

D. Diver 131

Chapter 131

I stare at my piles of loot on the floor and let out a long disappointed sigh. The white walls around me hum with a low and eerie tone. It makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I turn my head back and forth to take in the reality of the white walls around me with a clearer mind. With a loud clang, I drop my dagger and sword to begin walking slowly toward the back of the narrow rectangular room.

It's silent in here. I can hear my footsteps echo throughout the chamber. The small creeks and crunches of my old boots crawl in my ears as I walk. My heavy breaths and consistent heartbeats pound making me feel queasy.

I make it to the end of the hall, activating my All-Seeing Eye, then turn and begin walking to the other side.

"There has to be a way out of here. I need to find some kind of weak point..."

My pacing begins. Back and forth, extending the range of my exceptional perception to its limits. Mana is coursing through my body. It's being burned through almost as quickly as I plunder it. I try with all my might, but the range of my inner vision won't leave this confined space.

I can tell there's something out there and have witnessed it for myself firsthand. For some odd reason, I can't peer into the void.

Over 2 hours go by. Well... I think it's been 2 hours or so. It's impossible to accurately tell how long I've actually been walking. Using up so much mana on a perception-based skill is very mentally draining. I collapse to my knees beside my 3 piles of loot after confirming there are in fact no weak points to this white-walled prison.

It's been a long day.... Honestly, it's been a long couple of days. Ever since I came to the capital for the exams it's been non-stop hunting and getting into trouble. It's all of my own doing though. No one has forced me into anything... I'm just a battle junky that can't seem to get his fix....

My eyes begin to shut as I lie down on the hard marble-like floor and begin to let all my worries drift away.

I deserve a break... right...?

My mind and body are both on the verge of collapse and the hum of mana around me has become pretty normal for the time being. Over 2 hours in this odd environment makes the hum of energy in the air almost soothing.

My breaths begin to slow, and the humming sensation begins to lull me to sleep. I fall away from reality into a blissful dreamland for... Well, I'm not exactly sure how long.

The mana continues to buzz, and the white-walled room around me continues to miraculously exist within the black abyss that is the Titan's Domain.

A smile creeps across my face as I calmly snooze away my worries. My brain and body are thankful for the long-awaited rest.

In other words, I sleep like a rock.

Many, many hours later, my eyes begin to open and the bright white light of the walls on all sides blind me as I wake up. I let out a groan while stretching my arms, legs, and back. Lifting a hand above my face, I cover my eyes to adjust to the brightness while standing to my feet.

Another groan leaves my mouth as I reach over to my item stash and start to chug a bottle of water. Aside from this one, there are only 13 full bottles remaining.

I stop halfway through and let out a refreshing gasp for air, then take another look around.

"I'm still in this damn white-walled prison."

The second these words leave my mouth, my heart skips a beat. I gulp and run over to my sword and dagger lying on the floor, grabbing them both and cursing under my breath.

"I was supposed to meet Maria and the others to go hunting today... this is... not good..."

I twist my head around in all directions, snarling at the inanimate humming marble walls that keep me captive. I stretch my back and arms one more time while holding both my weapons tight. After that long rest, my body sure does feel rejuvenated.

I sprint around activating my stat-boosting skills while letting out a few practice shots of wind and fire magic at an open wall on the opposite end of the room. With a smirk, I watch the red and white crescents of energy erupt from my blades. I'm hit with a cold hard slap in the face from reality once again. They collide with the unbreakable walls, fizzling out into dispersed mana.

"Fine. I guess it's time to get serious."

I plant my feet and begin taking in all of the mana in the air around me. With each sword by my side, I start channeling energy into both of them. Activating all my buffs, glowing with crimson golden light, the ultimate charge-up begins.

For the first few seconds, the charge-up process is pretty normal. I've done it this way dozens of times, within 3 to 5 seconds I can usually charge an entire bar worth of MP in my blades. If I do both at once, 10 seconds should be more than enough. Unfortunately, normal isn't going to cut it this time.

After about 15 seconds of continuously plundering MP from my environment while focusing them in my blades, the two weapons glow brighter than I've ever seen them glow before. They've both hit full capacity and surpassed their limits. Each one of them holds close to 2000MP worth of pure firepower. That's over double my full MP bar in each blade. It's 4000MP in total for one attack...

The air pressure from my dagger is threatening to explode outwards. The dense flames in my sword crackle, waiting patiently to be released and burn everything in their path. An intense white light comes off my dagger and a deadly crimson glow seeps from my sword. I grit my teeth and continue.

"I can go further."

Another 10 seconds pass, and my blades are nearing 2 times the mana capacity they've ever received. The absorption rate slows drastically the further I push it. Both weapons vibrate violently in my hands.

"Just... a little more..."

Gripping the sentient blades with all my might for another 10 seconds, it feels like an hour passes in my mind. I'm nearly blinded by the white and silver shimmering glow that comes off my dagger,

and the dark red flames of my sword become even more ominous. More than 3500MP is stored in each individual blade. A combination attack would be close to four times any full-power move I've ever attempted. That's 7000MP in one attack...

My own sword's flames begin to burn my hands and the dense air around my dagger is making my joints creak trying to hold on any longer.

"It's time."

Letting out a yell as I swing both blades across the front side of my body, an ear-shattering release of force erupts from my blades. A metallic clanging mixed with the buzzing of my own mana reacting with the unique makeup of magic in the air echoes all around the room.

Two massive crescents of pure energy come rocketing out of my blades. One of them is pure silver, if looked at from the side it glimmers in and out of existence, a dense attack of wind magic. The other is a dark red flame with flickering black accents. It crackles and bends the air around it, leaving heat waves in its wake.

I'm thrown backward, but my eyes stay locked on the two powerful energy waves on a crash course for the white wall.

On impact, a ground-shaking twang rings out. It definitely feels and sounds different than all of my previous attacks. The moment they hit the mana barrier, something shakes beneath my feet, I'm sure of it. I feel the vibrations all around me. The two crescents of pure mana dissipate into the air moments after impact, this new reaction gives me a glimmer of hope.

Collapsing to my knees with a smirk plastered across my face, I wipe sweat from my forehead and stare straight ahead at the portion of wall where my full-strength ultimate attack just hit.

"Not even a scratch...."

The wall is completely unscathed, but I did feel a minor disturbance. So far, this is my only clue. After standing to my feet, I slowly walk over to my piles of loot and grab a handful of dried fruit while storing my blades in my item storage again. A breakfast of champions, there's only about 10 handfuls of fruit and 4 1kg bags of dried meat. It'll last me quite a while, but let's hope I can get out of here before food becomes an actual problem.

While chewing on a long strip of dried mango, I begin pacing back and forth along the long room's backside. Activating my All-Seeing Eye is useless, the only thing I can sense around me is this barrier sealing me off from an endless void. Doing so just fatigues my mind and honestly bums me out for no reason...

Dungeon Walker is the same. I can only teleport within this tiny confined space.

The echos of my footsteps while mindlessly pacing begin to fill my thoughts with worry and doubt. The rhythmic beats of my shoe's soles against the hard surface below me begin to be the only thing I can think about.

Every hour or so, I attempt to charge my blades up and attack the same portion of the wall.

The second time around, I have a pretty similar experience. Hands aching, blades shaking, and wall rattling as the attack hits it with nearly 7000MP in total. The whole charge-up process takes about 35 seconds.

My third attempt is a bit easier, the blades still shake and my hands still ache with pain as they grip the overly charged weapons, but to get up to the 7000MP threshold it takes just over 30 seconds. I push my limits for the extra 5 seconds and muster another 200MP worth of firepower into the brutal dual strike. The wall vibrates on impact, but yet again, remains completely unharmed.

As the day goes by, I manage to charge up 6 more attacks. Each time it gets a little easier to charge up to the previous limit and a tiny bit more MP can be squeezed into each weapon. By my final attack, I'm able to store just under 8000MP in both blades combined. That's almost 4000MP each and charged to full in just 30 seconds.

The metallic twangs of fire and wind imbued mana attacks on white-walled mana shields are getting louder, and the room-shaking sensation continues to grow slightly as well.

I've raised the attack's proficiency just by practicing, there's been no leveling up necessary. I guess training really does work... The mana released from each blade feels a little bit tighter and more refined. I've had more mana flow through my body today than I have in weeks worth of intense dungeon training.

I collapse to the floor next to my piles of loot, grabbing a handful of jerky and chugging the rest of my bottled water from this morning. The immense physical output and meticulous mana control have taken a huge toll on my body and mind.

This is good progress. I have nearly unlimited mana to work with in here, I'll train my way out of this madness.

"I'll escape the Titan's Domain."

Chapter 132

After my first long day of training, the next morning is not pretty...

I groan while stretching my arms and back out on the floor. My muscles feel sore and my skin feels tingly like mini pins and needles all over. My eyes adjust to the blinding white light around and I slowly sit up to let out a long exhale. All attempts at self-regeneration fail to fix much. It must be over-use of my abilities, I haven't ever processed this much mana in one sitting. I've felt a similar way after a long hunting session, but never to this extent.

I grab another bottle of water, then a handful of fruit, and go for my morning stroll. The mind-numbing pacing begins again. I have to pee pretty badly after a long night's sleep. At first, I panic but decide it's really the least of my worries. Bodily waste can be easily burned to nothing but ash and water vapor.

After about half an hour of procrastinating and fully waking myself up, I get to work on my new training regime.

At first, it's a bit of a tough start. My bones and joints feel sore and my muscles ache while holding onto my blades. I push through. Many tens of thousands of mana points surge through my body today.

After 10 total charge-up sessions over the next 8 hours, it feels like every millimeter of my body has been ripped apart with a dull knife and taped back together by a toddler. I collapse onto the ground beside my loot piles once again with a satisfied yet exhausted grin across my face.

A lot of progress was made today. Now, in just 25 seconds, I can store up to 4200MP in both blades. The progression is slowing, but it's far from over yet. I can feel a breakthrough coming soon, I just have to keep pushing.

Day 3 comes along and I realize I've just been counting days by sleep cycles... I'm not exactly sure how long I'm out each "night" and it's still even hard to tell how long I'm awake each "day". They're just guesses.

My teammates at the Association are probably worried sick and the Director most likely thinks I've bailed and gone rogue... None of that matters now though. My only worry is making it out of this prison alive.

Surprisingly, my body feels a lot better this morning. Sure, my joints and muscles feel like they've been run over by a truck... but that truck definitely lightened its load since it flattened me yesterday.

I take my usual morning pacing session while snacking on a handful of fruit, then get to work.

My body allowed for 12 full charge-ups today. In 35 seconds, I can store a little more than 4500MP in each blade. Together, that's just over 9000. Every attack I release becomes tighter, and more refined. The mana lets out a higher-pitched hum and the crescents of light are denser and thinner.

Every collision with the white wall gives me another glimmer of hope. It vibrates and shakes the room a little bit more with every tweak I achieve while improving my ultimate attack.

I fall asleep and repeat the process on day 4.

Then again, on day 5.

Over 100,000MP surges through my body each day, and I'm able to handle more and more every passing moment. The outside world begins to fade away from the forefront of my mind as I focus on one goal.

"I need to create a stronger attack."

On day 6, I start to get a bit frustrated. My progression is slowing down drastically, and my body's fatigue is building up again. After 16 full charges, I can manage just under 10000 MP in total. This is pushing to my absolute limits. While hands cramp and flesh burns holding on for almost 40 seconds, this is the best I can manage.

Along with my nearing plateau, the slowly diminishing food and water supplies are nerve-racking. I've started eating less and conserving more water as well. There's only 3 kg of jerky, 5 handfuls of fruit, and 10 bottles of water remaining.

I either strengthen this attack, or I die a slow and painful death....

Another 4 sleep cycles go by.

My progress is just getting slower and slower. I've managed to break the 10000MP mark, but it still takes me just over 35 seconds to fully charge the attack. It's been 10 days in here, now I can manage 18 full charges.

On the bright side, the glistening waves of mana that come out of my blades are evolving in their own right. My wind has taken an even sleeker form. The more I concentrate and refine my mana, the more transparent the shimmering silver air blade becomes. My fire burns hotter and condenses

into a deadly-looking black blade of flames. It shows almost no signs of red leaking fire as it rips through the air.

On impact, the wind expands into a dazzling silver and white explosion of light. The dense black blade now erupts into a mountain of bright red flames. Every hit shakes the floor beneath me more and more, but I'm increasingly discouraged when the energy disperses to reveal an undamaged white wall every time.

At the end of my long 10-day training marathon, I collapse to the floor in mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion. Whispering to myself as I drift off into a long slumber.

“Am I ever going to make it out of here...?”

As I wake up the next day, my pacing ritual lasts a little longer than usual. Close to an hour....

The days start to all blend together as I ration out my food into tiny little portions, and separate my water into the empty bottles so I don't accidentally drink too much at once. For the average human, I have enough for 10 more days... long and painful days... maybe...

I feel like I'm starving to death, and symptoms of dehydration are starting to kick in too. Luckily, with my self-regeneration skill mixed with the natural life energy properties of mana, an awakened person like myself can survive up to 2x longer without proper sustenance than a normal human. I still need to eat food and drink water, but this fact still buys me some time. Possibly, 10 more days of time. By then, my attack needs to be strong enough... I need a breakthrough.

The lack of nutrition and enough liquids over the next 4 days really begins to take a toll on my body and mind. I sleep longer through the night and begin to train less throughout the day.

The silent white walls around me begin to eat away at my sanity, and the lack of progression does not help one bit.

It's been 14 days.

I can charge up to 10000MP in just over 30 seconds, and my attacks keep becoming more and more refined. There's no numerical way to track the purity and density of the mana in each strike, so it's hard to know how much progress I've really achieved in that regard. Due to mind and muscle fatigue, my full daily charges have dropped to about 12-14.

Over the last two weeks, well over a million mana points have surged through my body and have come rocketing out of my blades. I've gotten to know my new dagger very well, and have an even better understanding of my sword. We've become much closer, but at what cost...

What does any of this matter If I never escape from here?

This must be what happened to those C and B-Class hunters a while back. The event Tripp referred to as “The Incident”. He said they all just disappeared.

At the end of day 14, with my eyes gazing upon the white floor and feet dragging behind me, I fall asleep dreading waking up tomorrow. Another day mindlessly throwing full-force attacks at an unbreakable wall.

I'm thoroughly exhausted and disappointed in the turn of events that followed my greed for more power. All I wanted to do was fight a strong opponent, but then again, I'm constantly looking for a stronger opponent. There's never an end to the journey to the top.

I let out a sigh.

“I’ve gotten way too ahead of myself...”

It’s just been lucky break after lucky break over and over. Every time I defeat an unbeatable opponent, there’s always a loophole. Is there no loophole today? Have I really met my match?

Letting out a long exhale, I let my weapons fall to the ground with a clang as I kneel in the middle of my piles of loot. There has to be close to 100 gold worth of items here. Counting my coins, pile of mana crystals, rare loot from the labyrinth, and especially... this ruby-colored egg...

I could easily sell every last penny of it and retire off in the mountains somewhere. I’ve already lived any hunter’s dream. A contract with the Association at 20 years old. Becoming a C-Class in just a matter of months... What more could I ask for? Why do I continue to sabotage my own life?

I stare at all my loot, regretting my decision to come to this dungeon over and over again in my head...

“I could have just stayed at that damn party.”

Anger and frustration have been building up in me for weeks. No amount of slashing at the walls can tame my current rage. The worst part about it is the only person I’m angry at is myself, there’s no one to blame here but me.

The closest loot pile to me is the pink crystals next to the ruby red egg. As much as I want to erupt into flames and start smashing everything around me, I pretty much can’t. My body and mental fatigue from constant training and lack of food and water have taken a huge toll on my resting energy levels.

All I can do is sulk in my own sorrow until tomorrow. A good night of sleep is the only thing that can ease my pain.

I lie down into the pile of mana crystals in front of me with the ruby red egg by my side and shut my eyes. Within seconds, I drift off into a deep sleep. Hopefully, tomorrow will be a better day.

Hours go by and my body heals itself to the best of its ability. I wake up to a curious sound...

I hear glass breaking.... Or, more like body-hardening crystals hitting the floor.

I open my eyes slowly as the bright white light from my prison cell blinds me. Letting out my signature groan and stretch, I rub my face and adjust to the brightness.

The first thing I see are small red crystal fragments all over the floor mixed in with the mana crystals I fell asleep on. I sift my hand through the stones and pick the red fragments out to examine them closely.

“What... is this thi-“

Crunch

I turn my head around as I hear a loud crunch. Fragments of pink mana crystal fly into my field of vision as I activate all my stat-boosting buffs, grab my blades, and stand to my feet.

My jaw drops and I stare in awe at the sight before me...

There's a small creature, no more than 1m tall with shiny black scales, wings, and a long narrow tail with an arrowhead at the tip. The underside of its belly, tail, and wings are bright red. The monster's 2 horns and wide eyes match the crimson theme.

It stares up at me with a curious gaze while tossing a mana crystal into its mouth using its tail.

Crunch

I gulp, blink a few times, then whisper under my breath.

"A... Baby Dragon....?"

Chapter 133

The meter-tall ruby egg I fell asleep next to has shattered. The top of it is cracked open and small red fragments of the shell-like material are all over the ground.

I can't believe my eyes.

A jet-black glimmering Baby Dragon is standing right in front of me eating my mana crystals like candy.

Crunch

I activate inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 1]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Plunderer [Mythic Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Bufs:

Guardian's Alliance [0/1]

The creature blinks at me with its crimson eyes and black pupils. Sharp white teeth bite down on another mana crystal as it flips its long pointed tail back and forth.

I just stare straight ahead in awe with my mouth wide open.

"It's really a Baby Dragon...."

Everyone and their mother has heard stories about Dragons. They're great mythical creatures that guard their treasures at any cost. The strongest, oldest, and most wise of all monsters.

How did I get my hands on a Dragon?

I gulp as we stare at each other in silence. The only noises present are the light humming of mana in the air and occasional crunches as the little creature continues to snack on the pile of pink crystals.

Almost a full minute passes, then the creature whips its tail around from its backside to poke my right leg. The creature backs up slightly, and prods at my back jeans with a small sharp arrow-tipped tail.

On the fourth poke, my jean fabric rips and its tail touches the skin on my calf. I look down and quickly pull my leg backward while flinching. It didn't hurt that much, but it was an unexpected pin prick. This monster may only be level 1, but that tail is still sharp...

The creature jumps backward to match my retreat, the abrupt movements startled it too. I look up with a smile putting my hands in the air, but what I see leaves me in awe once again...

There's a rectangle of blue text floating over the Baby Dragon's head. I read it carefully.

Guardian's Alliance [0/1]

Accept The [Demon/Dragon] Guardian's Alliance:

[YES][NO]

Baffled by the events unfolding in front of me I choose yes. There's no reason not to be on the same team as a Dragon...

The blue text above the small creature disappears. It shows me a wide toothy smile, then chomps down on another mana crystal.

Jaw hanging open, I continue to awkwardly stare. The meter-high creature crawls over to me with agile steps. It flawlessly weaves around the fallen mana crystals all over the ground with cat-like precision. Its agile winding body looks like a slithering snake as it approaches.

I just accepted its alliance, and this creature is only level 1. There are close to 0 threats, and it looks friendly enough... I watch it approach, while I let down my guard.

The Dragon dives between my legs and starts running around in a figure-eight pattern as it rubs its two crimson horns against my shins. It grins ear to ear, letting out a light purring noise. The tiny creature stops after about 20 seconds and looks into my eyes again, then promptly sits on my right foot white waving its long black and red tail around in the air.

Crunch

It bites down on another mana crystal and chews it to bits... I activate my Inspect and Appraisal skills again out of curiosity. The alliance buff must show up differently now, right?

[Lv. 2]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Plunderer [Mythic Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Bufs:

Guardian's Alliance [1/1][Greater Demon Contract]

I scrunch my eyebrow trying to process the new subtle changes in information.

“This doesn't make sense...”

Two things seem very odd. The first thing out of wack is its level. Somehow, this monster leveled up... Within the last few minutes, all it's done is eat mana crystals and rub its head against my legs. There's no possible way for it to level up in this environment.

I look down at the blissfully unaware scaled creature. It's trapped in this prison too...

I feel the sensation of mana leaving my body all of a sudden. A lot of it too... The little Black Dragon sitting on my foot begins to glow a faint red color from its underbelly.

I plunder mana from the environment around me, but the constant drain continues. This little monster is plundering my MP...

I grin, then let out a chuckle while I carefully slip my foot out of the boot it's sitting on.

The creature lets out a light chirping sound of confusion as it twists its head around and crawls toward me to get another sweet hit of my mana. [Mythic Grade] Plunderer must have some kind of mana to exp conversion attribute. If that's the case, it must have a very low conversion factor. It only grew from level 1 to 2 with half a dozen high-grade mana crystals and almost a full bar of my MP. Still, if my hypothesis is right, that's a really neat skill.

I've never seen or heard of a [Mythic Grade] skill before. Maybe this is unique to Dragons? Or maybe this is the next rank after [Legendary Grade].

Now for the second change, the “Guardian's Alliance” has been updated from [0/1] to [1/1] but [Greater Demon Contract] has also been added. The last time I checked, I was definitely not a Greater Demon.

Letting out a long exhale I look down at the mini Dragon as it looks back up at me. I raise one finger in the air and light it on fire.

The little creature perks up and shows me another one of its toothy grins. It twists its tail in the air and mimics my fire, lighting the tip of its tail with a dark red flame. I smile and put my fire out, it bobs its head back and forth, then does the same.

“Well... We're going to be spending a lot of time together little guy. I might as well give you a name.”

I scratch my chin, then tap my foot a few times. The Dragon just stares at me, blinking and waiting patiently. I stare back for a moment, trying to come up with something cool.

“Ember. That's a good one, Ember The Eternal Dragon. How do you like it?”

The little creature still just stares straight ahead. I roll my eyes... What was I thinking? Like it could actually understand me...

Unless...

“Telepathy.”

I activate one of my newest skills from the labyrinth, my [Legendary Grade] Telepathy skill. The moment I do, a soft, wise voice enters my mind.

“Hello Master, nice to finally meet you. “

Shocked, I reply sending my voice directly into its mind.

“Master? I’m... your master? You... can just call me Jay, and I’ll call you Ember.”

The tiny creature waves its tail with excitement.

“Yes M- Yes Jay. If you say so.”

“...”

“So this is our Labyrinth’s top floor? I will protect it with my life.”

Ember grins while spinning around to take a look at all four white walls. Then walking over to my loot piles and lying down directly in the center of my mana crystal stash.

Crunch

“I’m grateful for the mana crystals. It is a great awakening gift.”

Crunch

I watch the little creature chomp down on half a dozen more crystals. It doesn’t bother me much to be honest, there’s an unlimited supply of mana around us. This Dragon can eat all the crystals it wants.

Ember speaks using the telepathic link again.

“You’re an unusual Demon Ma- I mean Jay. Most Demons don’t look like humans.”

Crunch

I reply.

“Most Demons? What do you mean by that exactly...?”

“Your core shows me that you’re a Greater Demon. I just haven’t seen any that look like humans as far back as I can remember.”

I stare straight ahead as my mana crystals disappear into Ember’s mouth one by one. It continues.

“What are the maximum MP allowances here? How much mana are we working with to start? These crystals are nice and all, but I’ll need to plunder some of the mana from our surroundings if I’m going to gain any serious levels.”

“Well-“

“Is this a new labyrinth? Or has my egg been dormant for a while? This seems to be an odd one, but a Labyrinth is a Labyrinth. It’s our duty to protect it after all. Right?”

My heart starts to beat out of my chest. Everything is starting to become very clear to me now, and I’m really not sure how to handle all this newfound information.

If my guess here is correct, Demons and Dragons create some kind of special contract to defend Labyrinths. A Demon fends off intruders while the Dragon absorbs mana from the growing labyrinth. The growing labyrinth attracts greedy hunters that inevitably try to challenge the top floor’s defenders. If the Demon and Dragon can successfully defend their territory, the fallen hunter’s MP is added to their stash and the domain grows in power.

The more power that is gained, the greater the Labyrinth grows. The bigger the labyrinth grows, the more hunters arrive to gain riches. It’s a never-ending cycle.

The only issue here is.... I’m not a demon, and this dragon has no labyrinth full of mana to absorb.

I have to think this through very carefully.

I gulp, then the two of us sit in silence for over a full minute. My mind races for plausible solutions to take full advantage of this situation.

Finally, an Idea comes to mind. I smirk and reply.

“Ember. There’s been a change of plans. We’ll be leaving this Labyrinth.”

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Ember, the shiny black dragon with a crimson underbelly stares at me with curious eyes. He continues to munch on my mana crystals.

“A change in plans you say? Leaving the Labyrinth? This is not an option for us as-“

“We’ll make it an option.”

I grin, looking straight at my ticket out of here. This could work... I continue to speak to the tiny monster using my telepathy skill.

“How long does it take for you to absorb mana, and do you have a limit?”

The creature stops chewing on a large pink crystal for a moment, then looks up at me again.

“It depends. The first 100 levels or so are usually pretty quick, that’ll take a year at most. Then after that-“

“A year? A full year?”

The Dragon tilts its head and nods firmly one time. My stomach almost comes out of my mouth...

I’m really never getting out of this prison.

My face, previously full of hope, is now a disappointed mope. I drop to my knees.

“Well, back to training I guess...”

The Dragon continues.

“There have been exceptions in the past. One time I made it to level 300 in under a month! I absorbed an entire 20-floor labyrinth to do it though... My Demon was killed in the process and there was a full collapse, but it sure was fun! The higher-ups didn't like that one bit. Over 50 years in a dormant state... I still can't tell if it was worth it.”

I blankly stare at the Dragon, trying to piece together more of its random babbling into coherent thoughts. Did it just say, higher-ups? It was punished for killing a Demon and destroying a labyrinth for fun? 50 years ago....?

“So, you're saying you could level up faster if you had an enormous mana supply?”

I raise my hands in the air to point out the obvious nearly infinite mana supply we're stuck in. Again, the confused Dragon tilts its head.

Ember seems to really think this is just some messed up labyrinth.

“Sure. I can tell there's a large supply up here, but what about the lower floors? You still haven't given me any of the MP allowances. How long has this spawn been active? How much can I safely plunder per day?”

I scratch my head, thinking of where I should turn this conversation next. It'd be better if I keep playing along... If it really thinks we're protecting a labyrinth, for the time being, that's what we'll do. I'll explain how we're breaking out of this place once I have a better idea of its capabilities.

“One Hundred Thousand. It can handle losing that much a day without a problem.”

The Dragon's eyes open wide. It flaps its wings and jumps up into the air. With a shocking amount of speed, the miniature monster starts doing flips in the air.

“I really did it this time! I hit the jackpot in this life. Oh, karma's a funny thing! What a millennia to be alive!”

Grinning ear to ear, Ember finally calms down a bit and drifts back down to the floor. He continues.

“In that case, I'll still have to take it slow at first. To achieve my first rank-up, I'll have to hit level 100. This should be achievable within 5 days.”

I nod while biting my bottom lip.

“So it'll take 5 days. The higher level you climb, the faster you can plunder mana? Or-”

“Yea and no. I'll be able to absorb mana much quicker, but as my levels grow it takes much more mana to continue my steady progression. Hopefully, no hunters challenge us before I've matured. You've done a fine job growing this labyrinth without me. It's time we make a name for ourselves Jay. With this starting mana allowance, we'll break records. Oh, we'll break them all!”

Ember's eyes look determined, and that toothy grin is plastered across its face. I let out a sigh of relief.

This is an exciting new development. After two weeks of brutal training, I've finally hit another breakthrough. It just happens to be a pet Dragon... Ember finds a comfortable place on the hard marble-like floor and closes its eyes.

"I'll be busy for a while, It was a pleasure meeting you. Now we must get to work."

The miniature Dragon's underbelly begins glowing red as it activates its [Mythic Grade] Plunderer skill. I smile and nod while walking to the far end of the room.

"I'll be doing some training as well, I hope you don't mind the noise."

"Not a problem at all."

The two of us go to separate corners of the long white room and begin a long day of work. I take my usual small ration of food and water but have a lot more energy today. The appearance of my new mana-plundering friend has boosted my sprints a lot.

After 10 hours straight of charging, releasing, and resting. I manage to pull off 19 full attacks and hit a new personal best. With roughly 5350MP in each blade, it takes about 40 seconds to achieve a full charge. It's not as time efficient as any of my previous attempts, but it's a huge step in the right direction.

The large amounts of mana flowing through my system every day is beginning to seem much more natural. At first, it strained my joints and muscles a lot to continuously put them under such pressure. Now, it feels like my body is asking for more...

A successful day has come to an end. Although I've improved, I'm still dead tired after training all day. I sluggishly walk over to my pile of loot, passing the tiny glowing Dragon while it plunders mana from the surrounding area. I use inspect before falling asleep.

[Lv. 9]

I ponder the number in my head as I drift off. Ember has reached level 9. It did say the start would be slow, I guess I'll just have to wait the full 5 days to find out.

The 4 remaining days pass pretty quickly. I'm starting to lose a lot of weight. It's beginning to become noticeable. If I had to guess, since I stepped into this death trap, I'm down almost 5kg...

Not thinking much about the things I can't control, my training continues. After 4 more long sessions, I manage to complete 83 full charges in total. The most successful attack has been a 10900MP release, I managed it in under 40 seconds too.

In between full charges, I've been testing out smaller attacks. My speed and control of finer mana movements have dramatically risen. I can charge my blades up to 800MP each in less than a second. That's using nearly a full bar of my base MP. Just 3 weeks ago, a move like this would take me 3-5 seconds to pull off.

Even though I'm training a specific attack to break this wall down, the high volumes of mana surging through my body on the daily have boosted my overall mana control to levels I didn't even know were possible.

I've burned through over two million MP so far. This is more than most C-Class Hunters use in their full careers. I've been concentrating on one objective and training to succeed for just under 3

weeks now... I'm sure there's a better way to learn this mana control technique, but there isn't exactly anyone to teach me their ways in here. So, my brute force methods will have to do.

My wind-blade attack is nearly transparent now. The only way for me to catch a glimpse of its aura is by using a perception skill. Also, when it makes contact with the wall it detonates into a silver and white mana-rich display.

My fire has also become much darker and even more refined. The blackened flames rip through the mana-dense environment, leaving a trail of wavering air behind it. Every time it hits the white wall, bright red flames seep out looking for prey to burn.

My attacks have evolved with my training. I can tell they're getting more and more deadly with every strike I throw, but I still haven't managed to make even a mark on the white walls surrounding me.

My hope sits in the corner of the room giving off a faint red glow.

I sleep well tonight, knowing Ember will wake up soon. I've been making a mental note of his progression at the end of each day.

Day 1: [Lv. 9]

Day 2: [Lv. 23]

Day 3: [Lv. 40]

Day 4: [Lv. 61]

Day 5: [Lv. 94]

By the time I wake up tomorrow, Ember's first rank-up process will be complete.

I close my eyes and sleep peacefully. Although this has been hard, there is still a light at the end of the tunnel. I will find a way to leave The Titan's Domain.

Many hours pass as I dream of the outside world. At first, I dream of fun adventurers and running free. Sadly, they slowly twist into the skewed reality my subconscious weaves into my conscious mind. The people in my dreams are actually in the outside world, I am not....

Maria and the others must be worried sick... or maybe it's even worse, maybe they've given up trying to find me altogether. What if I'm a wanted man by the Association once I make it out? What if..? What if...

My restless sleep goes on for the entire night. I twist and turn as my sore bones and muscles desperately try to heal themselves. My stomach growls and my mouth is dry, even sleeping is starting to get really uncomfortable.

Nevertheless, I make it through the night, managing a few hours of decent sleep. I'm awoken by a light pin prick on my leg. Startled, I take a sudden leap backward, my head shaking and my hands instinctively rubbing my eyes. As my vision clears, I see a long, dark tail with hues of red, slowly slithering away from my lower body.

Letting out a sigh, I smile and reply while activating telepathy and letting my eyes adjust to the light.

“Good Morning to you too.”

In front of me stands a level 100 Dragon just over 2.5 meters tall. Stretching nearly 4 meters from nose to tail, its glossy black scales appear even darker, contrasting against its vibrant crimson underbelly. Two long red horns jut out from its forehead, mirroring the luster of its captivating eyes. Through our telepathic connection, the creature speaks, its voice resonating with more power and wisdom than before.

“Master. My rank-up is complete. Are there any updates on the state of our labyrinth?”

Chapter 135

I stare straight ahead at the newly ranked-up Dragon in front of me. Just yesterday it was no more than half my size, now it’s easily double. I grin and reply.

“Ember, I’m glad you’re rank-up went as planned. There have not been any changes. Our labyrinth is running smoothly.”

The jet-black glimmering Dragon begins to move around. The creature's speed has undergone a dramatic increase, while its finely honed cat-like agility remains as graceful and fluid as ever. The large monster glides through my piles of loot, circling me two times, then flapping its wings and lifting off into the air.

It hovers 10m above me for a moment, then glides back to the ground.

“Very well. If there is nothing new to report I will begin my next rank-up. This shouldn’t take more than 6 months. Please take care of the place while I’m under.”

I almost choke on my own tongue as I audibly gulp before replying through our telepathic link.

“Did you say 6 months? Half a year? It’s going to take that long?!”

The medium-sized Dragon smiles at me showing off its razor-sharp bone white set up teeth.

“It’s great, isn’t it? Only 6 months and I’ll already be at level 250. Having such a mana-dense Labyrinth is a lucky find. With readings like these, it’s almost like we’re in a Void Creeper’s Domain. I haven’t seen one of those disgusting creatures in a while. The last one I saw was before we even found this human realm. Those were the good old days weren’t they?”

With a puzzled stare, I try to piece together this monster’s babbling. There’s one thing I’m certain of, 6 months is not going to cut it. With my current food and water supplies, I’ll be lucky if I last another week....

I reply.

“Actually. There’s been a change of plans, I completely forgot... The humans sent a series of raids into the Labyrinth while you were out. I didn’t bother mentioning it earlier because they were far too weak to pay any mind.”

Ember’s eyes perk up. I continue.

“With that being said, your MP plundering allowance has risen. How much will you need to hit level 250? Is it considerably more than your first?”

“I’ll need close to ten million MP to rank up again.”

I nod, noting this very large increase... I’ll need to make reasonable, but also take into account my own urgency for time. I swallow hard, then reply.

“One week. Try to get your next rank-up done within a week.”

“Master- I mean Jay. Please consider your own safety. Plundering this much MP from even the largest of labyrinths would surely lead to a catastrophic collapse if done so abruptly. Sure, more monsters would invade the human realm, but it would be at the expense of another demon. That Demon, being you.”

I let out an exhale.

“I understand. This is an order. You will plunder 1.5 million MP per day. Rank up within the week.”

A sly grin comes across the Dragon’s face again.

“As you wish. It’s your funeral.”

I give the black-scaled crimson-glowing creature a firm nod. Ember folds itself up into a ball once again and starts to harvest the mana all around it. With this, I get back to work as well. My next long week of training begins.

The words said by the Dragon before its slumber stuck in my head though... Something about “Void Creepers”, could they have some correlation with the “Titans”? Also, Ember mentioned “the good old days” before “we found the human realm”...

The more I think about it, the more my mind races to connect with this newfound information. It all makes sense... I just don’t want it to...

Gates appeared about 80 years ago. The Great War was roughly 50 years ago. It’s said that there were massive breaks and monsters roaming free, terrorizing humans on both of these occasions. Other known terms for these two events are “The Arrival”, and “The Great Subjugation”.

This is how the Hunters Association became the unspoken world rulers. Only when strong hunters formed teams under a unified law did the world become peaceful again. We have The Hunters Association to thank for that.

From an outsider’s perspective, it seems like the Association leaders are just money-hungry nobles that seized power at an opportune time. The higher-ups may be this by definition to an extent, but they are here for the greater good... I think...

From everything I’ve heard about the labyrinths and breaks from the Associations side, and now from the perspective of a monster, things are starting to become a bit more clear to me. This is a worldwide power struggle, and I’m just scratching the surface on the juicy details.

Humans against the monsters.... But, why? What's all this mana hoarding and excessive leveling even good for? What's the ultimate goal here? I'm still unsure what either side is fighting for.

In time, I hope some of these questions become easier to answer. It seems I've stumbled upon an interesting new path of potential knowledge. I'm going to see how far it takes me one step at a time.

Deep in thought, over the next 7 days, I continue to train.

My attacks get more and more refined, and my ability to absorb mana gets faster and faster. Although it seems I've hit my limit on the amount of mana my blades can handle, roughly 11000MP in just under 40 seconds, I've discovered an even better way to train.

The more mana that runs through my body, the faster and more efficiently I can filter and control it. At the beginning of this new training cycle, charging up to about 2000MP per blade for a 4000MP total takes me roughly 2 seconds. My weapons hardly shake, and the backlash on my hands, muscles, and joints is minimal compared to my previous extreme sessions.

I'm able to repeat this process many more times, doing an attack at 1/3 full power is much easier on my body than going all out. This is just common sense. For every 2 seconds used for charging and releasing attacks, I only need a few minutes to regain my full composure.

Using 8-hour training windows, I'm able to charge and release up to 20 attacks per hour. That's 160 per day. On average, I'm running through 640,000MP. My daily output has grown significantly.

By the end of the week, I've nearly added 4.5 million points to my total mana usage. This is twice as much as all 3 previous weeks combined.

By the end of these 7 days, I'm able to charge up these two 2000MP attacks in just under 1 second. My plundering efficiency and speed have increased too. The density and pureness of each attack get closer and closer to a perfect strike every time I throw one at the wall.

The metallic twang of a 4000MP attack at the end of these 7 days is comparable to the vibrations of a full-powered 11000MP attack at the beginning of the week. I'm making so much progress, yet the wall still hasn't shown any signs of weakness.

That is... until the last day.

Using my newfound mana density and purity control, I decided to try for one more ultimate attack on a whim. I've been practicing all week with 4000MP, so I'm sure an 11000MP strike will feel great as a final attack for the day.

I charge up like normal, bringing both blades up to 5500MP each. They vibrate and glow, but I'm able to handle them with much greater ease. It takes less than 30 seconds, and I can tell this will be an enormous strike...

The mana itself isn't becoming more powerful. It's the density of the energy released that adds to its efficiency. The high amounts of mana running through my bloodstream over the last few weeks have given me much greater control over their movements within my body and within my blades.

After taking a deep breath, and aiming for the solid white wall, I let out a yell and release two crescents of highly refined mana. They slice through the air with astonishing precision. The air blade is completely invisible, and the fire is so dark it looks like a shadow flying through the air.

With a resounding twang that echoes throughout the room, the two crescents of energy collide with the wall, producing a deafening noise and causing the ground to tremble.

I grit my teeth and brace myself as the massive explosion of white and red magic expands and covers the back wall of this white room. When the residue clears, the first genuine smile of this entire month grows across my face.

The blank white wall in front of me is cracked....

“A... way out...”

I stand firmly, arms by my sides, gripping my blades tightly, and gaze in awe at the magnificent sight unfolding before me.

A 1m long crack in the white wall starts to leak with black energy. It hums violently like the void I was sucked into at the start of all this madness. I activate my All-Seeing Eye to confirm my theory, and it's immediately confirmed. I feel the seemingly endless twisting void connect with this small white-walled pocket dimension through the tiny tear in space.

Using plunderer, and my newfound aptitude for increased mana consumption, I push the limits of my perception ability. Burning through thousands of MP in an instant, I extend my range deep into the void.

For 10 seconds straight, until my fatigue begins to bring me to my knees, I push myself as far as I can go. This is the moment I've been training for, I have to find something useful...

Deep, deep within the void, I see another tiny white light. I clench my jaw and keep pushing my range. There's something out there. Something is in this void other than me.

“There's really a way out of the Titan's Domain...”

The moment I make this connection is the moment I lose it as well. The meter-long crack running along the white wall in front of me begins to shrink. The black swirling void begins to disappear from my mind's eye as the wall somehow heals itself entirely.

Seconds later, my All-Seeing Eye is useless. The white wall looks completely unscathed, and I can no longer sense the void at all.

“...”

I slump over and let out a sigh.

It's a little disheartening to see the wall heal itself in front of my eyes, but at least I've made some progress. My training may just be useless in the end, but at least it's keeping my mind busy. Without a goal or challenge in this white-walled prison, I'd surely have gone insane by now.

My food and water supply lessens with each day that passes. I only have 1.5kg of jerky left and I've eaten my last ration of dried fruit. There are only 6 bottles of water left and it's starting to really worry me.

I could finish all of this in one sitting, but I have to continue rationing it out indefinitely... I've lost nearly 7kg. My cheeks are starting to show signs of caving in and my abs are visible, at this rate, my ribs are next.

Ember glows brighter and brighter as he continues to level up. I make a mental log of his constant progression at the end of each day.

Day 1: [Lv. 133]

Day 2: [Lv. 174]

Day 3: [Lv. 207]

Day 4: [Lv. 224]

Day 5: [Lv. 236]

Day 6: [Lv. 242]

Day 7: [Lv. 247]

The monster's leveling speed decreases as it rises higher and higher. This is much different from its last rank-up. For its first 5 days of mana consumption to rise from level 2 to 100, it took no more than 500k MP in total. I gave it an allowance of 1.5 million MP per day this time around, and on its final day, Ember only rose 5 levels. That's an average of 300k MP per level on the final day, and it's only becoming more and more costly.

I fall asleep on the 7th night satisfied with my week's worth of training. I'm Eager to see what Ember's new form will look like after this rank-up.

Many hours pass. My dreams of the outside world seem to just drift by as well... I've embraced the fact that whatever happens here, just happens. All I can do is continue what I started. I'm trying my hardest every day, training to exhaustion, and staying alive. If I make it out to see everyone again, I'll deal with those consequences when the time comes.

A sudden jab in my side wakes me from my slumber. I don't flinch, nor do I immediately open my eyes. This kind of wake-up call was anticipated.

I activate my telepathic link while stretching and slowly adjusting to the blinding morning light of the white walls.

"Good Morning Ember. How was your- Oh-"

As soon as my vision clears up I see a majestic form in front of me. At over 4m tall while sitting down, and easily 7m from head to the tip of his long twisting tail, Ember spreads his wings and replies.

"It seems our labyrinth has not collapsed. You were right, I shouldn't have doubted your judgment."

The radiant black-scaled dragon lowers its head, directing attention toward its long crimson horns. Upon closer inspection, I notice that they're made of a material similar to a demon's horn.

The Dragon's deep red eyes are the size of my open palms. It blinks at me a few times, then continues to speak through our link.

"Are there any updates? Or shall I begin my next rank-up?"

"There are no major updates. You'll be able to rank up again soon if you wish."

After my reply, I'm left wide-eyed staring at the huge creature before me. I thought the Dragon's last form was impressive, but this one is on another level.

If my predictions are correct, my ticket out of this Titan's Domain is about to show itself. The rate of Ember's mana plundering is only increasing in speed. If anyone can absorb and collapse an endless void of energy, it'd be him...

I grin to myself, then look up at the majestic black dragon. A few questions have been lingering in my head this whole week, and a few more ever since my breakthrough in training last night. Now would be the time to ask them before Ember goes back to sleep.

"I have a few questions."

"Of course, please ask as many as you'd like Master."

Ember makes himself comfortable, laying in a neat ball resting against a white wall. I nod firmly, ignoring the fact that he called me master again, and begin my questioning

"First of all, how much mana will you need to achieve your next rank-up?"

"Usually, the third one is the toughest. Even with a medium-sized labyrinth, a Dragon with Mythic Grade proficiency like me would still take decades to achieve this feat. I've only hit the third evolution a couple of times in my many lives. It's a level 500 threshold, roughly 25 billion MP is needed."

My eyes open wide as I try to do the mental calculations. He'll need to plunder billions of MP a day to achieve this... that's thousands of times more than the previous week. If I want to get out of here before my food supply runs out, I have two options. I'll either need to make a lot more progress on my mana control to open up this white box myself, or Ember is going to have to rank up again. Both are a gamble, and neither has any guarantees to help me one bit... I guess my odds will be better if I try to achieve both.

I ask my next question.

"You mentioned Void Creepers. What... are those?"

Ember smirks and raises his head, then settles back into a comfortable position before responding.

"Void Creepers? They're just pesky mindless world hoppers that live between realms. I've only witnessed one of their forms, a form similar to humans actually. The elders used to call them Titans. They have access to immense mana pools stored over long periods of time. It's not necessarily their mana, they just exist in it. Any creatures that come within range of those things are swallowed up whole in an instant, never to be seen again, absorbed into their void as more fuel. Their only true enemies are Dragons. Or, in theory, a slime if it could level up high enough. With enough time, a Dragon like myself can plunder any pool of MP no matter the size."

A wide grin stretches across my face. A "Void Creeper" is just another name for a Titan. Well, to put it more accurately, I guess a Titan is a type of Void Creeper... Ember continues.

"I've heard of Dragons ranking up multiple times from one Void Creeper encounter."

"..."

Looking at the blissfully unaware Dragon spew valuable information starts pulling at my heartstrings. It's about time I let Ember in on a few of my secrets.

I let out a sigh, then look straight into the majestic Dragon's deep red eyes.

"Hey. Can I trust you?"

The black-scaled creature twists its head to the side looking at me curiously while waving its long thin arrow tipped tail around aimlessly in the air.

"Of course. We're contracted, that's the highest form of trust a Demon and Dragon can share."

I gulp.

"Is that right...? Could you explain to me exactly how this contract works? I'm... pretty new to all of this."

"Certainly. A Demon and Dragon may create a sacred alliance to protect a growing Labyrinth. A Demon is tied to its realm and has a duty to expand its territory. A Dragon is obligated to plunder mana and bring it back to the rulers once their life has run its course. A contract between the two links their lives in many ways. If one dies, the other does too. If one gains exp, so does their counterpart. It is a perfect partnership for any two like-minded monsters wouldn't you say so?"

"I... would say so..."

"Is that all?"

"Have you ever left a labyrinth?"

"Of course not. It is a Dragon's duty to protect their domain. If I were to do so, that would put my Demon at great risk."

I nod slowly while staring down at the ground. I'm contracted to a Dragon... It must be the Demon's Core I absorbed, that's why I'm able to fulfill its alliance contract. I'm bonded to a Dragon... until death...?

After a long pause, I look back up at Ember and decide to tell him the truth. If this is going to work out long-term, I'll have to tell him everything. There's no easy way to say this, but I guess I'll have to start somewhere.

"I'm... actually a human."

The room falls completely silent. The Dragon's tail stops waving back and forth, and its crimson eyes lock on me with a stare that pierces my soul.

At first, it's skeptical. Then, Ember's gaze grows intense as his eyelids tighten. Finally, curiosity wins the battle of emotions. The Dragon replies.

"Now... this... is new."

A wide grin grows across the monster's face as I continue.

"I've absorbed a Demon's Core, and well, stole the egg from a Labyrinth's boss room. I thought it was a gemstone or energy-rich core. Apparently, I was wrong. It was a Dragon's egg."

The grin across Ember's face widens even more as he lets out a bellowing laugh through our telepathy link.

"You... You have got to kidding me. No wonder this labyrinth felt so weird! There are always different variations depending on the Demon's preferences... but I guess this is what happens when a human takes over. Ha! Oh, this life just keeps getting better... With my luck, we're not even in a labyrinth at all, this is just a Void Creepers endless mana pool. Now wouldn't that be something!"

The bellowing Dragon continues to laugh and even begins flapping its wings, hovering a few meters off the ground while looking down at me. I whisper in a low tone through the telepathy link.

"I uh.... I think it is. This is a Titan's Domain, if I'm not mistaken."

Ember stops hovering instantly and hits the hard white ground with a thud while staring at me wide-eyed. He looks around the white room and begins feeling the walls with its tail and sharp claws.

"How..."

"..."

"How... Did I get so lucky? I knew you were a special one, Jay. This is my favorite contract yet, and it hasn't even been a hundred years! I might actually hit the third rank in a matter of weeks. Now wouldn't that be something!"

Letting out laughs of joy, the Dragon spreads its jet black wings to show off the glowing red underside, then jumps up high into the air. This small room is rather limiting for the massive beast, but it still manages to do a few laps while erupting into flames.

Its fire is dark red just like mine. The point where it leaves Ember's mouth it is almost pure black, a very similar color to the dense energy that comes out of my sword. It is a Dragon, after all, its mana control is probably even better than mine...

I still have so many questions to ask, but I should let the majestic creature enjoy itself. This reaction is much better than him getting mad and eating me alive. I cross my arms and watch the flames dance and the Dragon soar.

After a solid 20 minutes of celebration, the 7-meter-long fire-breathing monster finally settles down and comes back to greet me.

"Well, I've gotten that out of my system. Now let's get down to business."

I smirk and nod firmly.

"So, now that we're on the same page.... How do we get out of this prison?"

"We'll have to weaken it, then tear a hole right through. A Void Creeper's realm is one of the weakest because technically it's not a realm at all, it's just between two others."

Ember claws at a white wall, then lets out a dense ball of flames. It bounces off without leaving a scratch. The Dragon nods slowly while looking back over to me.

"In this form, and this level, I have no way of breaking through. I'll need to rank up again. That's the only way I'll be able to absorb enough mana to weaken this prison and have a fighting chance at denting this barrier at all."

I think back to my final attack last night. I managed to make a small tear in the white wall when I condensed enough mana and released it all at once. If the realm is weakened, and I can increase my attack's strength even more...

"This could work.... How much MP can you absorb without a day allowance limiter?"

The Dragon begins curling up into a ball.

"I'll have to start where I left off. A few million a day will be my limit in the beginning, but without fear of a labyrinth collapsing, I can go all out. My rate of absorption will increase as my levels rise. I believe a rank-up is possible in just a few weeks."

I take a deep breath while accounting for my food supplies and past training progression. It'll be brutal... but one or two more weeks in here is possible. I just have to make my 1.5kg of jerky and 6 bottles of water last.... I'll be in critical condition, but with my self regeneration skill and a few HP potions, I can keep myself alive as long as I have mana. It just won't be pretty. I'm down about 7kg in total and still dropping fast.

I reply with a thin smile.

"Perfect. Rank up as fast as you can, I'll have a plan ready when you awake."

"Understood."

Ember closes his eyes and begins to glow with a faint red light.

I turn to the opposite side of the room and grab my blades. My final training session is about to begin.

Chapter 137

In my last training session, lowering the amount of MP per charge increased my progress to a surprising degree. Handling lower amounts of mana is much easier to control and is more realistic in the long run after all. To raise my mana control proficiency, the total amount of consumed mana over time seems to be more of a determining factor than the amount I can muster per attack.

As levels increase, they bring forth improved overall stats in all categories. However, I'm finding that the refinement of mana requires a higher level of control and experience to master. While raw power may grow with leveling up, the true potential of this new power is becoming more clear to me with every passing day.

I wonder if B and A-Class hunters normally practice their mana control. Doing so without a plundering ability would cost a fortune. I'm burning through hundreds of gold worth of MP, even for an Elite hunter, this would be impossible to train consistently... right?

I decide to create the "One Second Rule". Every day I train for 8 hours. I charge up for one full second with as much MP as physically possible, then release it all and rest for 2-4 full minutes.

On day 1, I'm able to charge 2000MP into each blade in just under 1 second. The progression is slow, but the results pay off in the end. It's a brutal process, but I manage to average over 750k MP usage per day by the end of the week.

My rate of control increases quite a bit. In just one second, I'm able to hold 2750MP in each blade. Anything under 1000MP per blade can be charged while I swing, the attacks are deadly projectiles charged almost instantaneously.

At the end of each day, I test my progress with a fully charged attack. I still cap out at around 11000MP in total, but getting there is a lot faster. In just over 20 seconds, I can release this ultimate attack.

After each strike, the tear in the pristine white wall grows, a testament to the progression of my attack. Despite the damage inflicted, the wall heals itself in an instant each time, leaving no trace of my assaults. Its smooth surface remains unscathed, taunting my efforts.

At the end of day 7, the final tear looks wide enough for me to squeeze through if I tried. It's just over 2m high and a little under half a meter across.

I'm getting dangerously low on food and water. My jerky is at 0.5 kg and my water is down to 3 bottles.

Ember has been progressing slowly. I've made a mental note of his progress at the end of each passing day.

Day 1: [Lv. 253]

Day 2: [Lv. 260]

Day 3: [Lv. 269]

Day 4: [Lv. 281]

Day 5: [Lv. 293]

Day 6: [Lv. 306]

Day 7: [Lv. 322]

His levels are going up faster every day. It seems the rate of absorption is slowly rising. I just have to hang on a little longer.

I've gotten to the point where I'm not even hungry anymore. I just wake up, train, go to sleep, then do it again.

My 1-second charge capabilities have risen to 3500MP per blade, and my full power strikes can be charged up to 12500 and released in under 15 seconds. This may seem like a dramatic jump in just 3 days, but there's an interesting explanation as to why.

The crimson glow around Ember has become much stronger. The air, ground, walls, and ceiling around the resting Dragon hum loudly as it continues to absorb MP and level up.

End of Day 8: [Lv. 339]

Anytime I get within a 10m radius of the slumbering beast, my own mana begins to be sucked into the growing red aura.

End of Day 9: [Lv. 357]

My stash of mana crystals gets accidentally absorbed in its large plundering radius today. I throw all my loot into my item storage for safekeeping.

This is the day I eat my last bite of food, I've completely run out. I have a bottle and a half of water remaining, but it's not looking good...

Beginning of Day 10:

Today is the day when everything changes... I wake up to a familiar ringing sound in my head.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

While rubbing my eyes and standing to my feet, I open my status to realize I've leveled up 3 times overnight... Somehow, I'm level 362 now. It's odd, but with my tired mind, starving body, and singular goal, I decide not to think much of it and get back to work.

Walking past Ember, the aura around its body is nearly 20m in diameter. It emanates a deep crimson hue, pulsating with intensity and filling the air with a loud hum. The floor beneath us quakes with a violent rumble. I use inspect to check on its progress.

[Lv. 362]

Odd, it's exactly the same level as me... During my training today, I hear the "level up" sound go off in my head over and over again.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

It goes off 15 more times in fact... My maximum mana reserves have risen because of the pure stat-based boosts and my swords have leveled up a good amount too.

I check my status.

I can hardly believe the number that floats at the top of the blue screen.

[Lv. 377]

I'm exhausted from my long day of training without a single but to eat. I'm on my last 1-liter bottle of water, and dreading the day it runs out.

My final test of strength goes very well. The 12500MP strike rips a 5m long and 2m wide tear in the white wall. It stays open for almost 30 seconds before sealing completely.

My mind is fuzzy and my body is weak. As I fall asleep, a few words the Dragon said about our contract repeat in my head as I drift off into a peaceful slumber.

"If one dies, the other does too. If one gains exp, so does their counterpart. It is a perfect partnership for any two like-minded monsters wouldn't you say so?"

The connection in my foggy nutrient-deprived brain finally clicks. The reason for my accelerated level growth becomes clear: I am actually sharing Ember's experience gains.

As I drift off, a faint smile tugs at the corners of my lips. Even though I'm on the opposite side of the white-walled prison, the rumbling and intense humming of the black-scaled Dragon's [Mythic Grade] plundering skill reaches my ears. It's a reassuring reminder of the strong companion that now stands by my side.

My dehydration and mental exhaustion are pushing me to my absolute limits. My lips are cracked, my joints aching, and my hair starting to fall out. No amount of self regeneration is helping at this point. The hard ground is getting comfortable, the hot dry air is oddly soothing, and the lack of food and water hardly bothers me. All I'm focused on is finishing my mission.

Hours later, I'm woken up by more "level up" ringing noises.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I gained another 7 levels in my sleep... I'm at 384 now.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 384

Hp: 1925/1925

Mp: 320/1925

Strength: 945[+954][+652][+473]

Speed: 1112 [+667][+556]

Agility: 1211 [+545][+836][+606]

Defense: 835 [+334][+418]

Mental Strength: 945 [+567][+378][+425][+662][+491][+473]

Skills:

Absorption [Special Grade]

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spacial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength

Dual Wielding [Special Grade]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Items Equipped:

High Ogre King's Ring [+60% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength]

Serpent King's Scale [+45% Agility] [+45% Magic Resistance]

Desert Troll's Charm [+45% Mental Strength]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+101% Strength][+70% Mental Strength]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Wind Aspect][+69% Strength][+69% Agility][+52% Mental Strength]

[Greater Demon's Core] +50% All Stats

[Lenses Of Illusion]

At this rate, I'll be a B-Class in just a few more days. I gained 20 levels yesterday and 7 while sleeping... If I can survive this trial I'll be a B-Class just mere weeks after my C-Class exams...

Today, as I do my morning ritual of rubbing my dry eyes, stretching my poor arms and back, then slowly standing to my feet. I realize my MP bar is nearly at 0... A red tint fills my vision and the ground beneath my feet reverberates with a powerful hum.

I look over to the far side of the rectangular white-walled room to see Ember bathed in an aura of intense, dark red energy. The surroundings seem to bend and warp under the sheer pressure of the Dragon's skill.

I step closer and the hum gets louder. Every echoing footstep I take toward the rapidly leveling Dragon sucks more and more MP from my body. I'm easily able to plunder my way back up to full, but it's still an odd sensation.

At 50m away, the ground isn't just humming anymore, it's rattling making it hard to stand up straight without concentrating on my balance.

At 20m away it's a whole different story. The crimson veil around the creature is so dense that if I didn't have an MP plundering skill myself, along with the intense training these past few weeks, I'd be sucked dry of mana in an instant. The floor shakes and moves violently at this distance, it's very difficult to stay upright.

Determined, I tighten my jaw and decide not to go in any further. I understand that by keeping my distance and focusing on my training, this ordeal will be over soon. Based on my foggy-brained calculations, Ember has the potential to achieve a rank-up within the next 5 days, given his current rate of progress. My primary goal here is to endure and survive.

"Just... a little longer..."

Chapter 138

I make my way back over to the more peaceful, less ground-shaking side of the white-walled rectangular prison.

My training for today begins but ends shortly after.

I only manage to get 3 hours in. My bones are aching, my mouth is dry, and the muscle fatigue is becoming overwhelming. I have under a liter of water left. The only progress made today is thanks to my rise in levels.

In the last 3 hours, I've gained another 4, bringing me up to level 388. Over the last few weeks, I've managed to burn through just over 10 million MP. This is multiple times the amount most D or C-Class hunters will ever use in their entire lives...

The risk-to-reward ratio of training my mana control any further is not worth it. Before I entered this void prison, I didn't even know refining one's mana was possible. My attacks have become close to 5 times as dense, hence 5 times as deadly with the same MP output. My blade's total holding capacity has grown almost 2 times. With the near-unlimited stores along with my sentient weapons, I'm able to charge and release attacks up to 6 times my full MP bar.

Taking all the factors into consideration, a full-strength attack within these walls is up to 30 times as effective as it was just a few weeks ago. My rising levels are continuously adding to that number as well.

I test out an ultimate attack to end the 11th day of this training cycle.

Focusing my mana and gripping my rattling blades, I unleash two magnificent attacks. The first is a thin shining black blade and the second is a transparent crescent of wind. The combined power of these strikes amounts to nearly 13,000 refined MP.

My energy collides with the white man barrier letting out a metallic twang, then ripping through my prison's wall. A massive 10m high, 3m wide tear in space opens as the two crescents of expanding white wind and crimson flames continue to soar through the black void behind the wall.

I grin while dropping to my knees, preparing to sleep after my short yet effective day of training.

While my eyes shut, I activate my All-Seeing Eye to monitor the progress like usual.

I would typically gasp in shock at the astounding results, but my weary body and mind are too fatigued to muster a reaction. Drifting off to sleep, I witness the two powerful energy waves tearing through the outer wall of the apparently, not-so-endless black void. A small portion of my attack manages to break free from the confines of the Titan's Domain, escaping into the outside world.

I've managed to find the outer edge.

I close my eyes, and sleep for hours, but am rudely awakened by the sensation of a vibrating floor and my MP bar nearing 0 again. Standing to my feet while plundering my mana points back to full without much issue, I check my status.

I've gained another 5 levels... I'm at 393 now...

With the rumbling floor below me glowing a faint tint of red, I look over to see how Ember is doing. My jaw nearly drops to the floor as I take in the sight before my eyes.

The crimson aura has doubled in size since I last examined it. I can barely make out an outline of the slumbering dragon. The walls around it look very distorted... Almost as if the white-walled barrier around us is being completely absorbed.

I gulp.

If this box collapses in on itself, the only logical explanation I have would be that we would be floating through that endless black void outside. The unpleasant memory of falling through nothingness flashes through my head for a moment before I snap back to reality.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye, I confirm my prior hypothesis to be correct almost immediately.

The white-walled barrier between us and the outside void is slowly beginning to dissolve. The area nearest to the Dragon is the weakest. It feels just like the tear in space that I create every time I release an ultimate attack.

Ember is creating millions of micro-tears as he absorbs more and more mana from the surrounding area. Over the last day or so, the rate of absorption has grown to become slightly higher than the rate of this barrier's recovery. Slowly and steadily, these white walls will be torn away.... Then, we'll have to face the void....

I shutter, staring down at my 500ml of water remaining. If I were to fly out into the endless void, what would happen? How long would it take for Ember to plunder every last drop of MP in this realm between realms? Would this be enough to sustain me?

I let out a sigh while deactivating my perception skill. It's probably a better idea for me to think of a quicker way out than to sit and ponder questions I have no way of finding the answer to.

Gritting my teeth, and nodding with a motivated grunt. I've decided to attempt an ultimate strike with all of my available MP once per hour. My body is too weak to continue intense spurts of mana control training, the fastest and most efficient way for me to get stronger is to just sit in place and level up with the help of Ember's exp link.

Every hour, for 4 more hours, I do exactly as I've planned.

I release waves of energy at the white wall and they cut through the empty void slicing the back wall each time. I've gained 5 more levels, bringing me to level 398, but the progress has slowed.

I'm able to penetrate the back wall of the black void, but the white walls heal completely before I have a chance to ever send a second attack through. The rise in levels has increased my MP output slightly as well, every little bit counts.

After these strikes, I'm thoroughly exhausted. My biggest fear has also come true. I'm completely out of food and water. Those last drops were necessary to continue my futile full-power-slashing attempts.

Ember's aura has grown so wide, that even at the far side of the room, I'm partially engulfed in its red tint. The only way I'm able to see or sense the Dragon is by using my All-Seeing Eye. It's completely covered in a blood-red veil of light. The area of white walls surrounding it is dissolving at an alarming rate, growing more transparent every second.

My head aches, my lips crack, and my joints cry out in pain as I collapse and fall asleep once again. I'll have one more chance to find a way out when I wake up. If I fail tomorrow, then I'm as good as dead.

The rumbling floor, loud humming, and drifting red cloud of aura fade off into the back of my consciousness as I drift off to sleep.

Many hours go by again and I'm awoken by the dinging sound of "level up" notifications in my head. The floor beneath me is violently moving up and down, the metallic hum of mana fills my ears, and my vision is completely clouded by a murderous red tint.

Opening my status, I see I've gained 6 more levels while I was out. Level 404...

I activate My All-Seeing Eye, fearing what will show up in my vision.

For a moment, I don't move a muscle....

Ember's presence is nearby, but I can't say the same for most of the walls in this room. I'm not sure I can even call it a room by definition anymore.

The only white barrier-like walls I can sense are on my backside, and in front of me for about 10 meters at most. The rest of this ominous floating prison has been completely dissolved and absorbed by the sleeping Dragon nearly 100 meters away.

If the thick red aura blocking my vision wasn't present, I would be staring out into an endless black void. The Mp in my status is completely drained. I'm able to replenish it, but If I'm not constantly plundering MP it drops rather quickly.

"This... is... insane...."

I grip both of my weapons tight and prepare for the attack that I've been putting off until this very moment.

So far, all of my full power strikes have been aimed at the white wall on the far side of the room as far away from Ember as possible. I didn't want to disrupt his rank-up process. Now, it's a much different story. If I don't do something drastic, it'll be the end of me....

I aim my blades at the wide-open void in front of me. It's all or nothing this time around. I'll give one more strike every last bit of strength I have left in me.

Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I grip my blades tightly and begin plundering MP all around me. Every drop of mana that enters my body is refined, condensed, and imbued into my two weapons.

After 15 seconds, I've already achieved a new record. In total, my blades have 14000MP stored between them, and I continue to push on. They glow with dark red and bright white light. The excess wind and fire magic around my two weapons rips away at the frail skin on my hands and arms.

Just 10 more seconds pass and I manage to squeeze in another 2000MP. The joints in my fingers and wrists threaten to snap as I hold on with all my willpower remaining.

Another 5 seconds go by, and I'm on my last leg. It feels like every cell in my body is screaming at me to stop as I continue to hold on and stand strong. A final 1000MP is stored in my blades, bringing the total to 17000MP.

With a final yell of agony, I swing both blades across my body to let a reality-tearing attack.

As each wave of energy emanates from my blades, my eyes roll back into my head, overwhelmed by instantaneous exhaustion and fatigue. Due to the repetitive tremendous strain on my body and mind, I lose consciousness and succumb to the depths of oblivion.

With no limiting barrier to greatly decrease my attack power, the two curved blades of pure element-imbued refined mana rip through the darkness of the endless void with terrifying speed.

In seconds, they collide with the outer wall of the Void Creeper's realm slicing through it like a skilled surgeon's scalpel. An enormous tear opens up in the back wall growing in size as the two crescents of energy detonate on impact. They collide with foreign mass outside of this realm, compounding their explosive power.

This destructive force shakes the walls of the entire Titan's Domain as the tear in space grows exponentially larger.

The red aura of Ember's rank-up seeps out deeper into the void, finding the path of least resistance. That path, being the only way back to the outside world....

The tear rapidly expands as the Dragon continues to absorb its surrounding. I float out into the empty void as the last remaining bits of the white walls disappear.

In a brilliant flash of light, as the tear stretches to the length of the entire backside of the void, Ember's crimson aura continues to surge and expand. It overwhelms the near-infinite darkness, becoming the dominant energy in this realm between realms.

Hours later....

After lying unconscious on a hard surface I open my eyes to see a small black gem about the size of a coin laying on the dry ground peeking out from a patch of sun-bleached grass.

I release the death grip on my blades, putting them into my item storage and picking up the odd shiny stone.

Standing to my feet, I lick my dry lips and feel my caved-in stomach gurgle while taking in the beautiful view....

A black and red dragon soars high in the sky over an endless horizon of rising and falling hills.

A wide grin creeps across my face.

"I've made it back to The Great Plains."

Chapter 139

I stand in the middle of The Great Plains Dungeon rolling the black coin-sized gem around in my right hand while watching Ember flap his wings high above me.

"This must be a Strengthening Fragment"

I turn my head to see a massive crater on the dungeon's floor. It stretches nearly 50m in diameter, and the debris is scattered even further away on all sides. This is where I knocked down that Titan, and fell into its domain almost a full month ago. It seems like In the end, I won the battle and made it back in one piece.

Activating my telepathy skill, I call out to the shimmering jet-black dragon in the sky. It descends gracefully through the air to greet me.

"Jay, you've awoken."

Ember hits the ground with a light thud, sitting obediently with his head held high and long tail waving behind him. I look the creature up and down curiously for a moment. It doesn't look like he's changed at all. The 3rd rank-up must have ended with an incomplete result.

"It seems you haven't evolved any further."

"That's correct. Once the Titan's Domain couldn't handle my absorption rate, along with the attack you threw to disrupt the connection between realms, I was forced awake. We were thrown back into this dungeon hours ago, right after the Void Creeper's link was severed from its pocket dimension. You've been unconscious ever since."

I smile.

This reunion is nice and all, but I need food, water, and rest. My dry lips and caved-in stomach can't take it much longer, I've lost almost 12kg over the last month. I struggle to stay on my feet as I reply.

"I need to leave this dungeon and heal up from our ordeal.... It may be your first time contracted to a human, but I assume you realize things are going to be a lot different this time around. We don't have a labyrinth to protect, so you'll have to serve me in a much different way than a demon."

Ember bows his head as I continue.

"No one can know you're here."

"Of course, humans are quite troublesome creatures. If they were to see me in their realm I- I meant troublesome in a--"

I chuckle out loud.

"I agree. Humans are a bit troublesome aren't they."

Coughing, while activating my perception skills while preparing my dungeon walker ability, I continue.

"Stay at the back of this dungeon and don't come out for any reason. I'll be back as soon as possible with a plan for us to leave when I have a clearer head. It shouldn't take more than a few days. No attacking monsters or hunters while I'm gone. If you die, I die. Got it?"

"Understood. I've waited decades to come back to this realm, a few days is nothing to me."

With a majestic flap of his wings, the 7m long black-scaled dragon shows off its crimson underbelly as it flies into the open sky. With a thin smile, I teleport away.

I decide to go back to the Alpine Starter Dungeon. It's a last-second decision, but the thought of walking through the Dungeon Hub and all the way through the capital seems like a bad idea right now.

Plus, I'd need to get a hotel room and everything, I might collapse before that happens. Going back to my hometown seems like the most logical move. I just hope my landlord isn't too mad... It's been well over a month since I've paid rent.

Moments later, I find myself right next to the entrance of the blue-skied goblin dungeon I know so well. Luckily, it's the middle of the night once I step through the portal back to the outside world.

The soft light of the moon shines down on me as I slowly walk toward the village market. I can see a few of the shop lights on from a distance. One or two 24-hour stores will be open for sure.

I was really hoping for a nice hot meal, but I guess this is just a blessing in disguise. I'll need to slowly rehydrate and feed myself at first anyways. A full plate of food would have been suicide if I tried to scarf one of those down.

My mouth waters and my body shakes at the thought of real food and cold liquids after so long in that white-walled jail cell.

I walk into the first convenience store I see to grab a few fresh fruits, electrolyte drinks, and assorted nuts. It may seem bland, but to me, it looks like a 9-course meal.

Slowly sipping on one of the drinks, I make my way back to my apartment. My feet drag and a grunt comes out every few steps. The nutrients filling my body do make me feel slightly better, and some energy is returning for me so I can utilize my self-regeneration skill, but it's not helping much...

In the dead of night, I finally make it back to my building, walk up the steps, and open the door to my apartment. Letting out a long sigh, I collapse onto my bed.

Over the next few hours, I finish up a full bottle of electrolytes, and scarf down the fresh fruit and nuts. I continuously regenerate my muscles and deteriorated flesh with my self-regeneration skill slowly building back some of my body mass.

I fall into a deep sleep. Right now, this is the most comfortable bed in the world.

I wake up the next morning to the rising sun feeling incredible, but still starving... Looking in the mirror as I get ready for the day, I can tell that I've lost a considerable amount of weight. Last night's re-feed and regeneration session definitely added a few kilograms back to my frame, but I need a lot more mass to get back to my normal weight.

I grab a few pairs of extra clothes and throw them in my item storage, then leave a handful of silver out on the floor with a note apologizing to my landlord just in case he stops by and tries to evict me...

I walk to a local breakfast spot and dig in. I start off slow but get my fill, I feel much better than I have in weeks. I'm able to put on a bit more weight but am still easily 7kg down from when I started this extravaganza. It'll take me a while to gain this last bit back. Thanking the waitress and leaving a considerable tip, I head off to the goblin dungeon filled with excitement and dread.

Another odd sensation won't stop nagging at the back of my head since I woke up either... The feeling of near-unlimited mana all around me is no more. I'm inching to be full of power again, but I suppress it for now.

My heart pounds in my chest as I near Alpine Square. I'm heading back to the capital to see my teammates and check in with the Hunters Association. This could go so many different ways, I'll have to prepare for the worst...

After stepping into the starter dungeon I teleport to The Great Plains and step out of the portal immediately. I ride the train back to the main Dungeon Hub and take the moving stairs up to the surface.

As I exit, one of the familiar-looking guards waves and smiles.

"Welcome back, an all-nighter in a C-Class dungeon. You've got guts, man!"

I give him a firm nod and smile while continuing my walk into town. The morning sun is rising steadily, it's just after 9 am if I'm not mistaken, maybe closer to 10.

As I make my way toward the Hunters Association HQ I think about what that guard said to me... An all-nighter? What did he mean by that?

He must be confusing me with someone else....

Moving that thought to the back of my mind, I approach the Association's tower at the center of the capital. The lobby's sliding door opens and I'm greeted immediately. Arie's smooth low toned voice rings out the moment I step into the building.

"It's about time you showed up, we were about to leave without you."

The tan-skinned archer has his hood up with Abby and Maria by his side. Tripp stands close behind pacing back and forth. Both the blond and green-haired girls perk up as they see me, while Arie smirks with his arms crossed.

"I... Uh-"

"We've been waiting here for almost an hour. You ditched us at the party yesterday to hunt and you slept in late this morning. You sure do know how to make a great first impression on the Association."

I blink a few times, staring at my teammates in awe. Arie just said I ditched them... yesterday...

My mind spins as I reply slowly.

"I... Sorry... I must have had a long night, I lost track of the time."

With a loud gulp, I shift my gaze to the rest of my team. Maria laughs and points to the sliding doors that are about to close behind me.

"Come on, let's go! You weren't even that late, it's fine!"

Maria's reassurance makes me feel a little better, but the absurdity of this situation is overwhelming. I smile and nod while turning to the door. In my head, the thoughts are running wild...

The only explanation would be that time moves differently in whatever realm between realms I just survived an entire month in.

Another connection clicks in my head.

The spacial magic that I've been using as item storage has a similar effect. Whenever I put an item in there, time seems to stop. The realm that these Titans create must work in the exact opposite way, everything outside ceases to continue while time goes by for eternity in the void.

Abby brushes my arm on the way out the door and looks up at me with a concerned look.

"You seem different today... Is everything okay? It even seems like you've lost some weight."

I let out a sigh after a long pause.

"A-As I said, it was a long night... I'll be fine. Thanks for asking."

Tripp doesn't say a word to me, he just stays behind the 4 of us as we make our way back to the Dungeon Hub.

This is not at all what I was expecting our reunion to be like today... but I don't think it could have gone any better. I'll just put this traumatic event behind me as a lesson learned, maybe I'm not invincible.

Or... maybe this just proves I am....

I wide grin creeps across my face as we walk further into town. I stop at a street vendor selling D-Class items and stock up on a gold's worth of mana crystals. It's about 10,000MP worth. It's not even enough to charge one of my ultimate attacks with both daggers, but it will do for now.

That room of free mana really spoiled me. I probably won't need to charge up any attacks like that again in the future, but if I ever want to continue my mana control training I'm going to need a whole lot of gold to do so...

We make it to the Dungeon Hub and greet the new guard on duty. We go down to the platform and enter The Great Plains no more than 10 minutes later.

My teammates take in the view of the vast plains. Tripp speaks up as we begin walking into the dungeon.

"All right. This is your first mission together as a team with the Association. We won't be going too far in. Today will just be a trial run to make sure all of you are leveled enough and able to handle the base-level mobs. If we have the time, we'll try for some mutants."

We all nod, and continue walking forward. I activate my enemy detection skill and sense a few monsters, but nothing out of the ordinary. Tripp continues talking.

"There will be no reason to continue into this dungeon more than 10km. The potential for a Titan attack increases drastically after this point. Many lives have been lost by those creatures. Trust me, it is not worth the risk. I don't care how strong you

think you are, new C-Class hunters have no hopes of defeating one of those. Association Elites even have trouble sometimes.”

Arie smirks and takes out his bow.

“I hope one shows up, these Titans sure are getting a lot of hype.”

Maria and Abby excitedly draw their weapons.

“Yeah, I’m ready for a good fight.”

“Bring it on!”

Tripp looks over at all of us with a disappointing glare, but I keep my mouth shut. It’s out of character for me, but I can’t even fake being excited about fighting another one of those monstrosities.

Our blond-haired guide for the day takes out his silver daggers and points to the back of the dungeon, then speaks up in a firm tone.

“Kill yourselves on your own time. While training with me, you’re not fighting one of those creatures. Got it?”

With shrugs, nods, and a few disappointed exhales we all agree with Tripp’s order. The 5 of us venture off into The Great Plains Dungeon for our official first day of Association training.

Chapter 140

After scolding us for being so enthusiastic about wanting to fight Titans, the 4 of us quiet down a bit.

Tripp may have been a mood killer to some members of the group, but I completely understand where he’s coming from. The blond-haired dagger wielder is just looking out for us. He must have lost some teammates to one in the past, judging by his tone.

As we carry on deeper into the dungeon, the base-level mobs begin to appear. I let Maria and Abby handle them, they’re a bit more trigger-happy today than usual.

They are both much more agile than the charging monstrous Rhinos and have the perfect magic abilities to aid their fight. Frozen solid and skewered by stone, the charging beasts don’t stand a chance against this duo.

Arie and I decide to stand back and watch. The monsters are too low-level to gain any exp, engaging in battle with them would be more of a resource drain than a worthwhile fight.

Tripp realizes pretty quickly that all 4 of us are no normal newbie C-Class group of recruits and strikes up a conversation as the girls battle it out with another beast.

“I heard from the Director that your squad was going to be a special one. He told me both of you have some pretty rare abilities and rather unpredictable luck.”

He pauses for a moment, then continues.

“The old man stressed that you’d be a bunch of battle junkies with a death wish. I assumed you’d all be decent fighters, but had no idea you’d be able to fight off these mobs this easily...”

Arie grins.

“Oh just wait until we see one of those mutants, I can’t wait to go all out. I’m still pissed off at that examiner named Rodrigo, he wouldn’t let me use my bow in our final boss fight. I could have definitely joined the action with you Jay.”

I raise an eyebrow, remembering the 16th-floor showdown that seemed like an eternity ago. To Arie, it was less than 2 days in the past....

“Oh yeah? You could have handled the boss?”

“Yeah easy, one arrow to the head and it would have been over-”

I laugh with a satisfied smirk, appreciating his confidence, but doubting his strength.

Tripp jumps in again.

“So, Jay. Now that we’re not under the lurking eyes and ears of the Association, you have to tell me how you did it?”

“How I.. did what?”

Tripp’s face curls into a goofy yet devious grin, like a little kid with a secret.

“You know... how you trained with me during the exam? I was on guard duty during the C-Class exams. I’ve been thinking it over and over in my head like a madman. There’s no plausible explanation. How could you have possibly been in the labyrinth and at the Dungeon Hub at the same time? I even looked in your records, the only skills you have logged are Swordsmanship, Dagger Mastery, and your Advanced Fire Summoning.”

“...”

“Come on, you said you’d tell me, remember?”

I gulp. Vaguely remembering the day I signed my contract with the Association. I do recall Tripp asking how I did it... and I brushed it off like it was nothing.

“Well... I uhm...”

Arie lets out a laugh.

“Oh, you really used that thing? I thought you were saving that teleportation item for a rainy day. Don’t tell me you actually used it in the exam between tests...”

The tan-skinned bow wielder continues to laugh. I crack a thin smile, deciding to go along with his nonsense.

“Well, I guess I just thought now or never right? Magic items are meant to be used aren’t they.”

I crack another fake grin. Tripp looks at me dumbfounded.

“You... you used a teleportation item... to do a few hours of extra training... during an exam...?”

I scratch the back of my head and visually cringe. Next, I throw my hands up in the air replying defensively.

“Hey, you were probably better off not knowing.”

“...”

“Now ya do. I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t tell anyone I wasted an item like that. Alright?”

“But how- and where- a teleportation-“

“I’d rather not talk about it anymore, okay?”

We continue walking in silence for a moment. I’m left wondering if Tripp actually bought that excuse or if he’s just playing along to our obvious lies.

An awkward amount of time goes by before Arie strikes up a random conversation about the Hunters Association hierarchy structure. I begin to zone out as their boring talk of numbers fills my ears. I watch Abby and Maria continue slaying beasts as we run into them on our way through The Great Plains.

I’m just happy to be alive. It feels like I’m viewing all the events of today from above like an out-of-body experience. Maybe it’s a defensive mechanism built in to deal with all of the excess stimulation my brain is taking in today.

I did get pretty used to staring at white walls and focusing on a single task... every... single... day....

I let out a sigh.

Simultaneously, Arie lightly elbows me in the gut.

“Hey, we’re already 5km in you know. Are you that confident you haven’t even taken out a weapon?”

I shake myself out of my daydreams, then firmly nod a few times.

“Yeah, yeah. I’m sure they can handle it. I’ll wait for the mutants to have my fun, you’re thinking the same thing aren’t ya?”

Arie grips his bow.

“Yeah. Mutants or Titans, whichever comes first right?”

I gulp, then let out a few words in a shaky tone.

“Mutants... Mutants are fine with me. Tripp probably knows best, we shouldn't even joke about Titans right now.”

There's a pause of silence, then Tripp laughs and puts an arm around my shoulder.

“I think that's the first intelligent thing that's come out of your mouth since I met ya! Hear that Arie? Even this battle-crazed psycho that would waste a one-of-a-kind item for an adrenaline fix isn't dumb enough to fight a Titan. Read a page out of his book!”

The bow wielder rolls his eyes.

“For the short time I've known Jay, I think I have a pretty good read on him. Wait until one of these things shows up. He'll be the first one into action.”

I reply in a soft tone as we continue forward.

“Yeah, yeah...”

After some more casual conversation and a whole lot of walking, a mutant finally shows up.

I take out my sword and the 4 of us go in for an attack. My blade slices through the mutant like butter. Abby and Maria easily trap the beast in place with Ice and Earth while Arie lands a thin white glowing arrow through the monster's forehead.

The Mutant never stood a chance.

The girls cheer and Arie grins, but I'm not emotionally moved in the slightest. I just stare at the scene in front of me and mumble to myself.

“Why does this always happen to me? Why am I never satisfied...?”

The 3 of them wait around the Ice covered burning corpse to wait for it to drop its loot. I let out a sigh and activate my enemy detection skill.

My small use of MP shocked my system into wanting more all of a sudden. That release of power is making me shake, I clench my jaw craving more.

Eventually, the loot drops and I take a few deep breaths to curb my temptations. All 5 of us venture further in.

We're about 7-10km into the dungeon now. I can expand my range pretty far, closing my eyes and do so as we walk. I concentrate and reach out into the depths of the dungeon locating 10 more mutants within a 10km radius.

I push my skill a little further, sensing a creature at the same level as me moving at high speeds around the backside of the dungeon about 15km deeper in than us. I grin, registering that it must be Ember.

At the same moment, as I continue to expand my range, I hit a very familiar wall of infinite nothingness another 5km in. I immediately shiver and deactivate my enemy detection skill.

We continue the hunt.

All 5 of us wander around the 10-12km range for the next 6 hours straight. We've run into 8 mutants in total, this is thanks to me leading the way. The only one that doesn't know I have some kind of advanced perception skill is Tripp. It just seems like we're getting lucky to him.

In reality, we're actually getting the opposite. After 8 mutants and over 20 of its underlings, the only loot we've managed to pick up is mana crystals. I can tell the team's morale has been slowly declining...

Tripp calls out to us after this recent kill.

"Hey, let's do one more then call it a day."

The four of us nod in agreement.

After defeating our next mutant, I decide to plant the Strengthening Fragment I looted from my long battle with the Titan into the mutant's corpse during one of my close-range attacks. As it dissolves, the small black crystal drops, and I hear Maria scream with excitement in her voice.

"Guys! Guys! Look we got one! We got one!"

I grin while the others flock over to her, examining the small black gem. Crossing my arms, I watch my team's spirits rise. Maria's smile brightens my mood. Abby's willingness to whole-heartily support the cheerful blond as she fixates on the black gem puts faith in our teamwork.

Watching Arie smirk while gripping his bow reminds me of how he helped me in the exam and also covered me with a little white lie earlier today.

I'm back to the outside world with a team I can trust. I guess... this isn't too bad...

The 3 of them pass the gem around, then I walk over to take part in the fun. Tripp watches from a distance wide-eyed and pale-faced.

The drop rate is pretty low, we beat the odds of a 1% chance and got a Fragment in just 10 or so kills.

I would also be surprised if I were in his position, but the sheer expression of bewildered horror on his face suggests that there is more to this situation than meets the eye.

I hear him mutter a few words under his breath.

"I-Impossible... They actually got a Strengthening Fragment... out of a Mutant...?"