

D. Diver 151

Chapter 151

Fisher straightens his posture and casts an unfriendly gaze my way, scanning me from head to toe with a disapproving smirk.

"You're Jay... Ha! You're Jay??"

Confused by his question, I respond with a one-word reply.

"Yeah..."

The dark blue-haired hunter lifts his condescending gaze to meet my eyes, then pauses for a moment. He looks up at the ceiling, deep in thought, then replies.

"You're pretty quick, aren't you? I was sent here by the director yesterday. At my full speed, you still managed to get here just a few hours after me...."

His distasteful glare turns into a somewhat curious grin. He points to the door, leading to the open dungeon.

"Come on, let's go outside. I was told you have a pretty strong aptitude for fire, I'd like to see it for myself."

He walks toward the door through the tables full of hunters motioning for me to follow.

I turn to Rylan and the Inn Keeper. The redhead nods eagerly pushing me to follow him, Mr. Conway speaks up as we begin to follow.

"He may seem tough on the outside, but Fisher is a kind kid. He just puts on that act ever since he became one of the youngest C-Class Elites in the Vice Region."

With a nod and a smile, I thank the short man and follow Fisher as he steps through the wooden door on the other side of the room.

The air outside is still cool and crisp as both Rylan and I follow the Elite around the backside of the Inn. The view of the tall mountains is pretty beautiful from here. I'm always impressed by the artificial landscape created by dungeons.

Fisher stops right in the middle of a wide open field waving at us to follow.

Squinting as we walk further and further from the Inn, I see the shadowy outline of a winged creature flying at us from a distance.

The screech of wild Griffin fills my ears, and the realization that we're under attack from a monster finally hits me. I pull out my sword and ignite it into flames. Charging up less than 300MP worth of mana-imbued fire magic, I let out a fast, concise shot of dark, dense flames.

Seconds later, over 50m away, the diving Griffin loses its head and falls to the dungeon floor with a loud thud.

I let out a sigh of relief, then hear a slow clapping noise. The blue-haired hunter grins while walking toward me.

"Not bad, I was expecting much worse. When I heard a new C-Class recruit was coming to train in the labyrinth for the first time, I didn't expect to meet another young advanced magic user like myself."

He reaches into a small item box on his waist to pull out a large sword. Its base looks black, but it glimmers dark blue in the sunlight. I use appraisal the second its unique hue hits my eyes.

TideBreaker: Enchanted Blade of the Hydra [Water Aspect] [+127% Strength][+81% Mental Strength]

A thin smile crosses my face as the flames flicker out on my sword. It seems like I've found another element stone-imbued weapon user, this is a first.

"I assume you're a Water Magic user? Is that right?"

He nods slowly, pointing his sword at me.

"Brutus really chose your team to be the next set of Elites... So, it's my job to prepare you."

I raise my sword, pointing it right back at him.

"What do you mean by that? The next set of Elites? What are you talking about? The Director never told me anything about you... I thought I was diving in this labyrinth solo..."

Fisher smirks, letting out a sigh.

"You'll get used to the Director in time. He's always a few steps ahead. You'll never be able to outthink that man, if he wants you to do something, you're already doing it."

I gulp as the water wielder continues.

"Apparently, he gave two of your teammates upgrade crystals. That's why I'm certain your squad is his next choice for Elites."

I step forward.

"What's all this talk about Elites? Explain. What's an Elite? What's going on!?"

"Elites. That's the name the Association chose to give to C-Class hunters that actually have a chance of hitting B-Class. It's like a hidden rank between C and B. I'm sure you spotted the difference between a hunter like me and the hunters in there."

He points his long black and blue glistening sword to the backside of the Inn.

I remember the feeling I got while walking through the tables earlier.

"Yeah... you're right. What are upgrade crystals, and what are you even going to teach me? All I have to do to pass the Director's test is defeat the 20th-floor boss. He underestimates me!"

The blue-haired swordsman lets out a laugh.

"You really are a lost one, aren't you? It makes so much more sense why he let you think you're going into this place alone. You'd rather get yourself killed than admit there's an opponent you can't beat!"

"Hey! Don't talk like you know me! You have no idea how powerful I am... Plus... you still haven't answered all my questions, what's an upgrade crystal?"

He lets out another condescending sigh, then rolls his eyes.

"They're one of the Association's most valuable resources. Brutus gave me one a few months back, along with a few of my squad members allowing all of us to rank up to the Elite level. It upgrades your skills. Any combat magic becomes an advanced form, and any normal skills become [Special Grade] or even [Legendary Grade] sometimes. I got lucky with both."

I nod slowly, remembering the white crystals both Maria and Abby were carrying on their way back from their meetings yesterday.

If my guess is correct, it must be the "forced upgrade" method I've heard rumors about. By the way Fisher is describing it, these upgrade crystals must automatically use all the proficiency points on a users skills.

He must have been over level 400, giving him the necessary 400PP to upgrade both of his skills. He didn't get lucky... Someone timed his upgrade carefully.

If all of this is true, the Director really does have his eye on us. I guess taking advantage of this situation is the best thing to do right now. Even so, this guy is starting to piss me off...

"Alright. Then why am I teamed up with you anyways? I can climb this Labyrinth myself. I admit, you're stronger than the hunters inside, I can tell... but I hunt solo, I don't need your help!"

He grins, and his sword begins to glow with a light blue light.

"Oh yeah? Well it's a direct order I bring you to the 20th floor, watch you beat the boss, then bring you back alive. I haven't failed an assignment yet, but this one seems near impossible. We have a lot of work to do."

I grit my teeth and ignite my own sword into a flickering ball of flames.

"We? Since when are we a team? I don't really care what your assignment is, I was told I could farm this labyrinth by myself. I don't want to be chaperoned by an overconfident blue-haired Association lackey."

Again, Fisher lets out a laugh.

"Fire users are always the hot heads, I'm going to have to teach you a lesson kid. You may be the newest star of the C-Class exams, but there are many hunters much stronger than you out in the world. Don't start swinging your sword at fights you can't handle."

I take out my second blade, lighting my dagger up with the white hue of wind magic.

"What makes you think I can't handle you..."

The water-wielding swordsman begins to glow with a bright blue light, covering his body in a half-a-meter-thick veil of water. Letting out a laugh, he yells at me.

"One scratch! Land one single scratch on my skin and I'll let you climb these floors in peace. If you can't do that, you'll start listening to me. Got it?"

Activating my stat-boosting skills, glowing with a gold and crimson aura, I yell out to him.

"Fine! You asked for it!"

Clenching my jaw, and tightening my muscles, I begin charging up an attack. One scratch is all it'll take, so I'll make sure to get it over with in one blow.

I joined the Association to hunt stronger monsters, not to be pampered like a little kid. I want the freedom to do what I want, when I want, and where I want.

Whatever happens now isn't my fault, he asked for it, and I'll give it to him. I open my item storage to let a few mana crystals fall out, they touch my skin, and I plunder their MP.

I don't want to kill the guy, but I'll teach him a lesson for trying to step on my feet. I charge upon my ultimate attack for about 10 seconds, stirring around 3500MP into each of my blades. This is about 7000MP in total.

With a powerful thrust, I bring both weapons across my body to let out an attack that could cut through a Titan's Domain like butter.

The black and white crescents of energy hurdle toward the glowing blue-haired man. He raises his sword and braces for impact.

I stand steady watching in anticipation.

He's really going to take my attack head on...

On impact, the wind and fire expand releasing a devastating amount of energy. The rocky ground explodes to bits throwing dirt and stone everywhere for over 20m in all directions. A shockwave blows rubble in my direction and the red-haired hunter that came to watch runs in fear.

I grin as the dust cloud settles, expecting the arrogant hunter to be begging on his knees for mercy.

To my surprise, he stands unscathed in a small patch of untouched grass. The earth is chopped up and burned to ash everywhere but the spot he stands.

I gulp, gripping my blades firmly.

He laughs, powering down his blue glow, and letting his summoned water magic fall to the torn-up landscape below with a splash.

"Not bad, not bad at all... You aren't as weak as I thought you'd be. Still, you have a lot to learn."

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As the swordsman lowers his dark blue blade and deactivates his magic skills, I watch in awe. He looks at me with a satisfied smirk as the clearly summoned water around his feet seeps into the recently upturned soil.

He throws the blade in his hand to the ground and stretches both of his arms out wide.

"Come on, I'll give you one more shot. I won't even use a single skill to block you this time around."

His dark eyes pierce the thick air between us, making direct contact with my own. His white teeth peek out from the crooked grin across his face, and he remains unguarded in the middle of the empty field.

I activate my skills and charge my blades again, glowing golden red, filled with an odd sense of rage.

"Get ready."

Plundering the MP from even more of my leftover MP crystals, I begin to eat away at my supply just to show off. So much for my plans of staying low-key. Teaching this so-called "Elite" a lesson is more important right now.

It takes just under 30 seconds for me to charge both of my blades nearly to full power. There's over 10k MP in both of them combined. Letting out another reality-tearing attack, the white and black crescents of mana-imbued elemental mana rocket toward the defenseless Elite C-Class.

Another explosion of wind and fire throws rock and dirt in all directions. I watch the red-haired hunter, Rylan, run behind the back wall of the Inn to escape the blast. This time the destructive fireball is close to double the size of my last attack.

That cocky blue-haired hunter thought that was the best I could do and lowered his guard. Let's see how well he faired against this one.

I smirk, letting the dust cloud clear.

As it does, I hear the familiar slow clapping sound coming from within the dispersing sediments.

"Well done, well done. I am definitely going to have some fun with you. The Director picked out an interesting brat for me to train after all."

My eyes open wide, seeing the Elite C-Class hunter standing untouched on the same small patch of grass in the middle of the field.

Blinking a few times, then swallowing hard, I think back to the moment before impact....

Both of my attacks definitely hit him straight on, right across his chest in fact. There was no water magic blocking my attacks, it's like It hit an invisible shield...

I couldn't get a close enough look before the explosion of red and white light to see what happened at the exact moment of impact.

The blue-haired man walks over to me while placing his sword back into his item box.

"I was going back to sleep, but now that there's some excitement I'll stay up a little bit longer. Let's grab some lunch and talk over a few more details before our training starts tomorrow. Conway's cooking ain't half bad, just don't order the fish..."

I awkwardly stare straight ahead, still puzzled at his ability to completely nullify my attack. Plus, this easygoing attitude he's put on after I basically just tried to kill him over nothing....

Is he really that much stronger than me...?

I reply in a low tone.

"I'd rather not wait for tomorrow, I was planning on climbing today..."

I gulp while putting my blades away into item storage.

"...and what's wrong this the fish?"

He throws his arm around my shoulder with a chuckle.

"You really are an ambitious one aren't ya? Who said we'll be climbing tomorrow? I've got a lot to teach you, young one."

I let out a sigh, wriggling out from his arms grasp as we walk closer to the backside of the Inn.

"Don't call me young one, you're not even that much older than me... and I'm climbing tomorrow whether you like it or not! I didn't come here-"

Fisher cuts me off, turning his head, giving me a stern look.

"Trust me. You must have been climbing for at least 20 hours straight, some sleep will do you well."

I grit my teeth, starting to respond but a weak voice sounds from around the corner of the grey brick structure, then a red head of hair slowly peeks out.

"A-Are you guys done...?"

Rylan walks over to us with a pale face and a blank expression. He gulps, then lets out another sentence in an excited tone.

"J-Jay you didn't tell me you were in line to become an Elite! At your age, that's some major news. Your face will be plastered all over the Region any day now. Congrats!"

My mind continues to race as the redhead stares at me with a goofy grin. The blue-haired swordsman keeps walking toward the Inn's entrance as I reply

"I didn't exactly know about this either... "

Both of us follow Fisher inside as my mental turmoil grows more and more. Today was supposed to be a fun Labyrinth farming adventure with Ember, why'd it have to take a turn like this?

The 3 of us sit down at one of the circular tables in the back of the room. Rylan keeps asking Fisher questions about new missions he's been on as I continue to zone out in my own little world.

Finally, our food and drinks come out. I ask the first nagging question that comes to mind.

"Hey, how do you two know each other so well? It's not like-"

Rylan cuts me off as Fisher takes a swig of his newly arrived cold drink.

"I used to be his personal trainer, back in the Association! That is... until he surpassed me within the first year."

After a long gulp, the Elite chimes in.

"Yeah, yeah. He taught me the basics, I owe him for that, but it's all about your natural born talent and-"

"Money. It's about money."

I grin as the Redhead cuts off his former student's inspirational speech. Fisher rolls his eyes as Rylan continues, staring at me.

"The Association must want to back you for one of the skills you have. If I'm not mistaken... That attack you threw earlier was both wind and fire, right?"

I swallow the food in my mouth and reply.

"It... was..."

I pause, thinking about my next words carefully as the two of them eye me up and down.

"I- have element stone imbued weapons. You saw my sword and dagger right?"

Fisher jumps in.

"Enough, enough. It doesn't really matter. Clearly, the Director likes this kid, and I get a full 25 credits for the week if I can get him past floor 20."

He turns to me.

"You'll be resting up today, no questions asked. If you can't manage to make a scratch on me unguarded in an empty field, you're on a one-way suicide mission if you face the behemoth now. You may not even be able to make it to the 20th floor at your current strength..."

I stare at him with a cold glare, then take another bite, and reply with my mouth full.

"Fine. We'll do it your way."

He smirks.

"Good, finally I've broken through that hard head of yours. I'll do some proper tests on you tomorrow and our training will start once we both wake up. How about we meet back here in 10 hours."

Taking another bite, half-listening to his words I respond again.

"Sure, sure."

The 3 of us finish up our meals and Fisher insists we head up to our rooms. He may be tough, but I can see it in his eyes, this Elite is sleep deprived from climbing the labyrinth. This 10 hours of rest is more for him than for me.

The small staircase in the back creaks as I walk up it. The wooden door of my room opens easily and I walk inside.

The dusty scent of old wood and upswept floors fills my senses as I peer into the underwhelming living quarters. A single small bed close to the ground with white sheets, a small sink and mirror near the back wall and a small dirty window.

I let out a sigh, closing the door, and sitting on the bed. It creaks as I mentally compare this 5m by 3m room to the luxury apartment I just started renting...

Fisher believes I've been grinding my way up the dungeon for the last day just like him. It makes sense why he'd tell me to get some rest, but it's been less than 6 hours since I even woke up.

My day is just getting started.

I activate enemy detection and scan my surroundings to confirm there's no one behind the Inn. Everyone is trading in the town, or hanging out at the bar downstairs.

Double-checking to make sure my door is locked, I activate Dungeon Walker and teleport myself into the massive dirt pit created earlier by my attack against the water-wielding swordsman.

I grit my teeth as his arrogant face flashes into my head.

"I'll get to the 20th floor and beat the boss before he even wakes up...."

Without a moment's hesitation, I activate stealth and begin air-stepping away toward the back of the 10th-floor Dungeon.

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With my stealth skill activated, I begin my trek through the 10th floor's Griffin Dungeon. I need to get a significant distance away before thinking about letting Ember fly free.

From now on, scanning my surrounding will be tougher than just looking for random high leveled targets. Anything on this floor or above could be a hunter or a monster. I'll have to be extra careful.

After 20 minutes of light jogging, I've come to the base of the first mountain. While moving forward, the layout of this Labyrinth begins to bug the pattern recognition portion of my brain.

A lot of the floors here have similar monsters to the smaller Labyrinth I defeated before. There is a small difference in floor ranking though. The Griffins here are on Floor 10 while they were on Floor 11 before. Other lower-level dungeons were swapped around one the floors before this too.

I guess it's somewhat random, but the strengths of monsters stay pretty consistent no matter what dungeon I fit them in. Griffins are still Griffins.

With a shrug, I make my way into the dense tree line at the base of this mountain. I scan the forest for enemies and trek around the backside to make certain that I'm not being watched.

Ember flies free from my item storage when I'm sure we're not being watched. The moment he comes out of the white twisting spacial magic to spread his wings I activate our telepathic link and deactivate my stealth skill.

"It's time to pick up the pace. Let's get to the 20th floor within the next few hours, I'm itching for a real fight."

With a smirk, I crack my knuckles and look toward the backside of this dungeon. Griffins fly high in the sky, and the artificial sun shines down a yellow-orange light on the mountain range before us.

Ember flaps his wings and replies as I air-step upwards to climb on his back.

"Understood."

We fly off together, blending into the mountainside and soaring high with the Griffins. Ember picks up his speed just like I've asked, we're able to fly through an entire dungeon in under 20 minutes.

It doesn't take long for the two of us to clear the next few dungeons. Floors 10 through 15 are pretty basic layouts, with rather weak monsters. They're all very similar to the exam's Labyrinth. Looking back, I'm much stronger now.

Arriving on the 16th floor I realize we've come across another High Ogre dungeon. This is the one that Rylan and his team were planning to train at tomorrow.

The last 5 floors took us just under 2 hours to clear, but I'm starting to get the feeling a little extra mana is going to be needed for the upcoming floors. We still have 5 more to go, and the base mobs here are already above level 320.

Mana crystal farming begins.

Ember flies me around to every corner of the dungeon so I can get all of my teleportation points sorted. For the next 2 hours, I use Dungeon Walker to slaughter every High Ogre in sight. At roughly 1 kill per minute, I take out 120 High Ogres, totaling me nearly 40k MP in loot, along with a few rings and swords.

Taking my mana usage into account from teleporting and releasing over 100 small attacks, this little side mission has netted me about 25k MP in profit.

Looking into my item storage, I count roughly 75k worth of crystals in total. This should be more than enough for any enemies that cross my path in battles to come.

Ember and I fly off to floor 17.

It's a near replica of The Great Plains dungeon. There are Rhino-like monsters, and even mutants deeper in. I shutter at first, expecting Titans to jump out any second and attack, but after a wide-range enemy detection scan, I don't sense a single one of them.

It seems like that C-Class dungeon in the capital is just an anomaly like Ember said. It's infected by Void Creepers, not a normal occurrence.

We fly to the back of the dungeon to face off with the boss. So far, there hasn't been a single monster here that can't be taken out with one hit from my sword. Unfortunately, this level 371 boss turns out to be the same. A single 500MP charged fire-imbued slash to the neck topples the beast.

I make it to floor 18.

This time around, as I take ember out of my pocket dimension I shiver for a valid reason. Not because I'm scared, but because of the snow that falls all around us. There's a thick white blizzard raging in all directions.

Looking ahead more than 10m or so is near impossible. It reminds me of the Mammoth dungeon I faced before with my team... just much more extreme.

Ember and I both ignite our full bodies into flames. This is the first time I've seen his advanced fire magic in its full glory.

Both of us create immense heat, and at first, I'm hesitant to get too close... The last time I touched advanced fire magic, I had to cut off my own arm to put the flames out.

I open the telepathic link and the flaming Dragon speaks.

"As per the contract you agreed to, our souls are linked. My flames cannot burn you, and your flames will not do harm to me."

With a gulp, I walk forward to reach out and touch the flickering black and red flames with my left hand.

I leave it engulfed in the fire for a few seconds, then bring it back. Letting out a sign of relief I mumble under my breath.

"Nothing happened."

With a grin, I hop on Ember's back and we both increase our Fire Summoning output to melt through the storm. Using enemy detection as we begin to fly toward the back of the dungeon, I find a few slow-moving targets on my radar. They're all between levels 360 and 370.

My curiosity tempts me, but I decide to just wait for the boss, it'll be a better fight anyways.

As we fly higher and higher into the sky, the snow begins to clear up a bit. I can make out an impossibly high mountain off in the distance. It's made of dark black rock, somewhat covered in snow at the base, jutting up to the top of the dungeon out of sight...

Ember speaks up as we approach it.

"It appears the portal is at the top of the mountain."

The flaming black-scaled dragon doubles its velocity and begins gliding upwards with powerful flaps of its wings through the heavy wind and snow.

I grit my teeth and hold on.

Our flames leave a dark red trail of fire residue behind as we begin to tilt upwards. The snow and ice coming down grows thicker and our fire burns hotter.

I activate enemy detection and inspect as we near the top.

[800m]

[Lv. 387]

[Lv. 369]

[Lv. 368]

[Lv. 366]

A small reading pops up to show 4 enemies on my radar. One of them is much more powerful than anything else in the dungeon, and they're still nearly 1km above us.

The thought that these could be hunters crosses my mind, but judging by their levels, It's highly unlikely. There are 3 of them that are the same as the base mobs in this dungeon, it would be much more worth their while to stay down below and continue training.

I've also learned that this is a common pattern for mutants. A group of base-level mobs traveling with a leader. It's the perfect pre-boss showdown.

We continue to rip through the skies. I take out my blades while adding a red and golden hue to my aura. Whatever is up there is going to be ready to fight. So, I am too.

As we near the mountaintop, the shape of its apex comes into view. Impossible to see from below in the heavy snow, but now fully visible as we soar out of the heavy cloud cover in a magnificent ball of flames.

Ember and I look down on a flat mountaintop. It's covered in a layer of snow from past storms, and multiple sharpened pillars of stone randomly pierce through showing their jet-black coloring.

It's silent. The wind has stopped, and the visibility has drastically increased.

My eyes dart across the 200-meter-long, circular plateau-like area. Near the backside, a spinning grey boss room portal waits for us to jump through.

Standing in our way, there are 4 massive Snow Yetis.

A wide grin creeps across my face as I examine the new creatures. They're all roughly 4m tall, with monkey-like frames and thick white fur that almost blends into the snow.

Their leader in the back is over 5m tall, carrying no weapons at all. Their eyes glow red, while their brown ape-like hands and facial features contrast the lighter snowy background.

It spots us.

The mutant leader stomps its feet, letting out a roar and pointing both of its arms straight at us. Low grunting noises sound from its 3 minions. They begin to charge, staying in a firm triangular formation as they approach.

Opening the telepathic link with Ember, I point down to the monsters and speak.

"Stay back, I'm going to have some fun. After this, there's only 1 floor between us, and the 20th."

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Ember slowly flies down to the plateau below as the 3 snow Yetis come charging at us.

They all start glowing golden yellow with the familiar aura of [Extreme Strength], one of the same stat-boosting buffs that I use.

I jump off the flaming Dragon's back and begin to fall downward charging up my sword and dagger. My dark fire magic keeps the cold air away from my body as I plummet to the ground.

After falling for close to 3 seconds, the 50m drop comes to an end. I let out my attack on the nearby Yetis, releasing close to 1000MP per blade.

Using the last remainder of my MP stores, I activate my wind magic to lessen the impact of my fall onto the hard ground.

My feet hit the snow-covered stone floor, still cracking the hard rock floor, sending black fragments flying off in all directions.

I smirk, taking out a few extra mana crystals to plunder MP as I watch the crescents of energy slice the charging monsters all in half.

Their bloodied bodies stain the white snow as I hear a light thud from Ember landing behind me.

This short victory is followed by the roar of a gold-glowing mutant running at me with murderous intent. Still grinning, I charge up my attack again, a full 2000MP strike.

From almost 30m away the white and black energy blades rocket through the air to make contact with the monster's torso.

It flashes a dull white light, and I see my attack halt in mid-air for a moment right before impact. I do a double-take while plundering a crystal to restore my MP.

A few fractions of a second later, the facade of an invisible shield breaks, and the blades of wind and fire slash the mutant beast in two. Its mutilated body hits the floor with two loud thuds.

I continue to plunder MP from my excess crystals, but a slight concern itches at the back of my mind. While waiting for the monster to dissolve so I can take their loot, I mumble under my breath.

"I wasn't imagining that... was I?"

I shake my head a few times, then breathe in the cold refreshing air on the mountain's top while letting my flames die down a little bit.

Ember comes up behind me, so I activate the link. He speaks.

"Shall we defeat the boss? Like you said there's only one more floor before the 20th."

I pause for a moment, then ramp up my flames and grin my swords tightly.

"Let's do it."

Pushing the odd occurrence with that mutant Yeti to the back of my head, the two of us trek through the snow to the swirling grey mass of energy at the backside of the plateau.

Moments later, we both step through.

The white transfer magic clears from my vision, but it's hard to tell the difference between the blinding white light and the sight before my eyes.

I blink a few times, looking around aimlessly with a slight sense of confusion.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye along with enemy detection and inspect, things become a bit more clear.

"The boss is near..."

[100m]

[Lv. 399]

The shadowy figure of a 6m tall massive white-furred ape-like creature comes charging toward me. I can see its golden glow from a distance peeking through the dense overcast of white snow.

Only now that my perception senses are active, can I tell that we're in a cave-like room. It's about 200m in diameter and the ceiling is blocked off with a dome.

Bursting into flames, Ember flies high up above me as I run forward. Again, I charge up both my blades to use up nearly a full bar of MP, 2000 points.

Both of us draw nearer and nearer until its dark face comes into view and I'm glared down by its glowing red eyes.

I let out a yell and it returns the favor with a roar. Releasing my attack, I watch the two powerful crescents of mana soar.

They split through the air, melting and blowing away the heavy snowfall, aimed straight at the creature in front of me.

Moments before impact, my eyes open wide to watch this beast glow with a dim white light.

The metallic twang that's ingrained in my mind from weeks in the Titan's domains echoes throughout the 18th-floor boss room.

My jaw drops as I watch the white-furred monster deflect both of my attacks... with its bare hands....

A thin layer of white light shines bright covering its palms on impact, pushing back the high-density mana attacks. Some energy breaks through, slicing deep cuts in its palms, but most of the attack it pushed upwards to fly off into the upper regions of the boss room.

I'm left wide-eyed and speechless as I stare at the beast that continues to run my way. Its palms are dripping blood. The attack didn't miss, it was overpowered...

"There's no way it could be this strong."

I gulp, using inspect, appraisal, and air-stepping up into the sky for a better view of the situation below...

[Lv. 399]

Active Items:

[Yeti's Charm] +50% Defense +50% Ice Magic Resistance

Active Skills:

Extreme Strength

I tighten my lips and raise an eyebrow, trying to think all of this through. The monster barely has any gear, and its skill doesn't even have any upgrades.

"None of this makes any sense! What's going on?"

I grit my teeth, burst into flames, and charge up another dual attack. This time around, I eat into my mana crystal stores much more than before.

Maybe it was a lucky break. More power will take this Yeti easily. In mid-air, floating about 20m from the incoming monster, I imbue roughly 2000MP per blade. That's double the strength of my last attack.

With another yell, I release the built-up energy. The two crescents hurdle toward the monster. It looks up at me with its glowing red eyes while stopping in place.

It plants its feet and puts its arms out straight ahead. That same dim white glow appears...

On impact, I watch closely with my All-Seeing Eye locked in the monster's hands. The flaming black and whistling white mana attacks pause in mid-air for a fraction of a second before hitting the beast.

My perception skill picks up an odd reading...

I gulp, trying to understand why and how this creature's skin is becoming so dense with mana all of a sudden every time my attack comes near. The microscopic layer of pure mana in front of its hands actually covers its entire body. The glow and flash of white light is made when it's broken and mana is released on impact. If I saw this kind of barrier anywhere else, I'd think it was a man-made mana shield....

More gears begin turning in my head as I compare the density of the mana to my own attack.

As the two blades of energy grind through the beast's defenses, I let out a whisper under my breath.

"So... monsters can learn mana control too..."

The dense barrier being formed by the beast was strong enough to block my first attack, but this second one is twice as strong.

I hear a roar from the boss monster below me as the flash of white light triggers the explosion of my fire and wind as they break through its refined mana defenses.

The beast explodes into dozens of parts as I give it a small bow of my head as respect. That was the first strong opponent I've fought so far in this Labyrinth...

The fun is just about to begin.

I use my wind magic to hover down to the icy floor. The fallen monster is already beginning to dissolve. I let out a laugh, spinning my sword and dagger around, admiring my work.

Ember drifts down beside me as pick up the fallen loot. It's a large mana crystal, along with a heavy circular blue stone. I use Appraisal.

[Yeti's Charm] +50% Defense +50% Ice Magic Resistance

After examining the small blue rock to confirm it's nothing too extraordinary, I throw it into my item storage along with the mana crystal.

While my spacial magic is still open, I expand it so Ember can fit inside. I turn on our telepathic link as well.

"That was almost a decent fight, wouldn't you agree? Maybe this Behemoth will be a pretty good fight after all. What do you think?"

The flaming Dragon nods.

"I believe you will face greater challenges the higher we climb. I suggest you let me fight if things get too difficult."

I pause, then reply.

"Only if I'm in real life-threatening danger. Otherwise, let me fight my own battles. I'm here to get stronger by fighting tough opponents, I got enough free levels in the Titan's Domain."

"Understood."

Ember smiles and walks into my Pocket Dimension. The white light of the transfer magic fills my vision moments later.

It's time to face floor 19.

Chapter 155

The white transfer magic leaves my vision as I ready my blades, turning on enemy detection.

The sky above me is a pale grey, and the landscape in front of me is made of completely black glossy stone. Formations of rectangular-shaped rocks jut out from the ground in crystal-like structures. They form walls creating an abstract maze of pathways as far as the eye can see.

I gulp, moving my head back and forth, then opening my spacial magic to let Ember out.

With a burst of dark flames, the Dragon appears. I hop on his back and we fly up into the sky to take a better look at the landscape.

What I see below is intriguing, but not exactly comforting...

The four-sided crystal-like black stone structures fill the entire dungeon in all shapes and sizes. Some are mountain-sized, creating high peaks in the distance. Some consolidate together, creating rolling hills and valleys. Other sections are more abstract making winding mazes that hunters could get lost in for hours.

We soar through the air in silence, as the ominous structures whiz by, below us. I sense a few enemies on the way, but I haven't gotten a close look at one just yet. They're all between levels 390 and 400.

Until...

"Ember."

I point down toward a massive flat black structure off in the distance about 500m away. There's a lone enemy standing in the middle of it, this one caught my eye when I sense it on my radar. It's the same exact level as me.

[Lv. 408]

"Let's go down there. I need a warm-up before the boss room. This must be some kind of mutant."

With a powerful flap of his wings, Ember changes his flight path and starts a direct course for the soon-to-be battlefield.

Squinting, I can make out a humanoid figure just over 200m away now. I've never seen a dungeon like this and definitely haven't faced the monsters within it.

The fact that these monsters are my level, means they'll have enough exp to actually give me some proper growth.

"Finally, it's time to get stronger."

We glide down, faster and faster. The mysterious monster finally comes into sight and I get a solid look at the creature.

It looks like a man... A very, very oversized man with red skin standing nearly 4m tall. With human-like facial features, but sharp jagged Parada-like teeth, the beast turns toward me letting out an eardrum-bursting shriek. It's almost the size of a Yeti, but much more compact and agile looking.

Muscles ripple all over its body, and bulging veins pop out through a layer of lightweight silver armor and its sharp green eyes stare vehemently into mine.

Lastly, it carries a long silver sword...

I use Appraisal.

Active Items:

[Berserker Giant's Armor Set] +1000 Defense

[Berserker Giant's Long Sword] [Blood Bonded] +1000 Attack +500 Agility

Active Skills:

Swordsmanship

Berserker

I jump off Ember's back to plummet down at the creature. The Dragon hovers above awaiting orders.

I let out an excited laugh while activating all of my stat-boosting skills, charging my blades, and bursting into flames.

The beast below me continues to screech, beginning to glow red from its Berserker skill. Its eyes dart back and forth with extreme precision.

I watch the monster swing its long silver sword around, readying it as I descend from the sky above.

It doesn't flinch for a second as I charge my blades up to 2000MP each, dipping into my stored mana crystals. This is 4000MP in total, the same amount it took to defeat the Yeti boss.

Grinning ear to ear, less than 15m above the ground, I let out a battle cry to match its screeching.

My attack of fire and wind erupts from both blades and hurdles toward the red-glowing beast.

I watch it shift its body weight and grip its sword tight. A devious grin shows on the monster's face, the jagged teeth reflect the light of my incoming strike.

Using my wind magic, I slow my fall to watch the two energy attacks collide with the Berserker Giant's silver sword. A flash of white light appears on impact, and I watch the monster before me block both of my elements-imbued slashes to the side like a foul ball.

There is some pushback on impact, but no damage is done to the Giant or its blade. That same invisible shield of mana is being used again, and it's much stronger this time around...

I grit my teeth, remembering back to the Yeti blocking my attack with its bare hands. Now, a double-strength attack blocked with an effortless swing of the sword?

Without a moment's hesitation, the green-eyed Berserker shifts its weight again, locking its gaze on me in the sky and sprinting forward with terrifying speed and agility.

Before I can think to move, the monster jumps up in the air with its sword pointed straight ahead. Like a rocket, shooting up from the ground, I watch in awe as the 4m tall Giant jumps over 10m in the air with its blade aimed right at me. I airstrip upwards and the creature continues to follow another 10m up into the sky.

I watch in awe as this beast jumps over 5 times its height without breaking a sweat.

"Dungeon Walker."

I blip away, about 100m backward even higher up in the sky. I take a deep breath, activating my All-Seeing Eye to re-access the scene.

The Giant falls to the floor with a thud far away from me. I air-step closer but keep my distance, examining the beast and its surroundings. It glares at me, holding its sword steady while glowing red and pacing back and forth.

Ember's voice tugs at the back of my mind, so I open top our link momentarily. He speaks.

"That was a good start. I've fought a similar Class of Berserkers in my past life. They're skilled battle opponents, but simple to defeat once you figure out their techniques."

I clench my jaw, a bit embarrassed about having to retreat after my first attack went south.

"I'll get it this time. Just watch..."

Cutting off my link, then staring down at the pacing menace, I begin charging up an ultimate attack.

Opening up my item storage, I don't try to conserve a drop of MP. The only thing on my mind is taking this creature out. The way it stares at me with its sharp green eyes and open mouth like I'm its prey makes me sick.

The faster I can rid the world of that pest, the better.

I begin to float downward, making sure not to get too close to the Berserker's jumping range. After 20 seconds or so, I've charged up a decent attack. Full of rage, I've managed to build up 4000MP per blade.

"More..."

Continuing to glide closer and closer to the savage beast, another 10 seconds pass and I've charged up a 10k MP attack. This is nearing my upper limit....

Aiming straight, and letting out a yell, I let the highly refined flames and wind soar from my blades. The dual high-pressure attack tears through the dungeon's thick air, leaving heat residue in its path.

The Berserker's lips curl at either side, and its green eyes bulge at the sight of my new attack. It grips its sword and begins to glow dark red while planting its back foot.

A smile of my own creeps across my face as I realize it's going to take my attack head-on. The one I just released is well over twice as powerful as the last. This beast is in for a surprise.

Hoping to watch Berserker Giant's guts fill my vision, I eagerly wait for the moment of impact.

Watching closely with my All- Seeing Eye, new information is uncovered during this exchange.

As the two dense crescents of energy make contact with the Giant's blade, the usual white flash of dense mana being released blinds me. Before impact, I watch the two dense barriers collide.

The energy is almost acting like two solid objects, hence the loud metallic twang, but it's still hard to tell exactly how it's done.

Before I'm able to extract any more data, the wind and fire magic expands exploding into an array of white and red flames and white wind.

"This is good..."

Last time the attacks were completely deflected, this time they managed to hit something and explode on impact. Surely I landed a fatal attack.

Smirking I keep my guard up, but slowly float down to check out the scene.

As the magic residue, along with chunks of rock and dust begin to clear, I let out a slight gasp...

I'm filled with excitement, along with a bit of nerves at the sight before me.

The Berserker still stands gripping its sword, glowing bright red. Its entire right arm is badly burned... but somehow not on fire....

Deep cuts from my wind magic have sliced up its torso and dragged its armor, it drips red blood onto the hard black dungeon floor.

I can see every last one of its teeth as the jagged smile cuts deep into my soul from nearly 30m up in the air.

It lets out a screech, jumping upward with its sword pointed taught ahead. The monster is ready for more...

I let out a chuckle.

"Now, this is going to be a good fight."

Chapter 156

The blood-dripping Berserker Giant falls to the floor after attempting its jump into the sky.

I check my mana crystal supplies. There's just under 60k MP worth of crystals in my item storage. Judging by the state of this monster, and its tendency to throw itself in front of my attacks, it seems like I'll be able to defeat it in just a few more hits.

Grinning, I charge up both of my blades again. The white and red lights glow on both sides of my body as I concentrate on refining the dense mana flowing through my veins down into a perfect attack.

Locking my eyes on the target below, nearly 30 seconds pass as I charge up my attack full close to 10k MP. Once its ready, I let the energy crescents soar.

Same as before, they rocket downwards toward the grinning beast. It plants its foot and raises its blade, bracing for impact.

Moments before the mana-dense strikes make contact, I see a red blur move across the flat battlefield. The twisted grin of this menace haunts me as it runs from my attack...

A loud cracking sound rings out seconds later as 10k MP worth of hard-earned mana hits the glossy stone structure below exploding into a vibrant red, white light show below.

I scowl, air-stepping away while keeping my vision locked on the speeding Berserker. I can't tell what it's doing, but I know it just messed up my attack and I'm not happy about it.

This win isn't going to come as easily as I thought it would.

Resentfully charging up another 10k worth of MP, I plan an attack I've been meaning to try for a few days now...

After 30 seconds go by and both my blades are near the point of full mana saturation, I concentrate hard on my target and whisper two words under my breath.

"Dungeon Walker."

Teleporting to the opposite side of the black square arena, still over 20m in the air, I release my dual attack. In the blink of an eye, I teleport over 100m to the other side of our battlefield right behind the hideous creature.

Now, with the element of surprise on my side, the white and black energy blades rip through the air with All-Seeing Eye-guided precision.

It takes fractions of a second for the dense mana output to reach its intended destination. Watching it hurdle toward the Berserker's back, I let out a victory yell. It lands a perfect unguarded hit.

A bright white light shines on impact. Then after half a second of lag, wind and fire magic erupt from the target. Crimson red flames along with near-invisible razor-sharp gusts of wind shoot out in all directions.

I air-step closer full of curiosity, eager to admire my job well done. Today is the first time I've been able to test my new mana refinement abilities on a moving enemy that can actually take a hit.

The dust clears as I approach, but I stop abruptly as a red glow seeps out from below me. It's followed by another ear-piercing screech as the menace jumps up with its sword pointed straight ahead.

There are more residual burns and gashes from my wind slashes and fire magic, but somehow, it hasn't slowed down one bit. If anything, the beast has gotten faster and stronger from taking these attacks.

I use Dungeon Walker to teleport backward again, about 30m high in the sky. It takes a considerable amount of wind magic to keep me upright in the sky, I'm having to plunder MP from crystals more than I'd like to. It's the only way to avoid the leaping monster's attacks.

It hits the ground with another thud, locking its eyes on me again and sprinting around in circles with greater speed than its previous attack.

This is how Berserkers work.... The more I attack the more that beast will enjoy the fight. The closer it gets to dying, the more danger I'll be in.

It seems like I'll be safe if I stay high up in the sky though, I just need to land a few more attacks.

Peering into my item storage I count just under 50k MP worth of crystals. Burning through my whole supply would allow for 5 more solid attacks... Possibly... If I can manage to land every last one of them, maybe that will be enough.

Grinning, I begin to charge up another full-power attack into both of my blades. The Berserker stares at me from below salivating at the thought of battle.

Moments before releasing my strike, I Dungeon Walk to the opposite side of the monster and let it soar. After a flash of white light and a wind-filled fiery explosion, the rubble and dust clear up again.

I hit the beast, and it's even more scorched and bloody than before, but its wicked grin just keeps getting wider and wider...

It's a bit off-putting, but I like this monster's style. Charging up another 10k MP attack, the smirk across my face begins to look similar to the monster I'm trying to defeat.

Dungeon Walking to its far side again, I let out another dual strike. As lights flash and flames fly up in the air, a laugh escapes my lips. Energy surges through my veins as I begin charging up another strike before the dust even clears.

"This... is fun..."

Deep wounds show all over the Berserker's thick red skin. Its light armor is riddled with holes and slash marks. A trail of red blood follows the beast as it continues to run across the flat arena-like surface below.

With its silver sword held steady and green eyes locked on me, the monster doesn't flinch for a second jumping at me again.

Dungeon Walking behind it, I let out another attack as it screeches out in agony.

Every time I do so, I activate my All-Seeing Eye to collect more data on the mana refinement that these new dungeon creatures have.

So far, I've found that moments before impact, the creature lets out a thin layer of dense mana surrounding its skin. To me, if I were not using my perception abilities, this mana shield would be invisible to the naked eye until impacted with an equal or greater force.

The flash of white light seems to be the release of used MP after a clash of attacks, if my shots were weaker, they may have just bounced off without making much of a white glow at all...

The dust clears from my most recent attack and the beast is still standing. Its movements and strength seem to all be at 100%, but based on its physical appearance I can tell about 50% of its HP is spent.

I air-step higher into the sky counting less than 15k MP left in my storage. I scowl but push forward. I'm too far into this battle to give up now. I can't just leave halfway through after burning through all of my hard-earned MP.

"It's all or nothing. I need to do one final attack to finish this monster off for good..."

After a deep breath, I begin charging up both blades again. This time, not holding back in the slightest. I glow red and gold with the power from my bloodlust, berserker, and extreme strength buffs.

Plundering the MP from every last drop of mana crystal I have in my storage, my blades begin to glow and rattle. The berserker's eyes widen and it begins to glow darker red as well.

With that silver sword at the ready, it's eager to take on my newest attack head-on.

Just like in my past attempts, whenever charging up past my limits, the fire and wind elements begin eating away at my hands and arms. This can be healed later, but it's definitely painful in the moment. Struggling to hold on for over 40 seconds, I manage a full charge.

This is one of the biggest un-aided attacks I've let out since the Titan's Domain. A total of 13.5k MP all stored up in one dual attack.

With a yell, I Dungeon Walk to the monster's blind spot, and let it soar.

The release of energy feels incredible in the moment as I watch each mana blade glide through the air. The only downside is, my MP nearly hits 0 as I fall from the sky...

Watching the collision of attacks from a distance, the ground gets closer and closer. The white flash, followed by a ball of fire puts a grin across my face.

The red glow and murderous screech that follows do not...

My heart skips a beat as I watch the now one-armed menace jump 10m in the air out from the cloud of dust and rubble. Gushing blood and glowing red. The Berserker points its silver sword at me, sporting a twisted smile.

I fall toward the monster, fully able to activate Dungeon Walker as I please, but not interested in the slightest.

My final attack almost did the job...

Just one more and I could have finished this beast off.

I think of calling for Ember, or even going back to the lower floors to farm more MP, but none of these options will satiate my craving for killing this monster in battle right here and now.

Gritting my teeth as I fall closer and closer to the glowing Berserker below me, I reach into my item storage to pull out a Strengthening Fragment. Holding it in the same hand as my dagger, I smirk while bringing it closer to my mouth.

"The real fight is about to begin."

Chapter 157

I watch the ground get closer and closer as the Berserker lies in wait below.

"This is the only way."

I toss the small Black Strengthening Fragment into my mouth and prepare for its full power to be unleashed. As the tingling sensation in my fingertips begins, I get a nagging sensation on my telepathic link. It's Ember.

"Master, this is not wise."

I clench my jaw while the gem begins to activate. Pins and needles form all over my body and the warm feeling of near-limitless mana begins pouring into my chest, then circulating through my veins.

Letting out a gasp, I begin charging my blades without a moment's hesitation, then reply.

"This must be done. Just catch me when I fall."

"Understood."

Blades glowing, and Dungeon Walker Activated, I blip around to the backside of the one-armed, heavily breathing Berserker.

In less than 10 seconds, a 15k MP attack has already easily been charged. This is far more powerful than anything I've thrown at the beast so far. I release it instantly, charging another one up as I Dungeon Walk to its opposite side.

A flash of white light followed by the fiery explosion clouds my vision, but I push through.

The moment I see a dim red glow from within peek out, I release another full-force 15k MP attack.

The negative effects of the Strengthening Fragment are starting to take place. Even pumped up on battle adrenaline, the influx of mana into my bloodstream is overwhelming. Releasing 15k MP attacks with no cool down in between is extremely painful, but euphoric at the same time.

The feeling of a thousand tiny knives piercing my body returns, partnered with both hot and cold sensations all over confusing my senses.

With a yell, I let out another 15k MP attack straight into the fiery cloud rubble hoping to get a final shot in on the mutilated monster.

With my vision blurring, I try to charge a 4th attack, but it's no use... My eyes roll into the back of my head and I black out, just like the last time I tried one of these fragments.

Everything goes dark....

"..."

[Level Up]

"Master."

"..."

"Master, it looks like you're moving again."

I let out a groan as I wake up to the "Level Up" notification bringing me to level 409.

My bones feel frail and my muscles ache like they're about to snap.

I try to use self regeneration, but realize I'm completely out of MP. Moving my head back and forth slowly while sitting up and adjusting to the light, I take in the view.

A large crater has been made in the middle of the perfect smooth square-shaped battlefield. Ember sits beside me, and both of my blades rest on the ground nearby.

"Did... I kill it?"

"You did, and we've leveled up too."

I see a grin creep across the Dragon's face.

Letting out a chuckle as I groan and stand to my feet I reply.

"I knew you wouldn't be too mad if there was something in it for you as well. You'll rank up in no time."

I place a hand on the glossy scales lining the monster's back.

"Mind if I borrow some MP?"

"It's all yours, Master."

I begin to plunder a few hundred mana points, attempting to regenerate my sore body. It helps a bit, but the aftermath of overusing MP can't be healed so easily.

"Appreciate it.... It's still just Jay by the way- well, call me whatever you want I guess."

I place my blades into my item storage, getting ready to teleport us out of here, but then remember one of the most important questions I forgot to ask.

"Did that Berserker drop any loot?"

Ember turns to the crater.

"I believe it did."

I slowly walk over to the large hole in the ground filled with excitement. This beast was no ordinary monster, its item drop will most likely be pretty interesting.

The edge of the 20m wide, 5m deep pit nears. I peer over the edge to see two items on the ground below. The first is a large mana crystal, and the second is a long silver sword.

I jump down into the crater and activate appraisal to get a better look.

[Berserker Giant's Long Sword] [Unbonded] +1000 Attack +500 Agility

Nodding slowly, grinning at the shiny new sword in my possession, I think back to the first time appraised this monster. I'm sure the text that reads [Unbonded] read [Blood Bonded] moments ago.

I scratch my chin, plundering the mana crystal and waving the shining sword around aimlessly in the air with a stupid grin across my face. Doing so brings another question to mind...

"Hey Ember, how long was I out?"

"No more than 15 minutes, it wasn't too long."

I nod while placing the odd weapon into my inventory. That's longer than last time, but not too bad.

Letting out a sigh, I stretch my back and arms. I have no mana left, and my body feels like it's about to fall apart if I don't get some proper rest.

"We're going back to the 10th floor. This was a good first day of climbing. It seems like the 20th-floor boss room may be pretty difficult after all..."

"Very well."

I open up my spacial magic portal and allow Ember to walk inside. Without another thought, I Dungeon Walk back to my rented room at the 10th-floor Checkpoint Inn.

I close my eyes and fall asleep.

Hours later, I wake up to a loud banging on the wooden door less than 3m from my bed. I rub my eyes and groan while rolling off the low bed frame down to the floor.

"Jay! Rise and shine! Time for your first day of training!"

The sound of Fisher's arrogant, but enthusiastic voice rings out loud and clear through the poorly made thin walls.

I stand up to struggle to walk across the room to turn the lock.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm awake. What is it?"

The door swings open and I see the blue-haired swordsman grinning at me with Rylan close behind. Fisher points to the redhead.

"He's tagging along today too."

Rylan waves at me with a cheerful grin on his face.

"Hey, it's not every day I get to see Elite level training. I may learn a few things."

I open my mouth to reply, but Fisher continues.

"Come on, let's get some breakfast. I'll fill ya in on the day's tasks."

I walk out the door with a nod, closing it behind me with a light thud. Fisher takes the lead, walking down the steps as Rylan talks my ear off about how his team is going off to hunt High Ogres while he stays here for a few more days.

I just woke up... All this stimulation isn't helping my headache and sore parts.

As I walk down the wooden steps, I can feel the individual joints in my ankles and knees crack. They make slight popping sounds and I'm struck with a sharp pain after every step. It's nothing I can't handle, just a bit annoying...

The 3 of us walk over to the front desk to be greeted by Mr. Conway.

"Well good morning to the 3 of you! Well..."

The man looks down at his watch.

"Actually, it's closer to midnight in the outside world, but good morning to ya anyways! It looks like you've all gotten to know each other a bit better now. Am I right?"

Fisher smirks, putting an arm around both Rylan and me.

"Yeah, we're getting along just fine."

A squirm out from his grip with an annoyed look on my face. Rylan on the other hand, looks pretty used to this treatment.

The blue-haired swordsman speaks up again.

"Another round of drinks and food, the house special. Jay is starting his training today. I'll be teaching him about the Tier 1 techniques and how a Tier 0 can handle higher-level monsters."

The old man looks over to me, smirks, then looks back at Fisher.

"Got it, you're food and drink will be out shortly. Take a seat."

The Innkeeper points to an empty table nearby and walks over to a small door near the far side of the counter whispering under his breath with a grin.

"Oh, what it would be like to be young again."

Fisher leads us over to the table, shouting to the old man.

"Thanks, Conway."

We all sit down and wait in silence for a few seconds. I look the Elite in the eyes with a puzzled expression on my face.

"What did you mean by all of that? A Tier 1 and a Tier 0? What do all these terms mean...?"

I gulp, eager for a reply. Rylan listens wide-eyed and grinning. Fisher nods, putting both hands on the table before replying.

"The Tiers I mentioned are just a system the Association created to track the progress of mana control in Elite level hunters. I'm a Tier 1, a Low-Grade, but still a Tier 1. You are definitely a Tier 0, if I had to guess you're still a Low-Grade, but on the edge of breaking into the Mid-Grade range. This week you'll be breaking through."

I squint my eyes, still confused about what these Tiers even represent. Fisher continues.

"Remember yesterday? When you threw that highly refined mana attack at me and I didn't use a single skill to block it."

I nod, thinking back to the time I threw that attack at his open chest and it didn't make a single scratch... It reminds me of the Yeti and Berserker I fought earlier too. They all used a similar technique.

Fisher leans in.

"Well, this is a Tier 1 mana control technique called Mana Shielding. We'll be working on a few ways to improve your mana control this week. It's the only way you'll be able to stand a chance on higher floors. The Behemoth's Mana Shielding is near the level of my own."

Chapter 158

I stare blankly at Fisher.

This advanced mana control technique he's talking about makes sense. The only thing that bugs me, is the fact that this ability is pretty well-known in the Association... I had no idea it existed before I learned it.

I reply.

"So you're saying, by the end of the week you'll be able to teach me how to create a defensive technique like your own?"

The swordsman smirks then lets out a laugh.

"Yeah, right! I said we'd work on some techniques to help you break through one of these shields, learning how to form one yourself is on a whole different skill level. Plus, we have one task this week. There's no point in focusing on anything else right? Efficiency is key."

I grin, as he nods to me.

"Right. Kill the Behemoth."

After a long pause, the old man's voice rings out from the back room.

"Food is ready, eat up and get out!"

The Innkeeper brings over 3 steaming hot plates of food on a silver platter along with 3 drinks in his other hand.

Once served, I eat up like this is my first meal in days. Trust me, I know what that feels like....

Expending massive amounts of mana puts my body into shock like it's back in the Titan's Domain.

After hard training like this, I always try to eat as much as I can and use self regeneration to its limits. Even so, it still takes days to recover fully.

The 3 of us pig out for a few minutes, enjoying the feast in front of us and ignoring everything in the surrounding area.

About 5 minutes in, once food isn't the only thing on our minds, Rylan speaks up.

"So, what will you two do for training today?"

He looks over to Fisher as he gulps down his drink and waves at Mr. Conway to grab him another.

The redhead continues.

"Jay has an element-imbued weapon just like you, are you going to start him off with mountain training? Or is there not enough time for something like that?"

I raise an eyebrow, confused at the sound of this so-call "mountain training". Fisher replies while wiping his mouth with his sleeve.

"Usually, new Elite recruits can't manage to complete that training method in months if they tried. The Director says you're a special case, just like me.

He smirks, downing a fork full of food and turning to me.

"I finished mine in under a week. You can handle it, right?"

I shrug, shoveling another bite of food into my mouth too. After swallowing hard, I reply.

"Whatever it is, if it'll make me stronger, I'm in."

I take another bite and zone out as the two of them laugh and start a new conversation about the Association and a few previous missions they were both on recently.

I don't know either of these two guys very well. Rylan seems like he wouldn't harm a fly, and Fisher is one of the strongest hunters I've ever met.

After facing one of the mobs on floor 19, and having to use a Strengthening Fragment to finish it off, I can only imagine what comes after that. All of this talk about mana control is making me pretty excited. It's a new power I can harness to get stronger and stronger.

The way Fisher explained those tiers makes it seem like I have a long way to go...

I may be strong enough to weasel in a victory aided by a mana-boosting drug, but it won't be enough to face floor 20. I can tell I'm going to have to put some trust in Fisher and let him teach me a few things this week.

Ember seems to know a thing or two about mana control as well. I'll have to pick his brain when I get a chance.

We continue our meals, and the blue-haired swordsman throws a silver coin onto the innkeeper's desk.

"Come on, let's get started. The more time you have to do training, the better."

Fisher points at the door, motioning for us all to leave. I get up from my seat with a plate licked clean. Rylan follows and speaks up as we near the door.

"You don't have to keep paying for meals here. It's all taken care of by the Association."

The front door creaks open as the Elite replies.

"I know, it's just an old habit of mine."

The 3 of us walk outside and make our way over to the backside of the Inn. The large crater from our little altercation yesterday is gone... like it never happened...

I point to the flat rock-filled grassy earth shouting out to the hunters in front of me.

"Hey! Did someone fix this? What's going on here... why is the hole I made earlier today completely gone?"

Fisher responds but doesn't even bother to turn around.

"Come on, this way. If you don't know already, that's part of your training too. I'll fill you in once we make it to our destination."

"I- fine. Where are we going anyways?"

The blue-haired swordsman points up in the sky toward the closest mountain in the dungeon. Its rocky base has to be nearly 1km wide and it towers high into the sky. It's the smallest mountain here, but still pretty impressive.

I nod and follow along.

The pair love to talk it up. While they're bragging to each other about quests completed, I'm taking out diving Griffins as they fall from the sky.

Our walk takes just under 30 minutes. As we arrive near the base of the first towering peak, I finally start asking questions again. This mid-morning stroll was nice and all, but it's time to get down to business.

"Hey, Fisher. Now are you gonna tell me why someone took the time out of their day to fill up a hole I made in a dungeon? I still don't get it."

He lets out a chuckle.

"I didn't realize you were still thinking about that."

I give him a light glare.

"What does it have to do with my training anyways?"

Grinning, the swordsman turns his body to point an open palm up at the mountain above us.

"It relates to your training a lot actually. I'm surprised you've never heard about Dungeon Regeneration Rates."

"... No, I haven't. Explain."

"Dungeons and the monsters within them are made of pure mana. The only exception is when specific dropped items convert energy to actual worldly mass."

I nod slowly as he continues.

"Dungeons are created to look, act, and perform in a certain way. Dungeons and labyrinths grow stronger as we bring we, the hunters, bring more mana into them. If reckless idiots come in and rampage the place to leave it a mess, who would want to come back for more? How will the dungeons and labyrinths get stronger?"

I start to open my mouth as gears begin to turn in my head. Fisher continues.

"Every isolated Dungeon has a specific regeneration rate. Some that have stronger mana tend to regenerate faster, and others with weaker mana levels tend to heal a bit slower. Size, location, age, mob levels, if the dungeon is in a labyrinth or not, there are a lot of factors that play into this."

I finally get a word in, now understanding how the floor magically returned to normal overnight.

"So.. how long is the rate on this one?"

The Elite grins.

"Just under 8 hours."

I start scratching my chin and thinking to myself about this concept.

It seems like Fisher knows a bit more than I thought, but I have more insight on this new discovery than most hunters would ever get in a lifetime. I am after all bonded with a Labyrinth Guardian... A literal Dragon.

Ember has enlightened me on a few things. The first being, monsters only care about you for your mana. Mindless beasts are always programmed to kill an outsider on sight, even Intelligent monsters have an unwavering urge to defeat those that trespass into their domain.

There must be some reasoning behind this, but so far, I haven't found that out.

The one's profiting off the dungeons, most likely a Demon and Dragon pairing, want to keep them tidy for guests when they arrive.

With excess mana stores available, dungeons can be healed back to their original form.

A grin starts to grow across my face. New information is always so satisfying when I can put more pieces of a puzzle together.

"So... what do the regeneration rates of this dungeon have to do with my training?"

Fisher lets out a sigh, still pointing his palm high up into the air at the rocky mountain high in the sky. He brings his hand down and points at me, then to a rock wall about 100m away from us.

The words then come out of his mouth next leave me in a simultaneous state of shock, awe, and amusement.

Fisher speaks.

"You have 8 hours to make a cut all the way through this mountain with nothing but your mana, magic skills, and a sword."

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Still trying to process the words that just came out of the blue-haired Elite's mouth, I stand with a blank expression on my face. He really said...

"You have 8 hours to make a cut all the way through this mountain with nothing but your mana, magic skills, and a sword."

The corners of my mouth begin to curl as he stares at me with a very serious look on his face. I turn to Rylan, but he just shrugs... This doesn't help me out one bit.

Unable to hold myself back, I let out a loud laugh while bending over and holding my knees. I continue to process what the swordsman just asked me to do.

"Cut it all the way through? You want me... do cut this mountain in two? Who do you think I am?"

Fisher reaches into his item box and takes out his sword. Without a moment's hesitation, it begins to glow light blue. He turns to a jagged cliff overhang about 200m away from us and gracefully swings his sword.

A paper-thin crescent of almost invisible blue mana leaves his blades, flying through the sky toward the cliff nearby.

Preparing for an explosion followed by an avalanche, I take out my own blade and get ready to air-step away. On impact, quite the opposite happens...

The thin blue blade of energy hits the rocky overhang and doesn't even make a sound. I watch closely, eagerly waiting to see what will happen next...

The blue energy attack comes out of the top of the overhang in complete silence. I open my mouth but no words come out as I watch the massive ledge of rock separate from the mountain and fall to the dungeon floor moments later. A perfectly straight and glossy smooth cut has been made through the entire cliff side letting a huge chunk of rock hit the ground with an earth-shaking thud.

Fisher grins, putting his blade away and turning toward me. The dust cloud from the fallen rock settles as he speaks.

"By the end of this training session, hopefully, you'll be able to release an attack similar to that."

Still, wide-eyed and in shock at the precision of his blow, I let the Elite continue.

"Maybe I phrased myself incorrectly before. I meant, you'll need to learn to create an attack that can cut through this entire mountain, uninterrupted."

I raise an eyebrow.

"What kind of training is this...? Cutting through rock? How does this help me with mana control?"

Fisher throws me two small pink bottles, then points to my sword.

"I've seen you charge up at least that much into one of your blades. Try the same attack as me, throw one at the ledge. Once you can make a slice half as clean as mine, we can move on to the next stage of training. Got it?"

I catch the two bottles, examining them and confirming that they're just C-Class MP potions.

"Sure- I can do that..."

Clenching my jaw, I ignite my sword into flames, uncork the first bottle, and begin to charge up. Drinking both potions with one hand, and gripping my weapon tight with the other. I manage to imbue a full 5000MP in just under 20 seconds.

Dropping both bottles to the floor, I grip my flaming blade with both hands and plant my feet locking my vision on the cliff's half-cut ledge in front of me. Its glossy shine from Fisher's last attack glimmers in the artificial sun's light.

I focus on making my mana as dense, fine, and powerful as possible. With a grunt, I swing my sword and let the black crescent of dense fire rip through the skies.

Trails of crimson-red fire residues are left in its tracks. Heat waves make the air ripple behind it, distorting our visions as the hot slash rockets toward the ledge high above us.

It makes contact with the side of the mountain, letting off a loud crack. It pierces through pretty smoothly at first but begins to expand on impact creating an eruption of flames. Medium-sized boulders and smaller rock fragments fly off in all directions.

This is what tends to happen with all my attacks, they're precise on impact but always explode into a ball of energy once disrupted in any way.

The dust and fire residue clears up, and I'm left staring at a jagged crater on the side of the cliff. Fisher smirks.

"Not bad for your first day. For someone with your lack of technical knowledge, it's impressive you've made it this far in the first place. How'd you manage to train your mana control at such a young age? I looked at your file before you got here, you're only 20, right?"

I nod.

"The Director said you've already made it to level 400 as well."

I freeze, trying to think how and when the Director could have ever figured this out... His Appraisal skill shouldn't even show levels. Even if it does, I'm positive I was using [Conceal] every time I entered that office.

Fisher keeps talking.

"I'll take that as a yes? Come on, you've got to tell me how you did it."

I continue to stand there without saying a word, leaving the 3 of us in silence for a few seconds. Then, I reply once my thoughts are in order.

"The mana control is simple. I just do a lot of training... Every bronze coin earned goes back into mana refinement. Ever since I awakened, it's been the only thing on my mind."

I gulp, but Fisher nods with a smile

"I've done the same thing. Ever since I was picked up by the association as an E-Class 4 years ago, fresh out of high school. Every coin earned has gone into mana, I like your style."

He grins at me with a satisfied look on his face.

I nod, doing a few simple calculations in my head to assume Fisher is 22. Just 2 years older than me. He speaks up while I'm lost in thought.

"The levels, how'd you manage that? Brutus told me you managed to take down a few Titans too, but they don't even drop exp. So that couldn't have even been how you leveled."

He looks up at the sky, thinking hard about something.

I shrug, looking at the ground while trying to think of a reply. To my relief, after a few seconds, I get cut off as he decides to end this conversation short.

"Whatever, I'm not one to pry too much. That's enough gossip for me. Time for you to get to work."

Fisher reaches toward his item box and pulls out a few handfuls of C-Class MP potions. I raise an eyebrow at the ocean of glass bottles pouring out of his tiny leather item pouch doesn't seem to end... They just keep on coming... The blue-haired swordsman pours out almost 400 potions into a large pile on the dungeon floor.

"I- Are.. these all..."

He smirks.

"Welcome to the Association. Life as an Elite isn't half bad."

"..."

"This is what the higher-ups gave me for your training this week. It seems like they're in quite a hurry to get enough Dark Continent squads ready. Spending 100 gold on mana for a newbie like you during his 2nd week under contract is pretty unheard of. You must have really made a good impression on the Director."

I don't reply, nor am I listening to much of anything Fisher is saying. I just grin, walking toward the pile of potions before me. It's my lucky day... The moment I run out of mana crystals, nearly 1 million MP worth of potions happens to fall right into my lap.

The pink glow of potions reflects off my goofy grin as I approach. Fisher speaks up, pointing at the 1km wide mountain in front of us as I throw my sword to the ground and dive both hands deep into the glowing pile of pink treasure.

"When I did this training, my mentor let me figure things out for myself. I have a feeling you learn in a similar way, so I won't make this easy."

Too mesmerized by the potions, I still don't bother replying. He continues.

"Hey listen!"

I shake my head and snap out of it. He finishes up his speech.

"As you know, the regeneration rate in this dungeon is roughly 8 hours. Your task is to cut a hole all the way through this mountain, by any means necessary. I want to see an exit hole on the other side."

"..."

"I'll be back to check on you in 8 hours if you don't come to the Inn's lobby before then. If the hole through this mountain doesn't reach all the way through, you've failed and must try again tomorrow. Take as many hits as you want, but brute forcing a tunnel may be a lot harder than it seems. You'll have to get much stronger than you are now, in more ways than just pure power. Got it?"

I nod.

"Whatever you say...."

He bows his head slightly with a smile.

"Best of luck, we'll be back soon."

Rylan throws his hands up in the air from a distance.

"Hey come on that's it? No explanation? No guidelines? Not even a hint? Nothing? How is he going to-"

Fisher throws an arm around the redhead's shoulder, cutting him off.

"He's got this. It may take all week, but if I figured it out with I was younger, he can too."

I watch the two of them walk off back in the direction of the Inn, leaving me at the base of the mountain all alone...

One by one, I put all the newly acquired MP potions into my item storage. It's not my preferred way of replenishing MP, but it's a whole lot better than nothing.

Once that's taken care of I grab my sword off the ground. That strike I threw at the cliffside was the first one in a while that wasn't a dual attack.

I'm supposed to be training. Concentrating on one blade may help with my focus, that's what Fisher does, so why don't I give it a try? The way that crescent of blue energy came out of his blade is like nothing I've ever seen. It was such a pure, dense, and concise attack.

My goal this week is to get to that level... I just have to figure out how...

I walk closer to the flat stone wall, giving myself about 30m of space to launch another attack.

With a smirk, I take out 2 C-Class MP potions and begin to charge up my blade.

This training session is about to begin.

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I stare down at my black sword. It begins to glow red, flickering with crimson flames as I charge it up with two C-Class MP bottles worth of mana worth 5k points.

Fisher may have said brute force won't work, but he doesn't know what kind of brute force I'm capable of. Activating all of my stat-boosting skills I begin to glow red and gold.

I release the charged-up blast straight at the stone cliff before me. It explodes into a fireball just like my previous attack, making a deep crater in the rock. Fragments of mountainside fly everywhere and the dust settles a few seconds later.

Looking at the hole in front of me, I grin while reaching for more potions to charge up a second attack.

"This is gonna be easy..."

Over the next 30 minutes, I throw 9 more attacks. This is roughly 50k MP output in total.

The first 3 or 4 of these strikes are pretty promising blows, they look less than 5 minutes altogether. They blast chunks of boulders in all directions allowing me to make my way further into the mountain's side by about 5 meters each time.

The problem I begin to run into after these initial strikes is the leftover rubble left in place after each explosion... When I first pictured digging a hole through this mountain of rock, I didn't take into account the fact that I'd have to put the excess waste somewhere...

Luckily, I have just the place to carry large amounts of immovable matter.

"Spacial Magic."

Opening my white spinning pocket dimension that I use as item storage, I carefully move large pieces of stone from inside as I continue to dig deeper into the mountainside. With every full power attack I throw, the same size explosion is created, making the tunnel into this mountain base about 4-5 meters wide.

I think about using both of my blades. It would surely make a bigger explosion, but the amount of physical strain one of those attacks does on my body is pretty damaging. One sword is more efficient on my body as well as MP stores.

Another 30 minutes pass and I let out another 8 attacks.

My breathing is starting to get heavier and the excess amount of mana being used is beginning to take its toll on me already....

I'm just about 100m into the mountain, with 18 attacks thrown at it. That's around 90k MP worth of potions, at this rate, It'll be just enough to make it though....

There are two problems I'm facing so far. First, the timeframe. A full hour to only make it 1/10 of the way through isn't going to cut it.

I grit my teeth and begin charging up my blade again.

"I'll just have to go twice as fast."

Secondly, all this mana excess usage is tiring me out. Nearly 100k MP an hour is impossible to keep up for long. Using a million in a day sounds insane...

My joints are starting to itch with that sore feeling that I get after overseeing mana. My muscles are tightening up too, but it's not that bad just yet.

I've had it way worse. I can keep this up, I just need to figure out how to improve...

Hacking away at this stone wall isn't helping me train in the slightest. My mana control may increase in proficiency by a small amount from using up all this MP, but that isn't the point of Fisher's training session. There must be some kind of trick to this...

Gripping my glowing blade and staring at the cave wall before me, I let out a frustrated grunt. After thinking things through for a few more minutes, I start again.

"All-Seeing Eye."

Letting out another 10 attacks in record time, I make even more good headway. This barrage is complete in under 20 minutes. Along with trying to limit my break times in between slashes, I focused on the density of my mana control. I fine-tune each attack to make sure more power is stored into smaller and denser attacks.

This is what helped me cut through that white wall in the Titan's Domain. It must be how Fisher can cut through rocks like butter. Making my attack denser and stronger is the only way it'll cut this mountain in two without blowing up in my face. Right..?

After going all out, using up another 50k MP and clearing all the excess rubble with my spacial magic, I lean up against the cave wall about 150m into the mountain.

It's pretty dark this deep within the cave. The white light from outside barely makes it in. The only way for me to see is with the flames from my sword after each attack and the use of my perception skill.

My fingers are starting to tingle, my ankles are weakening, and a sharp pain in my lower back irks me every time I put too much pressure into my attack stance.

"I'm using too much mana..."

Over 150k MP has been run through today, and in a very short amount of time too.

I let out a sigh, using self regeneration to the best of my ability on my tight muscles and worn-out joints while sliding down the cool cave wall.

"I didn't get anything done today..."

It's been almost 2 hours and I've already worn myself out to the limit. There hasn't been any noticeable change in my attack power or precision. I just don't have enough time or mana to figure this out...

Using my perception skill hardly helps at all. I can see the flowing mana around me, and watch the energy become a highly refined, dense attack before letting it fly, but I'd be able to do mostly the same thing without it.

Feeling the flow of mana throughout my own body isn't too difficult, especially with the newfound level of control I've obtained recently.

I let out another long sigh, racking my brain for any potential ideas.

"There has to be a trick...."

I grit my teeth, standing up while igniting my sword into flames.

Fisher said I'd learn how to do all of this my own way, and brute force wouldn't work... Maybe he's right, but how am I supposed to figure this out without any guidance? I don't even know what he wants me to do... Cut a hole through a mountain? His mana control is on a whole different level than mine. I'd need dozens of times more MP to get to that level.

He said it took him a full week...

I don't want to spend a week meaningless slashing at a stone wall... I'm not learning anything.

Placing my sword back into my item storage, I begin to pace up and down the 150m long cave. After thinking over every word that blue-haired swordsman said, still, nothing stands out in my mind.

Angrily, I start dumping piles of rubble in the grassy clearing outside the cave entrance. There's no point in leaving these rocks in my storage any longer than I need to.

Before going back inside, I stare up at the portion of cliff that still reflects light off of its glossy surface. Other than the crater I blew into the mountainside right next to it, every bit of the rock wall is perfectly smooth.

"How...?"

I activate my All-Seeing Eye and look closer at the sliced rock above me. This is the only clue I have left to solve this puzzle.

I air-step upwards to get a much closer look. Sitting on the ledge of the cliff, I start my examination. The stone's surface is smooth to the touch, almost like I'm rubbing my fingers against a freshly cleaned glass window.

Squinting, and bringing my head closer with my perception ability active on full blast, I let out a curious whisper.

"Now this... is interesting..."

Usually, when I use my All-Seeing Eye on anything within a dungeon, intense mana readings pour out in all directions. Swirling clouds of pink and white energy seem to flow like air in environments like this.

This rock on the other hand... The surface that's been sliced is not giving off any readings. It's almost like Fisher was cauterizing a wound. The smooth surface of the rock face is acting like a miniature mana shield to its own magical pressure.

That swordsman's attack was so thin and precise, it sliced through this mana-based dungeon material with little to no resistance at all.

Remembering back to that thin blue energy wave, I realize he hardly even charged his sword. He used under a full bar of MP.

With my head spinning at all this new information, I jump down from the ledge with a smirk across my face while walking back into the tunnel.

"So that's what he was trying to tell me... It's not all about power..."