

Phenom's Ascension

Joel, a 22-year-old from New York, had just received his Hunter License from the Association. As a new Rogue-class Hunter, he chose to arm himself with a shortbow, valuing precision and distance over raw power. Most Hunters joined a guild, but for now, Joel was on his own, facing his first real challenge: a D-Rank Dungeon had appeared nearby.

Instead of rushing in blindly, Joel sought guidance. He headed to the Hunter Association Headquarters—a towering building in downtown New York filled with Hunters of all ranks. Some were gearing up for raids, others were cashing in monster cores for money. This was where the best and worst of the Hunter world gathered.

Joel approached the front desk, where a tired-looking receptionist barely glanced up. When he asked about finding a mentor, she hesitated before directing him to "Dante Cross - Ex-S-Rank Hunter" at an old warehouse in Brooklyn. Dante had once been among the strongest Hunters but retired after some mysterious incident.

Rather than rushing to meet Dante, Joel decided to ask around about him first. He approached a few Hunters who looked like they'd been around long enough to know the name. After buying a couple of cheap beers for a veteran D-Rank named Griff, the older Hunter started talking.

Joel learned that Dante was once an S-Rank Rogue, one of the best archers the world had ever seen. He had a reputation for being ruthless in battle, but not without a code. Three years ago, Dante had gone on a high-level dungeon raid with a team and was the only one who came back. After that, he disappeared from the Hunter world. Some said guilt broke him. Others said he saw something that made him quit.

Joel needed something valuable to offer Dante, something that would make the retired Hunter listen. He decided to dig into the raid records at the Hunter Association. After convincing the receptionist to "accidentally" leave a file where he could see it, Joel slipped into the break room and found what he was looking for: "RAID REPORT: Gate Incident - Dante Cross."

The report revealed that the raid was A-Rank, but something changed inside the dungeon. The mana levels spiked to S-Rank, making it a death trap. Dante's team included five elite Hunters, all considered high-level fighters, but none made it out. Their bodies were never recovered. The last recorded message from Dante's raid leader simply said: "We were wrong. It's awake." After the mission, Dante refused all interviews, quit the Association, and disappeared.

Armed with this information, Joel headed straight to Dante's warehouse in Brooklyn. The deeper he went, the fewer streetlights worked. The roads got quieter, the buildings more run-down. Finally, he reached an old abandoned warehouse on the edge of the docks.

As Joel approached, an arrow buried itself into the ground inches from his foot. A voice echoed from the darkness above: "If you take one more step, the next one goes through your throat."

Looking up, Joel spotted a hooded man crouched on the warehouse roof. It was Dante Cross. Even in the darkness, Joel could tell—he wasn't a normal man. He moved like a shadow, his bow drawn and steady.

"I know what happened in your last raid," Joel said, holding his ground. He told Dante about the dungeon's spike to S-Rank, the loss of his team, and the final message from his raid leader. When Dante asked where he got that information, Joel decided honesty was best: "I got it from the Hunter Association's records. I needed something to make you take me seriously."

After a tense moment, Dante chuckled. "You've got guts, rookie. Stupid, but gutsy." He motioned for Joel to follow him inside the warehouse.

Once inside, Dante made things clear: "If you can land a single hit on me, I'll train you. If you can't, you leave and never come back." He tossed Joel a wooden training bow and stood completely open, not even bothering to draw his own weapon.

Joel lunged forward, swinging the bow like he was trying to slam it into Dante's side. The ex-S-Rank Hunter sidestepped effortlessly, but this was what Joel had counted on. At the last second, Joel twisted his body, shifting his weight mid-swing. Instead of following through, he let go of the bow, letting it drop—then immediately spun, throwing an elbow at Dante's blind spot.

His elbow barely grazed Dante's chest—not a solid hit, but contact. Dante immediately disappeared, reappearing behind Joel before the younger Hunter could process what happened. Joel felt the faintest pressure of Dante's hand near his neck—if this were a real fight, he'd be dead. Then Dante stepped back and nodded slightly. "Alright, rookie. You've got instincts. Training starts tomorrow."

After Dante disappeared into a back room, Joel explored the warehouse. Inside a half-open drawer, he found a journal with pages partially burned. The remaining words were messy and rushed: "It wasn't a dungeon. It was a prison." "The mana surge wasn't natural. Something let it out." "The others... they didn't just die. They were taken." "It saw me. It spoke."

Joel also found a faded photo of Dante's team—six Hunters posing together, grinning. Five of them were crossed out. Under Dante's face, in small, sharp letters: "Why me?"

Before Joel could react, Dante's voice cut through the silence: "Find what you were looking for?" When confronted about the crossed-out faces, Dante answered simply: "Because they're dead." When Joel asked about the "Why me?" writing, Dante's jaw tightened momentarily. "Because I wasn't supposed to survive," he said quietly.

"Lesson one, rookie," Dante continued, his voice like cold steel. "If you want to be a Hunter, forget the idea of fairness. Power doesn't care who deserves to live. You survive, or you don't. That's it."

Instead of resting as Dante suggested, Joel spent the night training. He practiced his draw speed and form with a wooden bow, worked on his footwork and evasion, pushed himself through sprints and agility drills, and refused to stop even when his body screamed at him. By the time he collapsed onto the warehouse floor, drenched in sweat, his muscles were burning, but his mind was sharper than ever.

Dante had been watching. "If I only trained when I was told to, I'd never get stronger," Joel explained when Dante questioned him. "Good answer," Dante replied. "Most rookies think power comes from talent. Some think it comes from luck. But the truth? Power belongs to the ones who refuse to stop."

At dawn, Joel's real training began. "First lesson," Dante said. "Forget everything you think you know about fighting. A rogue doesn't win by being the strongest. You win by being the fastest, the smartest, the one who sees the kill before it happens."

Joel faced three tests. In the Test of Speed, he had to dodge five arrows in a row fired by Dante. The first arrow came without warning—Joel sidestepped right, letting it whistle past his shoulder. For the second arrow, he spun left as it zipped past his ribs. The third, aimed at his head, he ducked beneath. When Dante fired two arrows at once for the fourth test, Joel swung his training bow, knocking one arrow off course while shifting his leg to avoid the second. For the final shot, Joel stepped into the arrow, lunging forward as it whizzed past his ear.

"You're either fearless or suicidal," Dante remarked. "Either way, you pass."

Next came the Test of Precision. Joel had to hit three moving targets with a shortbow under time pressure. For the first shot at a target moving left to right, he relied on instinct, firing a fast draw and snap shot that hit directly. The second target moved erratically, but Joel trusted his instincts again, landing another direct hit. For the final shot at a target dropping from above, Joel aimed for the rope instead of the target itself. His arrow cut clean through, causing the target to plummet straight down.

"Huh. Didn't see that coming," Dante said with a slow clap. "You pass."

The final test was stealth. Joel had to sneak up behind Dante and touch his back. Joel chose to stick to the shadows, moving in quick, silent dashes between cover. When he was close enough, he created a minor distraction by flicking a small rock to draw Dante's attention, then made his final approach. With a sharp, precise motion, Joel tapped Dante's back. The ex-S-Rank Hunter immediately spun with inhuman speed, his hand snapping forward toward Joel's throat, but Joel had already launched himself away.

"Hmph. Took you long enough," Dante said, but Joel had passed all three tests.

The next morning, Dante didn't wake Joel. When Joel stepped into the warehouse's main hall, Dante was already there, waiting. "Hope you didn't think passing my tests meant you were ready," he said coldly. "You're not. But we don't have time." He tossed Joel a mission notice for a D-Rank Dungeon raid.

Joel decided to scout the dungeon first before committing. At the site, Dante led him to a nearby rooftop overlooking the entrance. A small group of Hunters was gathered nearby, some preparing for a raid, others waiting for their party members. Joel decided to focus on observing the Hunter Association staff near the gate.

He noticed a young data analyst typing rapidly on a tablet, looking tense. She kept whispering to another staff member and checking something repeatedly. Joel approached her directly, asking if something was wrong with the dungeon. Though she tried to deny it, a senior official quickly intervened, telling Joel to move along.

Joel slipped her a note: "If there's danger, nod once. If you can't talk, meet me behind the station in five minutes." She nodded just once before the senior official stepped between them. Joel walked away casually, then circled back to meet her.

"This dungeon—it's not stable," she whispered when they met. "We're reading mana fluctuations. The dungeon is spiking and dropping like it's trying to hide its true rank. It might not be D-Rank. It could be a trap."

Joel immediately reported back to Dante, who revealed he had suspected something was off. Looking at the rookie Hunters preparing to enter, Joel knew he couldn't stay silent. He approached a small group and subtly raised concerns about the dungeon's stability, asking if anyone had checked the mana levels and mentioning the analyst's strange behavior. This planted doubt among the Hunters, and soon one of them walked away from the gate.

With the warning delivered, Joel and Dante decided to enter the dungeon themselves to confirm their suspicions. The moment they crossed the shimmering blue veil of the gate, they found themselves in a vast, ruined temple covered in creeping black vines. The stone floor was cracked, glowing faintly with red veins of energy. The air was heavy with mana.

"This place doesn't feel D-Rank," Joel observed. Dante touched the ground lightly and confirmed: "Because it's not."

As they moved deeper into the dungeon, Joel let Dante take the lead. They soon heard a faint clicking sound—like claws scraping over stone. From the darkness, a figure emerged: a twisted, humanoid creature with six blackened, clawed limbs and glowing white eyes.

The creature lunged. Joel drew fast, firing an arrow that struck between the creature's eyes. But to his shock, the creature kept coming. Dante fired his own arrow, piercing the creature's throat

and bringing it down. But when they examined the body, they discovered something disturbing—the wound was closing. The creature was regenerating.

"We need to find the source," Dante said, nodding toward the deeper part of the ruins. Joel focused, trying to track the mana source. He sensed it was concentrated somewhere deeper inside, pulsing. They followed the sensation to a collapsed archway leading into the lower levels of the temple.

The deeper they went, the heavier the air became. The temple's architecture shifted—less ruin, more unnatural formations. They heard more clicking, more movement—not just one creature, but multiple. Rather than fighting, they chose to stealth past them, moving low and slow through the shadows.

Eventually, they reached a massive underground chamber. At the center, embedded in the stone, floated a black crystal glowing with dark energy. Before they could react, the ground shook violently. A voice—low, guttural, ancient—rumbled through the cavern: "Unworthy... trespassers..."

Joel didn't hesitate. If the crystal was the dungeon's power source, breaking it might shut everything down. He fired an arrow straight at it. The impact shattered part of the stone around the crystal, but the crystal itself didn't break. Instead, the energy around it flared violently, and the cavern rumbled harder.

A massive shape rose from the shadows—a towering figure of blackened stone with glowing white eyes. The dungeon boss had awakened. Joel didn't back down. He drew another arrow and fired again at the crystal. This time, cracks began to spread across its surface.

A massive stone fist swung toward Joel. Instead of dodging, he held his ground to get another shot at the crystal. His arrow buried itself deep into the crystal's cracking surface as the boss's fist slammed into Joel's side, launching him across the cavern. Despite the pain, Joel saw the crystal fracturing.

Dante, who had already leaped into action, fired a black arrow wreathed in mana straight into the crystal's core. The crystal shattered with a critical hit, and the dungeon boss seized up, its glowing eyes flickering. The dungeon began to collapse.

With the temple breaking apart and mana surging chaotically, Joel and Dante needed to escape. As they ran for the exit, a massive stone pillar began to fall right in front of their path. Joel drew his bow and fired, hitting a weak spot in the cracked pillar. Instead of blocking the exit, it crashed to the side, leaving the path open.

With the exit seconds from closing, they sprinted forward. Joel pushed with everything he had, but his injured body slowed him down. Just as the portal was closing, Dante grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward. They crossed the exit just as the portal vanished.

They landed hard on the pavement outside, back in Brooklyn. Joel gasped for air, staring up at the sky. Dante stood over him, arms crossed. "...Tch. You almost got yourself killed," he said, then smirked. "But I've seen worse." He offered Joel a hand. "On your feet, Hunter."

Joel wasn't a rookie anymore.

Less than an hour after escaping the dungeon, Joel found himself in a debriefing room at the Hunter Association Headquarters. A sharp-eyed woman in a dark executive suit sat across from him and Dante. Her nameplate read: "LENA VOSS - Hunter Association Supervisor."

"Tell me everything," she demanded.

Joel told most of the truth—the unstable mana readings, the regenerating monsters, the hidden crystal powering the dungeon, and how destroying it collapsed the gate. But he left out Dante's deeper involvement and didn't mention that Dante had suspected something was wrong before entering.

Lena's reaction was suspicious. "You're certain the dungeon was rigged?" she asked, as if she already knew something. Joel pushed back: "Why are you asking like you already knew?" For a moment, her expression changed slightly before she regained her composure. After a tense exchange, she dismissed them.

Once they left HQ, Joel decided to go back to the Hunter Association analyst who had warned him about the dungeon. But when he arrived at the monitoring station, her desk was empty. Scanning a nearby worker's terminal, Joel caught glimpses of an internal report: "Analyst Naomi Hayes - Temporary Suspension." "Access to classified data revoked." "Pending reassignment." "Restricted for internal review - No outside contact allowed."

Joel approached the worker casually, asking about Naomi. The man claimed she was "on leave," but his discomfort was obvious. When Joel pressed further, the worker revealed that her suspension hadn't come from standard Association oversight but from "higher up." Someone with real power wanted her shut down.

Realizing Naomi was in danger, Joel suggested to Dante that they needed to find her before the Association buried her completely. They determined that she was likely under house arrest—monitored but still alive because the Association needed her for something.

To find her, they decided to tail an Association agent. Outside HQ, they spotted "Agent Kellan Raines - Internal Review Division" heading to a black car. They followed him to a small apartment complex in the Bronx.

Once Raines entered the building, Joel created a distraction by having Dante tip over a garbage bin across the street. When Raines turned to investigate, Joel sprinted inside. He made it to apartment 3B just as Raines was unlocking the door.

After Raines entered, Joel slipped in behind him just before the door closed. Inside, he saw Naomi Hayes sitting on the couch. Her wrists weren't cuffed, but her posture was tense. When Raines turned his back, Joel struck, knocking him unconscious.

"...Took you long enough," Naomi said, standing quickly. She revealed that the Hunter Association was after her because she had discovered something they wanted to hide.

Joel searched Raines and found a Hunter Association keycard, a confidential file on Naomi marked "CLASSIFIED," an encrypted phone, and a standard-issue Hunter Association handgun. With Raines unconscious and Naomi free, they needed to escape quickly.

They used the fire escape to exit the building. Halfway down, they heard footsteps below—more Association agents coming to check on Raines. Joel decided to ambush them first. He vaulted over the railing, landing behind the three men.

Joel targeted the leader first, firing an arrow into his throat. As the big muscle of the group reached for his weapon, Joel fired another arrow into his knee, then closed the gap for a brutal takedown. The last man, clearly nervous, was taken as a hostage.

Under interrogation, the agent revealed they weren't just cleanup—Naomi wasn't supposed to be killed yet. The order came from a high-ranking Hunter Association official. They didn't want her dead, just "buried." And this wasn't the first time. Something bigger was happening inside the Association.

Joel, Dante, and Naomi went underground, taking their hostage to an abandoned subway station that served as Naomi's backup plan. There, they reviewed the stolen files and discovered that Naomi's suspension was ordered by someone powerful, and the dungeon Joel had cleared wasn't the first fake D-Rank. At least three others had been discovered in the past six months, and every Hunter who investigated had either disappeared or been killed.

A name appeared repeatedly in the reports: "PROJECT ECHO." The Association was covering up dungeons that weren't what they seemed, and removing anyone who got too close to the truth.

With this information, Joel decided to find the official who had suspended Naomi. If they found them, they'd find the truth. Following the money trail, they discovered that the Hunter Association was funneling millions into a 'shadow fund' that disappeared through fake companies. One name kept appearing: "Director Elias Kain," the Executive Director of the Hunter Association's Dungeon Research Division.

To gather more evidence against Kain, they tracked a secure meeting he was having at "The Ember Room," a private club in Manhattan. The team broke into the club's security room and hacked the cameras to spy on Kain's meeting. What they saw shocked them—Kain wasn't meeting just anyone. He was meeting Vincent Graves, a Hunter who had been declared dead two years ago.

"You said we were done with this," Graves said to Kain. "You don't get it, do you? Those dungeons weren't breaking. They were evolving." Kain responded calmly: "You lost control last time. I assume you won't make the same mistake twice."

Realizing this was evidence of corruption at the highest level, Joel had Naomi record the conversation and leak it to trusted Hunters and independent journalists. Then they intercepted information about "Site Delta" in an abandoned industrial zone in Brooklyn—the location of Kain's next dungeon break.

Joel, Dante, and Naomi, now joined by Mira Vaughn (a former healer-turned-combat medic who had left the Association two years ago), moved quickly to stop the dungeon release. They infiltrated the site stealthily, disabled the mana stabilizer, and canceled the dungeon release before it could begin. To ensure the facility couldn't be used again, they planted explosives and destroyed it completely.

With Site Delta destroyed and the truth spreading, Joel knew they needed allies before Kain retaliated. They tracked down "The Iron Fangs," a rebel Hunter guild that had been fighting against corruption for years. After convincing their leader, "The Alpha," by revealing how they had exposed Project Echo, the Iron Fangs agreed to join their cause.

Next, they needed to find Kain's true base. Interrogating Helena Ryker, a Hunter Association Regional Director and one of Kain's top lieutenants, Joel learned that Kain had a "secret project" called PROJECT NOX—a classified bioweapon development program creating "Hybrid Evolutionary Combat Units" similar to what was done to Graves.

Joel and a stealth team (Dante, Naomi, and Ghost—the Iron Fangs' best infiltrator) infiltrated the Blacksite Omega-2 research facility to destroy Project NOX before Kain could use it. They entered through underground waste tunnels, discovering an unexpected sublevel containing four experimental subjects:

Subject 01: A towering, emaciated figure with glowing veins across his arms.

Subject 02: A woman with pitch-black eyes who seemed to understand more than she revealed.

Subject 03: A former Hunter whose body was breaking down.

Subject 04: A silent child with disturbing awareness.

Despite the risks, Joel decided to free all of them. As they escaped the facility with the experiments, alarms blared. Joel had Naomi leak the Project NOX files directly to the public before setting explosives to destroy the facility completely.

With Project NOX destroyed and Kain exposed, Joel gathered all his allies for a final assault on Kain's private fortress—an abandoned military complex heavily defended with automated turrets, Hunter squads, and fortified security measures. He opted for siege warfare, surrounding the fortress and cutting off all escape routes.

Their first objective was to disable the fortress's defenses. Joel led a force to take out the underground power grid, sending a strike team to wipe out the generator room guards. Just as they were about to succeed, Kain activated something—a monster, his final weapon.

Instead of fighting the monster, Joel and his team headed straight for Kain's command center. They fought through halls filled with chaos as Iron Fang warriors engaged Kain's Hunters in brutal combat. When they finally breached Kain's control room, they found him waiting, calm and unafraid.

As Joel raised his weapon, Kain activated a final failsafe—injecting himself with his own experiment. A red glow spread across his veins as his strength exploded.

In the final battle, Joel observed that Kain's power was unstable, his reflexes too perfect, and the injection sites were glowing. Joel realized Kain wasn't reacting to attacks—he was predicting them. By disrupting Kain's rhythm and changing their attack patterns, Joel and his team broke Kain's advantage.

For the killing blow, Joel targeted the glowing injection sites on Kain's neck. As his blade slammed into one, Kain's entire body locked up, his enhancements tearing him apart from within. As Kain fell to his knees, he whispered: "You think... this changes anything?" Joel replied coldly: "Yeah. I do." Then he drove his blade straight into Kain's heart.

One year later, the world had changed. The Hunter Association had been dismantled—its corruption exposed, its leadership purged. A new system was rising, with Iron Fang warriors, former rogue Hunters, and even rescued experiments forming the foundation of something better.

Naomi became the leading mind behind the new Hunter Network, ensuring power never corrupted like before. Dante remained a fighter, now training the next generation of Hunters on his terms. Mira left the battlefield to run an independent sanctuary for those harmed by the old system. Ghost disappeared into the shadows. The Alpha and the Iron Fangs became the enforcers of the new order.

As for Joel, he became a legend—the one who ended an empire and burned a corrupt system to the ground. Standing on the ruins of the old world, watching the sun rise, he was approached by a young Hunter who nervously asked: "...You're Joel, aren't you? The one who stopped Kain?"

Joel exhaled, feeling the weight of everything that had led to this moment. Then he turned to the Hunter, offering a small, knowing smirk. "That's what they say."