panicked a bit before going after Noah while Nigel shot a short glance at the sky.

In his field of view, the clouds were pure white but there was an enlarging figure nearing his position.

He hastily began to run in the direction of the sixth layer.

Yet, it was too late.

The figure slammed into him in less than a second, creating a loud thud that made the other three students turn their heads to look in its direction.

'Rank 4 Cloud eagle!'

Noah yelled in his mind.

'This specimen must have been a bit stronger than the other peak rank 3 beasts in the pack and it must have eaten them during its time in the inheritance, finally reaching the fourth rank! However, the "Breath" in the environment wasn't enough to sustain its higher rank so it devoured every lifeform remaining in the layer. For how long did it manage to survive without a proper meal?'

The Cloud eagle behind them was enormous.

With its wings unfolded, it was more than thirteen meters wide.

Its strongest characteristic was its diving speed, it could reach the ground from the sky in an instant, not giving its prey enough time to escape.

The dust created from the impact of the magical beast with the terrain settled, showing Nigel's body pierced by the three claws of the eagle.

Chapter 145 - 145. Arm

The Cloud eagle slowly flapped its wings.

It gradually distanced from the ground, staring at the three students at a few meters in the distance.

Nigel's body was firmly stuck on the claws of its right foot, he was still alive but blood flowed incessantly from his injuries.

There was only one outcome in his situation: death.

The youths understood that and hastily turned to continue their escape toward the passage to the sixth layer.

However, while he moved his gaze away from Nigel, Noah remembered something that made him curse loudly.

"Fuck!"

Noah turned but not toward the passage, he faced the rank 4 beast, looking at it with determined eyes.

He jumped ahead, black rings appeared under his feet and black smoke began to envelop him.

'Shadow steps! Demonic form!'

He activated his two spells and ran at full speed toward the beast.

Errol and June noticed his behavior but continued to run away, no matter how frustrated they were about Nigel's situation, they wouldn't risk their lives to save a dead man.

Noah gained momentum and, in a few seconds, he arrived near the eagle.

He forcefully kicked on the terrain, using all his strength to jump in the air toward the beast.

The eagle released a high-pitched whistle seeing its supremacy in the sky being challenged.

It lowered its head, ready to take on the opponent's assault.

Yet, Noah didn't aim for the head of the creature but rather for its right foot!

Noah was covered from head to toe with black smoke, his Demonic form was completely activated.

When he was at two meters away from Nigel's body, two pairs of fuming wings unfolded themselves from his back, forcefully halting his assault mid-way.

He slashed with his sabers using his most powerful technique empowered with his most powerful spell.

'First form of the Ashura!'

He didn't dare to hold anything back when he faced a rank 4 magical beast.

What he unleashed at that moment was his most powerful attack.

Nigel was conscious, his eyes widened in surprise seeing of what might Noah was actually capable of.

Hope shined in his young eyes.

Ten fuming blows struck the eagle.

It used its beak to block most of the attacks, the other ones landed on its body, they could only make some of its feathers fall.

The eagle suffered no damage at all, no matter how much the toxic smoke tried to consume its skin, it wasn't able to wound the beast.

However, one of Noah's attacks didn't aim for the creature but rather to its prey!

Nigel's expression froze when Noah cut off his right arm and hurriedly seized it.

Nigel stared at his young companion kicking the air to run away with his arm.

'He didn't even look at me.'

Those were Nigel's last thoughts.

The Cloud eagle was enraged that such a weak human managed to steal part of its prey and tightened his grip on its feet, killing Nigel on the spot.

Noah was flying away at his maximum speed.

He held one severed arm with one hand and a saber in the other one.

His four wings flapped incessantly and he kicked the air repeatedly, he was using the Shadow steps spell and Echo to perform the flight of his life!

The eagle didn't let him simply run away, it flew to chase him.

However, its speed was nothing exceptional.

It was still faster than Noah but the difference wasn't that big.

'I knew it!'

Noah cheered in his mind as he inspected the situation behind him.

'It has starved for too much time and the horizontal flight isn't the specialty of its species! Cloud eagles excel in diving speed and its poor condition allows me to almost match it in a straight flight!'

The Elbas family rose to the throne of the Ultra continent about two thousand years ago.

That meant that the previous Royal family had to set up the inheritance ground way before that moment.

Magical beasts had powerful bodies but they were still affected by the lack of nourishment.

The eagle slowly gained some ground on him but its vision became hindered by the black smoke that Noah constantly released.

It had to reduce its speed to regain sight of its target and then it accelerated again.

A massive eagle and a fiendish figure were flying in a straight line toward a small cavity in the barren terrain.

Noah traced a black fuming line in the sky as he stared at the approaching exit.

Seconds lasted like years in Noah's mind but, in the end, he entered the passage successfully with the eagle unable to even touch him.

He slammed on the walls of the corridor, he didn't dare to lower his speed for even a second during his escape.

He continued to scrape the surface of the passage until he came out in the forest of the sixth floor.

There, he continued to roll until he crashed on a large tree that stopped his momentum.

He fell on his knees and deactivated his Demonic form, the remaining smoke consumed the tree behind him.

He was breathing roughly, he had used everything he had to retrieve Nigel's right arm and to escape the beast.

Errol and June had watched the scene of him successfully leaving the seventh layer, they had escaped while he was busy with the eagle.

It was their first time seeing Noah using his full power, they had to admit that his fiendish figure had sent chills down their spines.

Errol gathered his courage and neared him.

"Vance, did you save him?"

Noah raised his head to look at the tall youth.

"How could I save Nigel? He was dead the moment he looked at the sky."

June went close to him too and asked with her brows furrowed.

"Then, what did you even do back there?"

Noah smiled and opened his right hand.

Nigel's arm had been consumed by the black smoke but the item on his finger had been tightly stored by him.

A black space-ring stood unscathed in his palm.

Chapter 146 - 146. Irregularity

It was the space-ring given by the Royal army.

It contained Nigel's share of the rewards as well as the gigantic "Breath" blessing.

It was needless to say that most of their gains from the inheritance were kept in there.

June's eyes lighted up and she smiled happily.

"You've really done it! Now our efforts in the sixth layer won't be wasted."

She kneeled next to Noah and picked the ring, inspecting it carefully.

After a few seconds, she nodded and her smile widened.

"Everything is here."

Noah finally relaxed and released a soft sigh.

He didn't have time to inspect the insides of the device since he was still stabilizing his condition.

He wasn't injured since his Demonic form had never been pierced during the encounter with the Cloud eagle but his mind still felt tired due to the effort.

He had gone all out while facing a rank 4 magical beasts after all, it was quite normal for him to desire a long and peaceful sleep.

Errol, on the other hand, didn't manage to rejoice and lowered his head to stare at the ground.

"Did you even think for a second about Nigel when you took his ring?"

Noah raised his gaze toward the tall youth, he felt that the atmosphere had become tense all of sudden.

"No, he was dead the moment that beast hit him."

"But you surely could have done something more! Don't lie to me, that power you used was at the peak of the cultivators in the first rank!"

Noah shook his head at Errol's complains.

"And yet I didn't even manage to scratch that thing, the heroic ranks are really something else. Also, didn't you run away too as soon as I gave the warning? It was Nigel's mistake that killed him and his hesitation almost lost us half of the value of our mission."

Errol was about to retort again when June stepped in the conversation.

"He is right, don't let your feelings blind you. You should be grateful that Vance managed to retrieve the rewards."

Errol trembled a bit and then he sat on the ground.

He released a loud sigh as he calmed down and took out a jar full of wine from his space-ring.

"I'm sorry Vance, I didn't mean to offend you. If I have to speak the truth, I would have never managed to jump at that creature even if there was a chance to save Nigel. I think I was angry at myself for being this weak and shifted the blame to you."

He poured the wine into three different glasses and handed them to Noah and June before raising his own in a toast.

"Please accept my apologies."

Noah raised his glass too and slightly smiled at Errol.

"Don't worry, it's fine. Actually, if it wasn't for the eagle's starved condition, I would have been the first to reach the exit."

Errol released a small laugh and emptied his glass.

June shook her head and laid on the terrain slowly sipping the wine.

Noah drank from his glass and raised his head to the sky.

'I would be lying if I said that I'm not disappointed by my performance. Rank 4 seems such a distant level.'

He had used everything in his arsenal and yet he didn't manage to leave any sign on the beast.

'I can't even face a starved bird, how could I even think about storming Balvan mansion?'

He repressed his thoughts and laid on the terrain behind him.

He knew that his growth was extraordinary already but he could not help to feel that it was still incredibly slow.

"What do we do now?"

Errol interrupted his line of thought.

"What can we do? We retreat."

June answered plainly before turning to one side and falling asleep on the ground.

Noah did the same and Errol shrugged his shoulders, finding a comfortable position too before falling asleep.

One day later, they reappeared on the top of the tower, outside the inheritance ground.

When they descended through the stairs on its sides, they were greeted by a concerned Preston.

"You stayed for three months in there, I'm eager to know how far did you go."

He then noticed that there were only three of them.

"Where is the other student?"

"Dead."

June answered the captain.

"Oh, I see. Why don't you come to my tent and explain everything in front of a warm cup of tea?"

The students immediately agreed to his offer and followed him in the biggest tent.

The encampment didn't change much during those months, the pit was a bit deeper and there seemed to be a dozen more tents but, apart from that, everything was as they remembered.

"It seems that an irregularity had happened in the seventh layer, even the previous Royal family didn't expect for a rank 3 magical beast to evolve."

Preston said after the students gave him a detailed report of the five layers that they explored.

"Don't you worry about your companion, his family will be rewarded for the honorable service that he performed. Yet, we have a problem now. It's not

easy to put together a group with at least rank 2 cultivation without involving the Royals or the powerful nobles."

The inheritance ground still hadn't started to give spells and techniques for rewards, which meant that it went way deeper than they thought.

"I believe that if it wasn't for that irregularity, we could have cleared at least two more floors."

Errol spoke with confidence but Noah was of a different opinion.

'That wasn't exactly an irregularity but the usual behavior of magical beasts. There is a high chance to meet rank 4 creatures after the seventh floor.'

Preston nodded and reviewed all the details that he annotated during their explanation.

"It seems that there isn't much that you can do here anymore, it's better for you to return to the academy. We kept notes of each one of your courses so that you won't fall behind in your instruction. I will notify the academy, a carriage should arrive in two weeks. Just leave your space-rings here and feel free to act as you wish in the perimeter of the formation."

Noah's eyes lit up listening to the captain words and a shameless smile appeared on his face.

"You know captain, I think that I have an idea to better use our time here. It will also greatly benefit your troop."

Chapter 147 - 147. Guarding

Noah moved toward an empty area of the encampment.

"So, what is your bright idea?"

Preston followed him with June and Errol at his sides.

Noah looked around and nodded in satisfaction.

"Captain, there should be around fifty soldiers in your troop, am I right?"

Preston answered with a confused expression.

"Well, yes. Fifty-three to be precise."

Noah continued.

"And I believe that the items from the inheritance ground will stay with you until the envoy from the Royal family arrives, right?"

"That is true."

June and Errol were already shaking their heads since they understood Noah's intentions.

Noah made a gesture and the "Breath" blessing inside Nigel's space-ring materialized on the ground.

Its appearance attracted the attention of the entire camp since the density of the "Breath" instantly increased by one-fold.

Preston's mouth was hanging on his jaw, he still hadn't inspected the goods that the students retrieved and he was quite shocked to see such a precious mineral in that gigantic shape.

"I thought that it would have been a complete waste to keep such a miraculous resource hidden in a space-ring, you and your soldiers should at least make use of it until the Royal family arrives."

Preston came back to reality hearing his words.

"N-no! That's the personal propriety of the Royal dynasty! We can't."

However, his eyes fell continuously on the blue mineral as if they were captivated by it.

Noah went next to him with a bright smile on his face.

"But we are doing this for the Royal dynasty! Making their soldiers stronger will increase the stability of their dominion. Don't you want to protect them? What if a day comes when you are too weak to fight their enemies? Also, we aren't doing anything that endangers the item, we are simply storing it in an open field."

Preston moved his gaze from Noah back to the "Breath" blessing.

"Storing it in an open field you say..."

He mumbled for a few more seconds and then a smile broke his stern expression.

"Right! We are simply keeping it here for, ehm, safety! The space-rings are not safe anymore during these dangerous times, I should guard this precious item personally!"

Noah coughed lightly at his side, interrupting the captain's speech.

Preston turned and saw that all his soldiers were staring at the mineral with eager expressions.

Noah helped him in his delusion, answering to his previous words.

"Captain, I think that this stone is too precious for you to single-handedly protect it. I can't rest well thinking that you are all alone out here. Nevertheless, don't worry, I will stay with you the whole time!"

Noah made an ample gesture and turned to the other soldiers, subtly winking at them.

Some of them understood the meaning behind his signal and hurriedly made a military salute, joining Noah in his promise.

"Captain, I will not leave you alone!"

"Neither I will allow my mighty captain to endure this burden alone!"

Little by little, all the soldiers understood what was happening and swore to "protect" the "Breath" blessing.

June shook her head as she neared Noah.

"Couldn't you simply do all of this inside the captain tent?"

Noah smirked and lowered his voice to answer her.

"In that case, it would have been my idea. Now, it's Preston's one, the Royals can't use our time spent like this as an excuse to lower our rewards."

June's eyes widened seeing how much planning Noah went through to exploit that situation.

"You are actually this evil."

Noah snorted.

"You can't always rely on violence to obtain something, not at our level at least."

June wanted to argue but found his explanation reasonable.

"Since everyone is so faithful to the Royal family, we can start immediately our protection of their goods!"

Preston shouted, interrupting their conversation.

The soldiers cheered and neared the "Breath" blessing on the ground but noticed that Noah was already sitting in one of the closest spots available.

They wanted to retort but their captain did the same, followed by June and Errol.

A messy scene unfolded as the soldiers pushed away one another to secure a spot in the nearest positions.

In about ten minutes, the commotion settled and all the cultivators in the camp were silently meditating in front of the blue stone.

Two weeks passed like that.

Everyone was so engrossed in their cultivation in such a favorable environment that they totally forgot to check if there were news from the Royal city.

On the night of the fifteenth day, a loud shout woke them up from their meditation.

"What the fuck are you even doing!?"

Everyone turned to see a woman in a golden armor staring at them with an angry expression.

Preston immediately stood up and performed a deep bow.

"Her Majesty Lisa! I wasn't informed about your visit, what a pleasant surprise!"

All the other soldiers stood up and greeted the woman from the Elbas family.

'She is Thaddeus sister, the one that led the other batch of students from our class.'

Noah recognized her from behind the guards and cautiously sneaked to the borders of the group.

Lisa yelled again.

"Of course, you didn't know! You didn't contact us for two whole weeks, we were afraid that one of the nearby countries had found this place. However, the formation wasn't broken so we excluded that possibility. So, what exactly were you doing?"

Preston recognized his mistake and performed another bow.

"I'm deeply sorry! We..."

His voice softened as he continued.

"...were guarding this precious "Breath" blessing."

Even as he said those words, he realized how unreal they were.

Lisa stood speechless for a while before shaking her head.

"Never mind, just hurry up and gather the items that I have to bring back to the Royal city. Also, I will bring the students with me, I will stop at the academy along the way."

"Everything will be done immediately!"

Preston turned to his side but noticed that Noah had disappeared from his position and was already slowly moving toward Lisa from the borders of the group.

He arrived in front of her and bowed.

"And what happened to you?"

Lisa spoke, staring at the youth.

Noah had large eyebags and an incredibly pale complexion, his eyes were red and he seemed to be malnourished.

"Oh, don't you worry, Her Majesty, I'm just a bit tired from the hard trials of the inheritance."

The soldiers that heard his words wanted to curse him loudly but refrained to do so due to Lisa's presence.

Since those weeks were probably the last time in which Noah could have had access to the miraculous mineral, he went all out in his training sessions, even resorting to potions to keep himself awake and in a normal condition to maximize his training schedule.

Chapter 148 - 148. Unfilial disciple

Noah used the first week of the trip back to the academy to rest, he had to stabilize his condition again.

Increasing one's strength so rapidly was quite dangerous.

The dantian was an organ after all, too much stress on it could ultimately lead to an injury.

The same went for the sea of consciousness, the mental sphere had to be enlarged gradually or there would be the risk of breaking it.

Noah sat on one couch inside the carriage escorting him back to the academy, he was calmly analyzing the condition of his body.

'My dantian has completely recovered, there is no danger in resuming my previous training rhythm. My accumulated stress also has disappeared, it seems that the constant battles that we underwent in the inheritance ground helped my mental sphere quite a bit.'

Overall, they had been away from the academy for four months while his actual time spent training his dantian and body was equal to six months in his accommodation.

'Two months gained while my mind has still slightly enlarged due to the "Breath" in my sea of consciousness. I almost don't feel any pressure at all from Echo these days, I wonder if I can create another blood companion.'

He thought for a while before tossing that idea away.

'Right now, I should just focus on increasing the level of all my centers of power. I should also start to absorb again "Breath" in my sea of consciousness, I'm quite eager to test some of the forgings of my inscription method.'

He slowly opened his eyes, confirming his plans for the near future.

'With the rewards for this mission I will finally be able to buy some spells that don't have a limitation in their rank and I will be also able to use the facilities of the academy for a while. The first to break through should be my mind, followed by my dantian and body. I just need to quietly cultivate.'

"Have you recovered enough to give me your version of the events in the inheritance ground?"

Lisa spoke to him wearing a slight smile.

She couldn't be in the open since she would be too eye-catching so she had stayed in the carriage with the other three students the whole time.

Noah nodded, putting a stern expression.

"I believe that my companions have already covered every detail of our mission."

Lisa laid her back on the carriage while putting a hand below her chin.

"Vance, right? My brother has spoken to me about you. Did you reach the solid stage already?"

Noah didn't dare to lie to her as Thaddeus had made clear that the intelligence of the Royal family surpassed the common sense.

"Yes, I did a few months ago."

"And how old are you exactly?"

"Sixteen years and six months."

Errol and June's eyes widened but they remained silent.

According to the standards of the cultivation world, a human would acquire his dantian at the age of fifteen.

However, in the academy, there were only talents, virtually each of its students had obtained a dantian before that age.

Even so, the usual age in which cultivators reached the solid stage was when they were seventeen or more.

It wasn't a matter that concerned talent, they simply didn't have enough time to cultivate till that level.

June, for example, was seventeen and she had broken through the solid stage during the month that they spent cultivating in the sixth layer.

She had actually spent less time than Noah to reach that stage but he had obtained his dantian at an incredible age.

After all, how many people in the world could obtain a rank 3 body and a rank 1 mental sphere before the age of fourteen?

"That is indeed a great achievement. If you and Daniel were of the same age, you would have surpassed him."

Errol joined the conversation, intrigued by Lisa's words.

"Is it possible to know Daniel's level?"

Lisa waved her hand and answered as if it was a small matter.

"He broke through the first rank and successfully became a rank 2 cultivator. His status as a student was removed and he joined Professor Wanda Hamman in the alchemy division of the academy. This all happened in this years' tests, it should have caused quite a commotion in the academy."

'Oh right, the tests for my courses.'

Noah remembered that detail about his enrollment.

Lisa seemed to understand his thoughts and reassured the students.

"Don't worry about those. You all did an excellent job in the Royal inheritance so you are exempted from them, not that I believe that any of you would have failed."

The students relaxed and continued to look at Lisa, there was still another question that required her explanation.

"You will get your rewards from Thaddeus after the total value of what you retrieved is estimated. He will contact you himself so you can just go back to your normal lifestyles."

Having cleared their last doubt, silence occupied the carriage.

Lisa didn't seem like she wanted to speak anymore so the students began to spend their remaining time in the carriage as they wanted.

Noah resumed his usual training schedule, causing June to imitate him.

Errol simply laid on his couch, Lisa's presence didn't allow him to reach the relaxed state needed to train.

Lisa slept most of the time, she was so silent that it almost seemed that she was only closing her eyes.

In the end, another week passed and the carriage reached Arolyac forest.

Lisa left the students at the borders of the forest and continued toward the Royal city while they went on their way back to the academy ground.

They arrived at the small mountain and Errol pressed his token on the terrain, opening a passage.

After so much time, they had finally returned!

"I think I will rest for a few days and then resume my courses. See you around, friends."

Errol was eager to return to his lodging and separated from the group.

June and Noah slowly walked on the right side of the river.

They reached June's accommodation first and she silently opened its door.

Before entering though, she turned to look at Noah and spoke with a plain voice.

"You look older than your age."

After that, she entered her place and closed the door behind her.

Noah shook his head and resumed his walk toward his lodging.

Considering her character, the meaning behind her words was something battle-related, he didn't bother to think too much about them.

'I feel like I'm forgetting something though.'

As he opened the door of his accommodation, an awful smell assaulted him, accompanied by a loud lament.

"You unfilial disciple, you actually left me to suffer all this time!"

Chapter 149 - 149. Convocation

'Oh right, I only gave him enough money for two months of wine.'

Noah looked at the pitiful state in which Ivor was.

He had returned to his previous smelly and ragged figure and tens of empty jars were left all around the floor.

Noah picked a thousand Credits and casually threw them to him.

"Go to the alchemy division and buy some wine, money shouldn't be a problem from now on."

Just the amount that he had seized from the rewards amounted to ten thousand Credits, Ivor's expenses could be covered for two years with those.

Seeing that he was about to complain more, Noah revealed him something to placate his mood.

"You might want to know that I've decided to accumulate "Breath" again in my sea of consciousness."

Noah knew that even if Ivor didn't pressure him, he had a lot of expectations regarding his improvements in the Elemental forging method.

Ivor's eyes lit up and regained some focus.

"Are you sure? Is the internal pressure gone?"

Noah shook his head.

"Not completely but I'm quite certain that it can store at least twice the amount of "Breath" that I currently have."

Ivor nodded and straightened his position.

"Wonderful! That will also speed up your mental sphere's growth. I will buy the wine, you just do what you have to."

Ivor exited the lodging, leaving Noah alone.

He gathered all the trash and threw it away from his house, the cleaning services of the academy would take care of that in the night.

He took a bath and calmly focused on his sea of consciousness.

His ethereal figure crossed the matter of the sphere and acted as a bridge where the "Breath" could pass through.

The vortex on his figure's hands was small, attracting only small quantities of black gas every time.

Noah suppressed and refined each of the minute strands of "Breath", stopping his absorption each time.

The consumption of mental energy was higher since he had to refine the "Breath" multiple times but he preferred that method.

Even if it was more time-consuming, it was way safer than the reckless storage of a single and bigger quantity of "Breath".

That method was noted in one of Ivor's books, it was way slower than the normal approach but Noah didn't mind it.

As the "Breath" entered his sea of consciousness, it would be assaulted by the crystalline mental energy, making it harmless and mixing with its substance.

Small dark-blue balls formed in his mental sphere that gradually joined the bigger one that was already present inside it.

Little by little, the quantity of "Breath" in Noah's sea of consciousness doubled in size.

At that point, Noah stopped the absorption process.

It still wasn't his limit but he chose to leave some room for unexpected events and in order to maintain an almost normal state.

After all, the internal pressure increased by a lot, making Noah's headache return.

Yet, the pain wasn't enough to hinder his cultivation.

'This will be my normal state from now on, it should maximize my improvements till I become a rank 2 mage.'

He opened his eyes and found Ivor sonorously snoring in one corner of the room, there were more than three empty jars on his sides.

'He will probably need more money tomorrow. Well, until Thaddeus summons me, I can just resume my normal routine.'

The absorption process had taken him a few hours, it was already night.

His mental energy was expended though so he chose to simply sleep instead of cultivating for the rest of the night.

In the morning, he visited the management building to obtain the new calendar of his courses.

Since it was his second year in the academy, his courses became more specific and profound in their teachings.

The course regarding magical beasts would start to analyze the body-parts of each creature, underlying their proprieties and usage.

The real combat course would focus less on the one versus one battle and explore the many formations used by the Royal army, allowing its students to take part in missions requiring a group.

The general cultivation course would begin to study the creations of spells and techniques, exploring the achievements in that field done by preceding cultivators.

They were also shifted to the afternoon hours instead of the morning ones, leading Noah to modify his training schedule.

The environment of the academy was peaceful and Noah slowly improved his strength and his knowledge.

It had to pass a month for Thaddeus' convocation to arrive.

Noah walked in the left area of the academy, he had received a warning through his token with the required indication to reach the appointed place.

He arrived at a tall building and saw that June and Errol were already waiting in front of its entrance.

"Vance! I didn't expect you would be late."

Errol greeted him with a smile on his face.

"I was busy cultivating, I noticed the token warning only a few minutes ago."

Noah replied honestly, there was no need to lie to someone that has seen his full strength.

"I will enter first, then Errol, and lastly you, it's based on our timing in arriving here."

June spoke calmly and Noah simply shrugged his shoulders, he had done most of his training that day, he only needed to rest.

After a few minutes, the door opened and June entered the building.

She came out a while later with a bright smile on her face.

"That good?"

Noah asked, seeing her unusual expression.

She nodded repeatedly.

"It seems that Professor Megan Iccok noticed my character and was interested in taking me as her apprentice."

Noah remembered the first time that he saw that woman in Arolyac forest and could not help but find similarities with June's nature.

"Now that I think about it, she is quite wild, just like you."

June's eyes narrowed.

"What that supposed to be a compliment?"

"I don't really know, I think that's just the truth."

Errol laughed loudly seeing their usual bickering and entered the building.

June went to greet her new master while Noah waited patiently for his turn to come.

Errol exited almost immediately, he was wearing a bright smile too.

"It seems that I might receive a position as a captain in the Royal army as soon as my strength reaches the necessary requirements."

He then patted Noah's shoulder and went on his way.

Chapter 150 - 150. Hindered

Noah entered the building right after Errol left.

"This way."

Thaddeus spoke, appearing on top of the stairs leading to the first floor.

Noah hastened his steps and followed him.

They passed many closed rooms and Noah's gaze lingered on one of them that had a transparent glass that occupied half of its door.

Inside, Ruth was meditating in an environment full of runes.

That action seemed to demand her full concentration as her brows were furrowed and sweat ran down her forehead.

"My disciple is training. Even if she is born with the natural talent of hearing the "Breath", she still has a lot of work to do before she will be able to perform her first inscription."

Noah moved his gaze away from the room and continued to follow Thaddeus until they were in one of the last rooms of the corridor.

Thaddeus sat behind a large and carefully adorned desk and gestured to Noah to occupy one of the couches in front of him.

"I read the reports from my sister and Preston and, well, I actually asked June to confirm them. I really couldn't believe that you faced a rank 4 beast only to retrieve part of the rewards."

Noah answered shrugging his shoulders.

"That eagle was heavily malnourished and had already attacked, the odds of succeeding were high. Also, my share would have diminished if I had left the "Breath" blessing with that creature."

Thaddeus joined his hands below his chin, he was slightly amazed by Noah's foolishness.

"It would have diminished by a lot indeed. Here, you can take everything that this device contains."

Thaddeus handed a black ring to Noah.

Noah took it and was quite astonished by the number of Credits inside.

"Since the most valuable item of the mission would have been lost if it wasn't for you, I raised your percentage to four percent. I hope you won't think that the Royals are the same as those blind and petty nobles."

Noah nodded absent-mindedly, he was still counting the amount of wealth contained in the ring.

'Seven hundred thousand Credits! I can finally take a look at the inventory again.'

He moved all the contents in his empty storage device and handed the black ring back to Thaddeus.

"Now, for the privileged position. I have a lot of empty spots available but I have sorted those that seemed more suited for your talents. You are free to take a look."

He laid two piles of sheets on his desk.

Noah took the bigger one first.

It wasn't to disrespect Thaddeus' opinion but simply to have a broader vision of the various professions in the Royal city.

'Alchemy assistant, city guard, miner of precious material... They basically cover every existent profession and there is a discount over the relative products of the executed job.'

He read through them quickly, there was nothing that attracted his attention nor that seemed especially suited for him.

He picked the other sheets, there were only five of them.

'Hunters' guild member, captain in the junior city troops, escort guard, soldier, and martial art trainer. These are indeed all made for me.'

"Is the position of the hunter really that privileged?"

"Almost every valuable item is made using magical beasts' body-parts. I say that having a discount over all those articles is pretty privileged."

Thaddeus laughed lightly as he answered to Noah's question.

'This one should also be less strict as a profession, I don't really want to involve myself with the struggles of the army.'

"Hunter it is."

"You really don't want to join the army, as expected."

Thaddeus commented and began his explanation.

"A token will be sent to your accommodation. When you have time, go to Elbas city and formally join the guild. I advise to increase your strength first though, you won't benefit much from it if you can only hunt rank 3 beasts."

"Can I join whenever I want?"

Noah asked in surprise.

"Of course. Your main focus has to be on your studies. You can even wait till the end of your enrollment here before moving to the Royal city."

Thaddeus took the sheet and stored it with him.

"Give me your token, I think that three thousand merit points are plenty enough as a reward for your services inside the inheritance ground."

Noah didn't hesitate and happily handed his token to him.

When he took it back, it clearly stated that he had three thousand and twenty merit points available.

Noah was about to bow in order to leave the building but Thaddeus' next words made him stop moving.

"I think that you would be happy to know that we are hindering the investigations of the Balvan family."

Noah's eyes became dark and Rhys's face materialized in his mind.

"Are they still looking for clues?"

Thaddeus smiled staring at the youth standing in front of him.

"Yes, they even sent letters to the Royal city requesting an investigator specialized in inscriptions. Can you blame them though? They lost the best cultivators of the younger generation in that accident, without considering the three heirs. Their future prospects are quite grim."

Noah's expression remained still as he continued to ask questions.

"How much do they know?"

"Not much. They have their suspects that someone betrayed them since the Shosti inheritance ground has never been that deadly but nothing is pointing in your direction. There is a matter about a space-ring being forced open in Evergreen forest but they only discovered that after the Shosti family allowed them to use their inscription master or, to say it better, after the Royal family allowed them to do so."

"Why are you doing so much for me?"

Noah wasn't that naïve to think that they had done that out of good-will.

"You are a potential asset, a valuable one I'd say. Not only you have a rare element, but we also don't need to force you to sever your noble ties. Also, almost all the cultivators that can face a rank 4 beast have sworn an oath with the Royal dynasty or are close to the most powerful noble families. You are our biggest investment concerning the Royal inheritance."

Noah nodded in understanding.

"Who is the Balvan's biggest suspect?"

"According to our reports, they are looking for a wind mage that uses a sword. Do you know of someone that fits that description?"

'They are looking for Trevor! It makes sense. In their minds, I didn't have the power to kill them all and escape.'

"Not of anyone alive."

Thaddeus nodded, showing a bright smile.

"That's for the best. You should just focus on becoming stronger and continue clearing the Royal inheritance. It's a win-win situation after all, both of us will greatly benefit from it."