

Chapter 211 - 211. Trumpeting

Recognizing the danger before it was too late was one of the key aspects of survival.

Hunters generally relied on reports and on their senses to understand if an area was too dangerous or if a pack had rank 4 magical beasts among them.

That's why many of them just ignored the study of traces or weren't adept in that field, the senses of a cultivator were generally enough to recognize beings of such might.

Yet, having more information could only be considered an advantage, no matter how small it was.

"This is indeed surprising, I had to hunt in this area for a month before becoming able to recognize the rank of those beasts by their footprints. The academy is worthy of its fame."

Ada praised before continuing with her questions.

"And, what do you think will it be the best approach against them?"

Noah's answer came immediately.

"In their reduced size, they are too dangerous because they can maintain the same strength behind each attack while removing the weakness of their huge frame. The only way to make them return to their normal shape is to kill each weaker beast in their pack. They will then instinctively feel the need to attract other similar magical beasts and would return to their original form to do it. Yet, that means that someone has to deal with the rank 4 elephant at full strength while the others vanquish the rest of the pack."

The other hunters nodded at his explanation, that was precisely the method that they intended to use.

Kurt stepped forth and proudly patted his chest.

"You have the necessary knowledge to be of use. Now, let's find the pack so that we can reassure you of our strength."

The hunters resumed their march in the grassland.

There were no trees, only short bushes, so their field of view was particularly clear.

Ada became more friendly with Noah once she understood that he could give a second opinion to her guesses and they often exchanged thoughts on the magical beasts' topic as they followed the tracks left by the pack.

Then, in about half a day of walk, they finally met their target.

At a few hundred meters in the distance, fourteen gray elephants calmly walked over the plain.

The biggest of them was about two meters tall while some of them were so short that the grass almost hid them.

"The big one is the weakest of the pack, the rank 4 should be hidden in the grass thanks to its small size."

Ada nodded at Noah's words and softly patted his shoulder.

"You stay here, we will take care of them."

Noah nodded and could not help but feel a bit of excitement growing inside of him.

He was about to see cultivators actively fight a rank 4 creature!

Until then, he had always been forced to run away when he met one of them and the only time he had seen one of them die was inside Twilboia Cliff.

Also, if they managed to win, he could use the Blood drain spell to inflict the finishing blow!

'I bet that the nourishment from a rank 4 beasts will help me a lot in shortening the time required for my breakthrough! The wind mage's blood had been enough to heal all my injuries and still increase my strength and he was only a human!'

The bodies of the magical beasts were far stronger than the human's ones, the nourishment that they could give had to be undoubtedly higher.

That was the main reason why Noah accepted Kurt's offer.

After all, his killing spree of rank 3 creatures was caused by his need for nourishment.

If he could obtain it from rank 4 creatures without being endangered, then he would gladly stop hunting the weaker beasts.

"Let's go."

Kurt gave the order and six figures shot out at high speed toward the pack.

There were fourteen visible beasts to kill in order to make the rank 4 beast return to its normal size.

Time was key.

In just a few seconds, the hunters arrived at the pack and launched attacks that had a wide area of destruction.

Kurt wielded a big hammer that slammed on the terrain and created a shockwave that made three elephants directly explode!

Ada and Ella created two fire snakes that reduced to ashes five elephants in a few instants.

Newton rotated his two meters long metal stick that slammed precisely on the heads of three other elephants, making them explode due to the impact.

Hazel threw eight black needles that accelerated mid-air and pierced two beasts in the middle of their eyes, killing them on the spot.

Vic swung his sword and severed the head of the last visible beast, the pack was vanquished in just one move of the hunters.

However, Noah wasn't surprised in the slightest.

He could accomplish something similar alone with his rank 3 body, how could six cultivators with rank 4 bodies be any weaker?

'The real battle starts now.'

The last elephant was less than thirty centimeters tall and was hidden under the yellow grass of the plain.

Its feet were partially inside the terrain, it seemed that the surface of the ground wasn't able to sustain its weight.

As the last member of its pack was killed, it felt the urge to create a new one.

Yet, its size didn't allow for it to be noticed so it instinctively chose to return to its normal size.

It raised its trunk to the sky and trumpeted angrily!

The sound was too strong and created a shockwave that sent back the hunters around it.

Meanwhile, the body of the beast enlarged.

From thirty centimeters to one meter.

From one meter to two meters.

It stopped only when it reached a height of six meters!

Its true form was revealed and it stood like a small boulder in the middle of the plain.

'Rank 4 Shrinking elephant! Its tusks are almost indestructible for cultivators in the human ranks and it can release sound attacks with its trunk! It is slow but its charges are almost unstoppable due to the size of its body and its skin is hard, giving it one of the best defenses among magical beasts. Can they really kill it?'

Noah thought, reviewing the information about that creature in his mind.

Kurt and the others had by then recovered from the shockwave and encircled the beast.

The battle was about to begin!

Chapter 212 - 212. Kneeling

Six cultivators encircled the huge beast.

The sound attack that the elephant had unleashed was only able to push them back and could not cause any injury.

From his position at a few hundreds of meters away from the battle, Noah could guess the might of that attack.

'My eardrums would have exploded if I was there and the specialty of the Shrinking elephants is their strong body, the sound attacks are just a casual move. A rank 4 body is the minimum requirement to walk on this world.'

After that realization, his eagerness to increase his strength was even more powerful.

'I wonder how will they deal with it. Exhaustion?'

Since the hunters were only rank 2 cultivators, they didn't have attacks powerful enough to kill the beast in a few blows, a prolonged fight was obvious.

Once he had those thoughts though, the battle began.

Kurt jumped at the elephant and slammed his hammer on the head of the beast.

He was fast and the frame of the creature didn't allow it to avoid the blow, the hammer landed on its head and created a loud shockwave that resounded through the plain.

The elephant seemed to slightly suffer from the attack since it lowered its head due to the force of the impact, yet its eyes never closed, they remained fixed on the burly man that dared to challenge it in a physical fight.

It trumpeted again and forcefully swung its trunk toward Kurt.

The trunk was fast and heavy, the skin over it was as hard as steel, that body part was one of the best materials to create inscribed whips!

Kurt could not avoid the attack from his mid-air position and was hit on his ribs.

The power behind the blow was immense, it flung Kurt at tens of meters of distance, slamming him on the ground where he created a pit with the impact.

Kurt's attack could only make the beast budge a little while the elephant could thrash away the cultivator with just one strike!

The difference in strength was incredible!

As soon as Kurt was sent flying, attacks rained on the elephant, the other hunters weren't there just for show.

Two fire snakes coiled around the front legs of the beast, scorching the skin on them and hindering its movements.

Newton took Kurt's position and dealt with the head of the beast, repeatedly slamming his stick on it to prevent it from attacking.

Hazel and Vic managed the rear side, furiously attacking the joints of the elephant with piercing blows that cut its skin and made it bleed.

Under the full offensive of five cultivators, the rank 4 creature was forced to stay still and deal with the attackers.

It swung its head madly, using its tusks and trunk to pressure Newton.

However, Newton was experienced and showed an incredible dexterity when he swung his weapon.

His stick seemed to release explosions every time it clashed with the beast's body, slowing the elephant in its struggles to escape the encirclement.

Yet, he alone wasn't enough to hold the beast still, he was slowly being pushed back after each clash.

At that moment, Kurt rose from the pit that he had created.

There was a big bruise on his torso and traces of blood were present on the sides of his mouth, yet his eyes shone with the fire of passion, he seemed really excited to fight such a strong beast.

'Don't tell me that he is also a maniac?'

That detail couldn't escape Noah's observation, he was carefully inspecting everything that was happening in front of him after all.

Kurt shot toward the creature, forty meters were crossed in an instant and he jumped again when he was close enough with the elephant.

His hammer found again the head of the beast but there was no retaliation from its side at that time.

Under the joint assault of all six of them, the rank 4 beast could no longer attack and was forced in a passive state, continuously suffering injuries over time.

It couldn't be helped, the hunters were using their stronger methods and good teamwork to deal with each side of the elephant.

Kurt and Newton managed the front side, unleashing strong blows empowered with their respective spells.

The two sisters, Ada and Ella, were restricting its movements, using their spells to continuously burn the legs of the beast.

Hazel and Vic were weaker than the others, but Hazel could easily pierce its skin with her weapons and her spells allowed her attacks to stab deeply in the beast's flesh.

Vic struggled to inflict some serious damage but he never slowed his offensive, even if he could not be as incisive as his companions, he did his best to hinder the beast's retreat.

Little by little, wounds accumulated on the body of the elephant, it seemed that it wouldn't take long for the battle to end.

Nevertheless, all living beings had an innate survival instinct.

The Shrinking elephant knew that if it remained in that situation, it would ultimately die.

It decided that it had to escape.

"It's going to charge!"

Ada shouted seeing that the elephant was gathering its strength on its legs.

An even stronger cry sounded in the plain, signaling the will to survive of the beast.

The ground trembled and the hunters had to momentarily stop their offensive to endure the sound attack.

In that moment of silence, the elephant charged ahead, its heavy steps shook the terrain and created deep holes in the ground.

Yet, Newton and Kurt were still in front of it, they had to be removed if the beast wanted to escape.

Newton and Kurt were in that position not only because their abilities were suited for close combat but also because they were the strongest of the six!

Newton slammed on the terrain as the beast became closer

The ground morphed and small golems rose from the ground to slow down the charge of the elephant.

As the elephant destroyed them in its advance, the golems exploded and released a torrent of sharp rocks on the beast, further injuring its flesh.

Kurt jumped again and his hammer shone as it slammed for the third time on the beast's head.

That last strike finally stopped the charge, the beast could not withstand that blow and crashed on the ground, kneeling in front of the hunters!

Chapter 213 - 213. Unorthodox

Another wave of attacks crashed on the Shrinking elephant once it was on the ground, when dealing with a rank 4 creature, it was better not to take any chance.

The magical beast was laying on the ground, its skin was torn everywhere and its gray flesh sprouted blood on the terrain.

Newton and Kurt hit repeatedly its head for a while before they stopped seeing that life was abandoning it.

"Vance, it's safe now!"

Kurt shouted seeing that the elephant was about to die.

Noah didn't hesitate and ran at full speed toward the battlefield.

He had come prepared: he was wearing a black robe that featured long and large sleeves that completely hid his hands.

That allowed him to perform the Blood drain spell as he ran without being noticed by the others in his group.

"Turn."

Noah ordered once he arrived next to Kurt.

Snorts could be heard coming from some of the hunters, yet, under Kurt's admonishing gaze, they all turned and left Noah alone with the beast.

Only when he was sure that each of them went to gather the bodies of the other beasts did Noah stabbed his already morphed claws into the beast's flesh.

One hand went for the uncovered flesh while the other tried to pierce the remaining skin of the beast.

However, the second hand didn't succeed in overcoming the natural defense of the beast and Noah was forced to stab it in another uncovered spot.

'The Blood drain spell heavily depends on the strength of my body. It seems that my physical strength is still not enough to hurt rank 4 beasts.'

He thought before being amazed by the immense quantity of vitality that entered his body.

'What the...'

The demonic claws began to absorb the blood of the beast as soon as they came in contact with its flesh.

Noah was prepared for that, yet he couldn't help but be surprised when he realized the amount of power contained in just a single beast.

He had used his spell on a cultivator with a rank 4 body after all!

Even if Abel's blood could almost instantly heal his injuries and still have power left to empower his body, it was still far away from what he was feeling now.

'This is incredible!'

His claws absorbed blood nonstop, accumulating the energy that it contained on Noah's back, right below his acupoints.

He had by then become used to the spell, he had killed more than five hundred rank 3 magical beasts with it after all!

'Just this surpasses the "Breath" given by fifty rank 3 magical beasts and it's still going!'

Life slowly abandoned the Shrinking elephant so Noah focused more on the spell to accelerate the absorption process.

Yet, in less than a minute, the beast exhaled its last breath and died.

At that point, the blood lost all its vitality and became devoid of nourishment, forcing an unwilling Noah to stop his spell.

A rank 4 magical beast had died right in front of him but his mind couldn't be bothered with that thought.

He was still internally calculating the amount of nourishment that he had obtained using rank 3 beasts as a unit of measure.

'Two hundred rank 3 magical beasts in just one hunt... In a few days, I have obtained the same results of two months of slaughter.'

The "Breath" that he had just absorbed had to be refined through his body-nourishing method to be used but just its sheer quantity was enough to make Noah gasp in surprise!

Magical beasts could absorb the "Breath" of any element to increase their strength while cultivators had to use the one required by their nourishing method or they would harm themselves.

'This is way faster than what I did in the past months, obtaining a rank 4 body before I turn twenty has never been more feasible.'

The problem with hunting in low-danger zones was that the number of rank 3 magical beasts was low.

Noah had to travel a lot to reach different hunting zone to accumulate all his killings, which was quite inefficient.

Sadly, those zones had only a few dozen magical beasts, leading to even less rank 3 specimens, only danger zones had hundreds rank 3 creatures in them.

"Hey, kid, are you done?"

Newton asked from his position at some distance away, making Noah come back to reality.

"Yes, you can take the body now."

The hunters turned and were a bit surprised by the state of the corpse.

Noah didn't manage to absorb all its blood before it died but it was still in a dried state.

"You know, a few centuries ago these demonic techniques were banished. Yet, the Royals discovered that it was easier to control their practitioners if they didn't hunt down each of them."

Hazel commented, linking the state of the corpse to an unorthodox cultivation technique.

Unorthodox techniques were also called demonic techniques.

Differently from the orthodox ones that used the natural "Breath" of the world to function and emphasized stability, the demonic ones worked through extreme exercises.

Noah had practiced in one of them in his youth, namely the Forging of Seven Hells.

They usually involved sacrifices and dangerous treatments but they also gave fast results.

Seeing that Noah had absorbed part of the blood of the creature, Hazel could not help but guess that Noah cultivated in one of those techniques.

"Your martial art should be the same, right? Those needles of yours seem more the art of an assassin rather than a hunter. Don't worry though, my technique doesn't function with human's blood, that's why the academy accepted me even after discovering it."

Noah blatantly lied to cover his aptitude.

An unorthodox technique would explain his fast improvements and also his relentless hunts, he didn't mind giving some random information about it.

As long as he obtained a rank 4 body while keeping his aptitude a secret, he would gladly create the fake story of a cultivation technique requiring beasts' blood.

"That's right, you sure have good eyes for these things. I have to refine my weapons in quite a peculiar way to use my martial art. It's a bother sometimes but the effects are good."

Noah nodded at her words but his eyes fell again on the corpse of the elephant, he felt some eagerness toward his next hunt.

"So, will you stop going into low-danger zones and join our hunting group?"

Kurt asked, arriving next to him and putting the rank 4 magical beast in his space-ring.

"As long as my conditions are respected, I don't see why not."

Chapter 214 - 214. Illegitimate

Rank 4 magical beasts' bodies were valued thousands of Credits.

Each of their body parts was a rank 4 material and the market of the Royal city could never have enough of them.

The main reason was that those materials were rare: there weren't many cultivators able to fight those beasts, and those that could weren't willing to spend their lives as hunters.

Most of the supplies of rank 4 materials came from the cleaning operations of the Royal army but those missions were linked to the personal benefits of the Royals, they weren't aimed to gather the materials needed for the various professions in the capital.

Only the Hunter's guild would accept to hunt specific magical beasts if the right price was added to the value of their targets.

The Shrinking elephant, or more precisely its tusks and trunk, were needed by the guild of the inscription masters.

They were the best materials for the creation of strong inscribed weapons that suited their characteristics, like spears and whips.

Its bones were also sturdy and its skin tough, many inscribed items in the second or even third rank could be created with them.

Noah later learned that the hunt for the pack of elephants had been given priority because the guild of the inscription masters had paid twenty thousand Credits in advance.

Adding that sum to thirty-five thousand Credits, which was the value of the rank 4 specimen, that single expedition had been worth fifty-five thousand Credits!

However, Noah didn't care about his gains in the slightest, what he was interested in was when he could use the Blood drain spell again on a rank 4 beast.

"First, we need to return to the capital and rest. Kurt needs time to heal and we have to carefully plan our next mission. With just the six of us, we can only handle two rank 4 magical beasts at the same time. Now that we have to make you inflict the finishing blow though, that number is halved."

Ada answered Noah who questioned her about their next target.

"Oh right, why did he charge alone at the beginning of the fight? Wasn't it better to just fight the beast altogether from the start?"

Ada made an embarrassed smile after listening to Noah's words and thought for a bit before giving an answer.

"Well, we have an unspoken rule in our group: if Kurt can endure it, we can kill it. I know that it seems stupid and reckless but Kurt's body is really hard to pierce. If a magical beast can heavily injure him with just one attack then we don't have any chance of defeating it."

Noah's eyes widened after hearing the reason behind that reckless action.

'How did they managed to survive till now?'

He couldn't help but have that doubt.

"I heard that Kurt's body-nourishing technique allows him to become stronger as he takes damage, that's why he always takes one hit from the beasts."

Vic joined the conversation and spoke in a soft voice.

'Increase in power based on the damage taken? With that requirement, the effects should be particularly good.'

Noah had somewhat tested Kurt's natural defenses and had to admit that it definitely wasn't a common body-nourishing technique.

Yet, if it had that other ability too, the technique would be considered among the best ones that weren't restricted to an element.

"How did he obtain something like that? Is there a place where one can buy techniques on that level?"

Noah asked, if there was some specific place in the Royal city where he could inspect new techniques, he would gladly visit it.

"This guy..."

Newton began to speak while patting Kurt's shoulder.

"Is an illegitimate Royal child. His dad gives him cultivation resources and even wants to marry him to some noble lady but he only cares about fighting magical beasts. He doesn't even take us to drink with all the money that he has."

Kurt shook his head and sighed loudly.

"I told you that this matter had to be a secret. You've only managed to learn about it because I was drunk at that time and you had already told it to the whole group. Will you put a banner in front of the guild next time?"

Newton laughed and spoke in a happy voice.

"Come on, we have to take care of the kid until he becomes useful in hunting rank 4 creatures, right? That's a lot of time, it's better to just be open about everything."

Ella joined the conversation and pointed at Newton while showing a sly smile to Noah.

"You know, when Newton is hunting, he becomes very irritable but he relaxes as soon as he is returning to the capital. Oh, be careful in the guild when you sit with him, he can turn any good man into a drunkard."

"Hey, don't tell these lies just because I got Kurt drunk once! It took all my talent on that occasion."

"See, you're not even denying it!"

The two hunters started bickering and a smile appeared on the others in their group.

'Are all cultivators like this?'

Noah again asked that question to himself.

'Wait, am I like that too?'

After a bit, he simply put that thought in the back of his mind and joined his group in their return to the capital.

The hunt had succeeded, he had to take his share of money and had to absorb the "Breath" of the magical beast.

'Though, a body able to become stronger as it takes damage seems nice. In theory, my Yin body should have a similar strength if not higher. It has both the restriction to one element and a special ability after all.'

He thought as they marched, he was quite eager to understand the feeling of having a center of power in the heroic ranks.

They reached the capital after a few days and Noah was forced to join a celebratory toast in the main hall of the guild.

Apparently, that was a tradition of Kurt's hunting group after each successful hunt, Newton would personally use part of his share to buy strong wine fit for their powerful bodies.

Needless to say, Noah could only take one sip from it before feeling some dizziness assaulting him.

In the end, they separated after deciding to meet one week from then to discuss their next mission.

Chapter 215 - 215. Value

Noah's life became quite engaging.

He would still maintain his usual training routine most of the time but, at specific intervals, his presence was requested in Kurt's hunting group to organize and plan their next mission.

They would usually hunt twice a month and only in danger zones where they were sure that the number of rank 4 magical beasts was not too high.

Noah was a burden for them after all, they couldn't risk being ganged up by several strong creatures.

That's why their focus was on the lone packs in specific areas, they had to be sure that nothing unexpected could happen.

It had to be said though that Noah wasn't completely useless.

The group of hunters soon discovered that, during the planning phase, his insights on the behavior of the magical beasts were extremely valuable, so much that Ada would often ask for his opinion.

There was a time when they had to face two packs of Hellish hounds both led by a rank 4 magical beast.

Noah suggested for the two sisters with the fire aptitude to create a pyre and let the magical beasts fight themselves for it.

Hellish hounds were innately attracted by fire since it was their nourishment and the one created by spells was a delicacy in their eyes.

Noah knew that, even in the presence of humans, the hounds would have prioritized the fire and fought the opposing pack for it.

That had allowed the hunting group to kill two rank 4 magical beasts instead of retreating and abandoning the hunt.

Another time, they had difficulties tracking a rank 4 Furred worm that was nearing a low-danger area, endangering that environment.

Noah suggested creating a bait with a pack of ant-type magical beasts which was the favorite meal of that creature.

Pointless to say that the bait worked perfectly and the Furred worm couldn't resist the temptation of that meal, exposing itself to the hunters that ably vanquished it.

The quantity of information that he had learned in the magical beasts' course of the academy was incredible and he also was really interested in that topic.

Noah didn't know why he liked studying so much about magical beasts, maybe the dragon in his childhood had left a deep impression on him or maybe the fact that his first kill was a magical beast influenced his psyche.

Anyway, his value was acknowledged and his group began to rely more on him.

Noah didn't mind helping them out.

On one hand, a smooth hunt would ensure his safety and prevent any mishap from happening.

On the other one, he needed those rank 4 magical beasts to speed up the growth of his body.

Every time he used the Blood drain spell on a dying beast of that rank, he would gain days worth of training!

Also, with each successful hunt, his Credits would increase and he would gain access to better discounts over items deriving from magical beasts.

The speed at which his body improved increased, his money increased, and his stash of rank 4 materials did the same.

Everything about the situation was completely beneficial to him, Noah had to just give some pointers when they planned their hunts and he would gain part of the profits.

It must be said though that his situation was quite peculiar.

The Hunters' guild had to choose between letting Noah roam free in low-danger zones and harm the work of all the weaker hunters or forcefully bring him in dangerous missions where his life was on the line.

In order to maintain a peaceful environment inside the guild, they had to give some free rewards to Noah or else he would have continued to hunt rank 3 magical beasts.

Like that, time passed, and the number of rank 4 creatures on which Noah used his spell increased, with their joint work, Kurt's group managed to complete two hunts per month.

It was impossible to hide Noah's improvements during that period of time.

His skin became whiter and his aura colder, it seemed that he was going to transform into a piece of ice.

Only Noah knew that the cold aura exuded from his body was caused by the type of "Breath" of the darkness element that he was absorbing.

"Vance, today the wine it's on you! That damned pig broke my stick!"

Newton exclaimed.

Kurt's hunting group was in a forest near the border of the Utra country.

They had just vanquished a pack of Iron-tusks boars and the rank 4 specimen had destroyed Newton's weapon in the process, thus being named "pig" by him.

One year had passed since the events with the Shrinking elephant and the hunting group had successfully killed twenty-seven rank 4 creatures in that period of time.

Of course, Noah had used the Blood drain spell on each of them.

Noah's gaze was lost, he was deep in thought and didn't hear Newton's words.

He was carefully inspecting his body with his mental energy, quantifying the "Breath" that he had just absorbed and calculating how much nourishment it could give.

"Vance, are you alright?"

The others in his group noticed his unusual behavior and Kurt gave voice to their worries.

Noah came back to reality and saw that the other six hunters were staring at him with confused gazes.

"I think I will have to skip the next mission. It seems that I need to stabilize my gains for a while before I can use again my cultivation technique. Don't worry though, it's nothing too serious. I should be fine in one month."

The hunters nodded at his words.

Unorthodox techniques were dangerous, they needed to be trained carefully and the cultivator had to stop at the first sign of instability or he could irremediably hurt himself.

"Sure, take your time. We will just go hunt slightly bigger packs in the meantime, my body was getting rusty with all this safety first after all."

Kurt said with a laugh and patted Noah's head before turning on the path back to the Royal city.

Noah didn't even notice that gesture since his focus had gone back on his body.

'This "Breath" and a couple of nights of training should bring me to the peak of the third rank! Finally, after one year and a half of time spent hunting, I can attempt on the breakthrough to the heroic ranks!'

He masked his excitement with his usual cold expression and then went after the others in his group, it was finally time for his body to reach the fourth rank.

Chapter 216 - 216. Peak

Noah returned to his habitation inside the Royal city.

That new house was closer to the Royal Mansion compared to the one that he had rented previously when he had to experiment in the Elemental forging method.

Since he didn't need a reinforced room, Noah could afford a house with a higher concentration of "Breath" at a lower price than the previous one.

It was wrong to call it a house though, it was only a large room that he and Ivor shared quietly at the price of two thousand Credits per month.

His weekly income had increased since he joined Kurt's hunting group so Noah didn't mind spending a bit more to have that density of "Breath".

That allowed him to make up for the time wasted traveling with his normal training schedule.

Inside, there was Ivor waiting for him.

Lately, he had begun to sleep more, Noah guessed that the damage on his sea of consciousness was slowly increasing its effects on his daily life.

"Ivor."

Noah called and patiently waited for the ruined cultivator to wake up.

"What is it?"

Ivor asked after a bit as he stretched his hand toward one of the jars around him.

"How was your Pain Tribulation?"

Noah knew that Ivor had a rank 3 dantian so it was obvious that his body had been through the Pain Tribulation.

"Mhh..."

Ivor seemed to make a lot of effort to remember that moment of his life and he would lift his jar from time to time as he reviewed his memories.

"Painful."

"..."

Ivor's answer left Noah speechless.

'I guess he is only useful when my doubts concern the Elemental forging method.'

Noah thought, taking out a few thousand Credits from his space-ring.

"I need some time alone, these should suffice for the rent of a cheap habitation and your wine for about a month."

Ivor took the Credits and moved toward the exit door.

As he was about to unlock it though, he turned and said something with a warm smile on his face.

"I remember my Master's words back then when I was about to go through it. He said "Be sure that your entire body is filled with "Breath" before you attempt the breakthrough". Apart from those words, I remember only the pain of the process."

Noah nodded to him and watched as he left the room.

'If it's just about pain, I believe that it will go quite smoothly.'

Noah thought, taking out the "Breath" blessing from his space-ring and placing it on the floor.

The density of "Breath" in the room instantly surpassed that of the best house in the academy.

'First, I need to reach the peak.'

The information about the breakthrough to the fourth rank of the body was already deeply impressed in his memory.

Generally speaking, the process was the same for each cultivator with some slight differences due to the different body-nourishing methods.

A cultivator needed to reach the peak of the third rank, then he had to fill the entirety of his body with "Breath".

Once those two requirements were met, he had to activate his nourishing method to start the reconstruction.

'Many cultivators lose themselves in the pain, some of them die in the process. Yet, the Pain Tribulation is still considered the easiest to pass. After all, its requirements are easy to meet and it's quite common for a cultivator on

that level to have a strong will, capable of enduring that terrible pain. It's quite funny that most of those that die in that Tribulation are nobles or wealthy cultivators.'

To withstand pain, one must have a strong will.

Nobles rarely found themselves in dangerous situations and their lofty lifestyle didn't allow them to build a strong personality.

That's why, through history, nobles had the highest mortality rate in the Pain Tribulation.

Noah sat on the floor of the room and focused on his back.

It was still day so he could not cultivate in the Yin body, yet he still had to absorb the "Breath" of the rank 4 Iron-tusks boar that his hunting group had killed.

The energy on his back circulated through his body and reached his dantian where a selection process happened.

The "Breath" of the darkness element was separated and redirected inside his skeletal system which emitted a cold aura that slowly nourished the body.

The rest of the "Breath" was simply dispersed in the air.

"Fuuuuu"

Noah exhaled loudly after the process was complete.

By then, he had become used to using the Blood drain spell to speed up his improvements, yet the quantity of nourishment that came from rank 4 magical beasts always surprised him.

'If I was a magical beast, I could just eat anything that contains "Breath" to strengthen my body, without the need for specific techniques. I have to admit

that I quite envy them. Well, at least the potential that humans have due to their three centers of power is far higher.'

From Noah's point of view, the cultivation process of the magical beasts was simply too easy if it was compared to that of the humans.

Nevertheless, when a human had all three centers of power in the heroic ranks, the power that he held was enormous.

'Not yet, I still need a couple of days before I reach the peak.'

Noah calmly waited for the night to come before starting to cultivate in the Yin body.

He wasn't going to cultivate both his dantian and body at the same time, in that important moment, he wanted to be sure that all his focus was on the breakthrough.

The first night passed uneventfully with seven vortexes constantly absorbing "Breath" from the environment and accumulating it below the acupuncture points.

That cold "Breath" was then rendered harmless with one refinement of his dantian and redirected to his bones.

Noah rested for the whole day, waking up immediately upon the sunset.

Just a few hours after his second night of cultivation, he felt that his bones could not receive any more "Breath" and each time Noah tried to pour more in them, they would just redirect it to other parts of his body.

"Finally, the peak of the third rank."

Chapter 217 - 217. Breakthrough

Peak of the third rank of the body at the age of nineteen and a half!

That was an incredible feat!

Most of it though was due to the Forging of the Seven Hells in which Noah had trained in his childhood.

Unorthodox techniques had a faster pace of training but required for the cultivator to undergo risky procedures.

The Forging of the Seven Hells had endangered Noah's life many times, it was no wonder that he could reach the peak of the third rank at such a young age.

'Now, I need to store "Breath" through my whole body.'

A lot of energy was required for the reconstruction of the body and, of course, the best source of energy of that world was the marvelous "Breath".

Noah resumed his cultivation, he had to be sure that his body was filled with "Breath" before he attempted in the reconstruction.

One week passed uneventfully, with Noah focusing each night concentrating on the Yin body and using the rest of the day to sleep.

Rest was necessary during that process, the body needed time to mix with the "Breath" and the latter had to uniformly nourish each of its components.

It was only when the seventh night ended that Noah could not store any more "Breath".

'It is time.'

Noah undressed and sat naked on the wooden floor.

The reconstruction process was long and painful, it was similar to the hibernation of the magical beasts when they increased their rank, with the only difference being that humans didn't need to create an incubating membrane during it.

'The first step toward the heroic ranks, the first step toward complete freedom!'

Noah's will rose and he wasted no more time, activating the next step of his nourishing method.

The bones in his body had accumulated so much "Breath" that they autonomously radiated a cold halo, they were the part focused by the Yin body after all.

Yet, as Noah willed, they broke and released waves of energy through his whole body.

CRACK!

"GHHHHH!"

Noah suppressed a loud cry as the pain invaded him.

The process had started, stopping it at that moment would endanger the cultivator's life or inflict incurable injuries.

Nevertheless, the idea of stopping the process had never crossed Noah's mind.

The "Breath" contained in his bones ran free through his body, breaking everything that it met.

The first to be affected were his organs which were pierced and cut in many places as the waves of energy crossed them.

Then, it was time for his circulatory system to be affected.

His blood vessels exploded, forming large bruises under his white shin.

Noah was already laying on the ground, convulsing like crazy.

Once his bones had shattered, he could not sustain his sitting position anymore.

After that, it was time for his flesh.

The waves of energy ravaged the flesh and ripped off the muscles, anything that stood in their way was destroyed!

It wasn't a casual process though.

The "Breath" would only destroy the body parts unfit for the new form that Noah was assuming.

Like the dantian boiled away most of its impure "Breath" to reach a higher purity when it increased in rank, so did the body.

Flesh was a mortal material, "Breath" was the true source of energy.

All those impure body parts had to be expelled to form a purer body, able to successfully store "Breath" of a higher quality.

The dantian needed those impurities to improve its composition but the body didn't.

It had to be said though that the impurities of the dantian were still "Breath" while the ones of the body were the body parts, devoid of any value.

Of course, that process was extremely painful.

Noah felt that his body was being punctured and cut everywhere.

His internal composition was being shaken by an unrestrainable power, he felt like each organ under his flesh was being mixed together to form a disgusting human soup!

Then, it was time to expel the useless parts.

The skin of the living beings was the body part that had the most contact with the external world, which meant that it was almost completely filled with impurities.

Noah's figure laid on the floor directly exploded!

The entirety of his skin was ripped off, leaving only a bloody human figure in the room.

The deadly part had begun!

Noah's consciousness was still focused, the pain that he had felt until that moment didn't make him faint or lose concentration.

The Yin body activated and a huge black vortex enveloped his sorry figure.

The "Breath" that he had accumulated was still inside him, searching for other useless body parts to eject.

Yet, after a few rounds of inspections, it couldn't find any of them and began to solidify.

Noah was at the center of the black vortex, he was filled with "Breath" and more of it was gathered by the suction force of his nourishing method.

The "Breath" began to solidify, mixing with the remaining body parts and reconstructing the missing ones.

The skeletal system formed, it was gray with dark shades all over it.

Then it was the time for the organs and the circulatory system.

The organs seemed to shine under the daylight and the blood vessels had a thicker form while being half-transparent.

His flesh and muscles recomposed, they were sturdier and denser, it didn't seem that they were made of simple flesh.

His skinless figure solidified and started the healing phase.

Noah's skin grew, it was white and smooth, devoid of any follicle, not even a simple imperfection was present on it.

Two black tattoos appeared on his chest, a bat with two pairs of wings and a panther, and they roamed freely on the newly formed body.

At last, a black membrane was created around Noah's heart.

As the vortex continued to absorb "Breath", a black liquid began to fill that membrane, immersing Noah's heart in that cold substance.

The vortex rotated for a few more minutes, fixing the absorbed "Breath" on each part of Noah's body and securing its sturdiness.

Then the vortex dispersed, leaving a naked Noah on the floor, surrounded by the filth that had been expelled in that process.

Noah felt a huge amount of energy filling him but his mental sphere was too tired from all the pain that he had to endure while maintaining control on his body-nourishing technique.

He could only have one last thought before falling asleep on the spot.

'Rank 4 body!'

Chapter 218 - 218. Drop

It took Noah three days to wake up.

Not only his mind had been heavily stressed during the breakthrough but his body also needed time to stabilize.

It was a completely new body after all, it wasn't just one with fewer impurities.

'That was gory.'

Noah thought, looking at the remains of his old body all around him.

'I even have some pieces of skin in my hair, I should take a bath before inspecting my new body.'

As he stood up though, he began to notice some of the new aspects of his center of power.

'Wow, I feel so light! And what's all this energy that runs through me?'

His body was made of flesh and "Breath".

The latter was almost immaterial, it was no wonder that the weight of his body had diminished.

'Everything in my body has mixed with the "Breath", which is a form of energy. It's obvious that I would feel so energetic.'

Then, his hand instinctively went toward his chest.

His heartbeat was muffled due to the membrane that enveloped that organ but he couldn't find any problem with its functioning.

'The liquid around my heart should be liquid "Breath" of the darkness element. It seems that, in order to activate the ability of my new body, I have to inject that "Breath" in my circulatory system.'

When a body reached the fourth rank, the "Breath" inside it would reach the liquid stage and give far more power to the user.

'I'm quite eager to test it but I should first clean everything and let my center of power stabilize.'

Noah took a long bath to remove all the remains of his old body from himself.

Then, he gathered all the filth on the floor in one big bucket and used the black smoke to erase every trace of it.

Only the smell of blood remained in the room but, given enough time, even that would disappear.

'I feel so free.'

Noah judged, inspecting his body.

He was still naked, carefully observing every part of his skin.

There were no apparent changes in his external aspect, his skin was slightly purer and his muscles were more defined but, apart from those, he looked as when he was still in the third rank.

'The real changes are in the insides.'

Noah took out an inscribed weapon from his space-ring.

It was Fabian's white sword, its power was in the lower tier of the first rank.

Noah put strength on his grip and the sword directly broke in half!

'I can definitely survive the attack of a rank 4 beast now. Oh, it has been more than a week since I've last eaten and yet I don't feel any hunger. It seems like I'm really distancing myself from the mortal world.'

The breakthrough had lasted approximately three days, most of that time was expended in the reconstruction of the body.

A rank 3 body could survive starvation for a long time but that didn't prevent it from feeling hunger.

Yet, with his new body, Noah didn't feel anything similar to hunger or thirst, he felt like he had just woken up after a satisfying meal.

'Heroic ranks are so different and this isn't even the full power of my body!'

Not only was Noah's body still in the lower tier, but he also had an ability that empowered it!

The problem with the tier though was not solvable.

After the breakthrough, the body would slowly reach the peak of the lower tier as his dantian improved, yet, to reach higher tiers or ranks, he would need a rank 5 body-nourishing technique.

'Rank 5 is simply too far away, I should just focus on my other two centers of power that are still in the second rank. Right, the restrictions on my dantian should be gone.'

It was still day but the Dark vortex cultivation technique had not the same restriction of the Yin body, cultivating during the day would just be slower.

Noah sat on the now clean floor and created a vortex between his hands that were joint on his waist.

The vortex absorbed "Breath" of the darkness element and poured it freely inside the dantian that, to Noah surprise, showed some signs of expansion after just a few hours!

'Amazing! The restrictions are completely gone and it actually seems that the process is smoother! I shouldn't feel any hindrance till the solid stage of the third rank now.'

Noah happily shouted in his mind as he interrupted his cultivation.

His body had just formed, he would rather let it stabilize for a few days before resuming a complete training schedule.

'Now, I should be able to completely refine the Undead chameleon bones.'

Noah took out more than thirty bones accompanied by the same number of empty buckets.

During the last year, the Credits in his possession had increased so much that he could freely buy rank 4 materials without suffering any losses.

Also, since he was hunting rank 4 magical beasts, the discounts on those items had risen, allowing him to purchase even more materials.

He didn't do that only to always have available materials at hand but also to be prepared for his big escape.

A market rich of such a variety of materials was rare in that world, in the whole Ultra nation, only the Royal city had it!

Noah didn't want to find himself in a situation where he lacked so many materials that he had to personally hunt each of the magical beasts from which they came from.

Noah put one of the buckets below his stretched arm and casually slashed with his white saber that had just appeared in his hand.

CLANG!

The saber hit his wrist but only a metallic sound resounded, there was no wound on it.

"..."

'I forgot that I can't hurt myself so casually anymore.'

Noah thought after being speechless for an instant.

He pressed the blade of the saber on his wrist and strongly pulled.

He used the real strength of his body at that moment, so it was obvious that a quite deep cut appeared on his skin.

However, after only a single drop of blood fell on the bucket, the cut healed, leaving no trace of the previous wound.

"..."

Chapter 219 - 219. Drunk

'Just stay open!'

Noah shouted in his mind, giving another strong thrust with his saber.

A drop of blood fell on the bucket below his stretched arm.

The blood had filled only half of the bucket but Noah had to cut his wrist for the whole day to achieve that result.

As usual, the wound healed right after that drop fell.

'Dammit!'

Noah lost his patience and directly made a long vertical cut starting from his shoulder and ending on his palm.

The wound was deep and many lines of blood flowed out of it.

However, after the bucket was filled by only another eighth of its volume, the cut healed and the blood stopped flowing.

'This will take a while.'

Noah realized as he sighed in helplessness.

If he made those large cuts, the filling speed was somewhat acceptable.

Noah spent the whole night to fill thirty-two buckets with his own blood and then proceeded to immerse in each of them one chameleon bone before finally sealing them and putting them back in his space-ring.

'This is over, now I should just quietly rest and let my body stabilize.'

Days passed, which Noah spent slowly resuming his normal pace of training.

He soon discovered that he didn't really have to worry that much about the stability of his body.

Even if just created, a rank 4 body was still a center of power in the heroic ranks!

Noah almost didn't feel any need for food or water in that period and even spending entire nights cultivating in the Dark vortex technique produced basically no stress at all on his dantian.

There was also the fact that he didn't cultivate anymore in the Yin body.

His body had reached the fourth rank, the technique was complete, the "Breath" that he stored in the membrane around his heart would naturally be refilled once expended.

Ivor came back precisely after one month.

"What happened to you!?"

He exclaimed as soon as he passed through the entrance door and stared at the young man sitting on the floor.

"What do you mean?"

Noah asked, he really couldn't find any difference with his usual appearance.

"Contain your damned aura already! You know that my sea of consciousness can't sustain much pressure!"

"..."

'Don't tell me, the cold halo released from my body has increased even more?'

Noah pondered, applying a layer of mental energy around his body to hide his presence.

"Better?"

"Yes, thanks! You can't be alone for one month that you already forget that you have an ill roommate! By the way, did you just have another breakthrough?"

"Not yet, I was just too focused and I've influenced my surroundings."

Noah lied while shaking his head.

He had finally obtained his rank 4 body, his big escape was nearing, he couldn't let people know that his power had risen again.

'Right now, the powers I have that the Royals aren't aware of are the shard of Demonic sword and my body in the heroic ranks. There is also the Warp spell that I've purposely avoided using so they shouldn't be aware of my proficiency with it. The last two should be enough to take them by surprise and allow me to escape, now I just need the right moment and a better knowledge of the world outside the Utra country.'

Noah had a vague understanding of the various countries that composed the continent he was in, yet that was far from enough to secure a smooth escape.

He was completely unaware of the political situations in the other nations, which was what made him doubtful about his destination.

'I think it's time to go back on scamming soldiers.'

He decided in his mind as a cold smile appeared on his face.

Noah resumed the hunts with Kurt's group.

He was eager to test his new strength but, in the end, he decided to lay low and pretend that he had still a rank 3 body.

He didn't do that only to hide his actual battle prowess and to continue in his accumulation of material, he did that to appear the weakest of the group.

Most people would talk in a more unrestrained manner to those that considered inferior to them, Noah knew that fairly well.

He used that fact as a way to gather precious information.

Kurt's group had the tradition to gather in the main hall of the guild to drink after each successful hunt and that moment was precisely what Noah was aiming for.

He began to drink more in those situations, that wine was made precisely for cultivators, that meant that it could make them drunk.

Since Noah was pretending to have a rank 3 body, he could act as if he had gotten drunk after a few jugs and "innocently" ask for sensitive information to the others in his group.

Only Kurt was only a hunter after all, the other five hunters had all other jobs outside the guild, many of them in the Royal army.

As soldiers, it was impossible for them not to know about the political situation of their opponents on the borders of the country.

"But, I mean *hic*, this noble system is so restrictive. It is impossible for all the other nations to have the same."

A "drunk" Noah exclaimed loudly, waving his empty jug toward the servants waiting near the walls of the hall.

"Haha! Vance is drunk again! I told you that I can turn everyone in a drunkard!"

"Newton, don't feel proud about that, he is not even twenty and is already trying to match your amount of wine. You really have a bad influence on people."

"Hmph, and what does age even matter! We might all die in our next hunt because of some unexpected beast appearing out of nowhere. The way I see it, be extra careful when there is the possibility to die and be extra drunk when there isn't!"

Newton and Ella bickered as usual on the table while wine continued to be poured on their jugs.

"There are different political systems throughout our continent. I know that there is a nation where the power is divided through many independent organizations called "sects". They are like a bigger version of the academy but without any restrictions on the bloodline."

Ada answered Noah's question.

Newton's eyes lit up hearing her words and joined that conversation.

"I heard about that too. What was its name, right! Papral nation! I heard that the cultivators there live in caves where they isolate themselves for entire years!"

Chapter 220 - 220. Continent

"In my opinion, they are just a bunch of savages. What's the point of using a cave when you can have a house!"

Vic joined the conversation, expressing his complaints.

"Those "savages" belong to one of the three most powerful nations in our continent. It wouldn't be wise to underestimate them."

Hazel said to him.

"*hic* is there a ranking for the nations?"

Noah asked, feigning some hiccups.

"Yes, you can say that our continent is ruled by three large nations. Our Utra nation is ranked second or third and it occupies the southern side of the landmass, that's why the capital is situated to the north, there is only sea over the southern borders. On the opposite side of the continent, there is the Papral nation which is ranked second or third as well. Their strength matches that of our country but they are too far away from us so there has never been any war."

'So, Utra nation on the south and Papral nation on the north.'

"What about the central area? *hic*."

Noah had almost forgotten that he was pretending to be drunk and hiccupped only when his question was voiced.

That time, it was Ada that gave the answer.

"At the center of the continent, there is the Shandal Empire, the strongest nation on our landmass. They are a military nation built on strength, where even a farmer can have access to rank 3 body nourishing techniques. If it wasn't for the joint resistance of the Utra and Papral nation, they would have already conquered the whole continent."

"What *hic* about the other *hic* countries?"

"They are either underlings of these three nations or weak allies. The Shandal Empire usually uses the people of the countries that it conquers as slaves, it has an economy heavily reliant on war. Oh, there are some uninhabited zones where the magical beasts have wiped out the humans, but they are scarcer than the inhabited ones."

Their conversation continued for the whole night before they decided to go back to their respective habitations.

Noah pretended to stagger a bit as he returned to his place only to resume his normal expression when he entered his room.

'This is quite troublesome.'

He thought, dispersing the "Breath" accumulated by his last usage of the Blood drain spell in the air.

His Yin body was complete, he could not annex external energy anymore, he could only wait for his dantian to slowly propel the body toward the peak of the lower tier.

As for the alcohol in his blood, the basic regenerative abilities of his new body were enough to dispel it as soon as Noah drank it.

The main quality of his body-nourishing method was regeneration after all, how could booze affect him in the long term?

"Is that good wine that I smell?"

Ivor woke up due to the smell that lingered around Noah.

"What do you know of this continent except for the three big nations?"

Noah ignored him and drew a simple figure on the floor of the room with the tip of his saber.

It was just a big oval with three marks on it: two at its vertexes and one at its center.

"I'm pretty sure that our continent is not that linear."

"Come on, old man. Tell me something useful."

"Mh, let's see."

Ivor took out his knife and drew a second figure around the oval.

"This should approximately be the actual coastline of our continent, I remember it from when I studied in my mansion."

Noah fixed that image in his head and nodded.

"It is quite big, the three big nations occupy only half of its territory. The other half is divided between weaker countries, wastelands, and big danger zones. What do you want to know precisely?"

Ivor asked, lifting his head to look at his student and drinking from one of his jars.

"Anything that you can remember regarding geography and political situations of each area."

Noah didn't raise his head and continued to inspect the map.

'Going into big danger zones would surely be the best solution. The problem is that the magical beasts in there managed to kill all the humans for a reason, I won't be surprised if rank 5 creatures occupied it.'

Due to his studies of magical beasts, Noah vaguely knew about the layout of the continent.

Part of that topic was about the location of such beasts, it wasn't strange that he had learnt about some specific environments.

Yet, he really didn't have enough strength to establish himself there, the danger was too high.

As for the other two big nations, they were to be avoided too.

He wouldn't be surprised if both of them tried to exploit him like the Royals were doing.

'I need somewhere messy, where there isn't a fixed government and its hard to gather information.'

Ivor began to describe the fragmented information that he could remember.

What he said mostly concerned peculiar places where rare magical beasts were discovered and he marked them on the simple map.

Little by little, the number of marks increased.

However, that was just circumstantial knowledge in Noah's mind, he still couldn't find a safe place where to develop.

Then, Ivor finally said something that interested him.

"All around the three big nations, there are destroyed countries. The Nerere country is one of them but its destruction was caused by something that I'm unaware of. Especially in the territories between the Papral nation and the Shandal Empire, there are a lot of areas where cultivators can build their own little tribes and strive for survival. As you can imagine though, the strength of those tribes is not that high otherwise they would be annexed in the nations near them."

Noah fell deep in thought after those words.

'Territories without any fixed ruler, that seem perfect. However, how far are those? How do I reach them? How can I cross the Shandal Empire unnoticed?'

Noah shook his head, punching the map on the floor to erase any trace of it.

'I don't even know my actual battle prowess yet. I should think of a way to test it.'