

D. Diver 161

Chapter 161

I walk deeper into the cave I've been hallowing out for hours with a newfound spring in my step.

After my small study break, up on that ledge, it seems like I have a new tactic to try out. Instead of trying to cram as much power into an attack as possible, what if I make it as thin as possible?

It's not like I'm trying to break through a high-density mana barrier, or some unbreakable armor. These are just dungeon boulders. With enough hits, I could probably crumble them with my bare hands...

I let out a chuckle as I near the end of the cave.

"Now... let's try something new..."

Using up just one MP potion, I charge my blade with about 2500 mana points while activating my stat boosting and perception skills. It glows and flickers, ready to let out its full power. I focus on creating as thin of an attack as possible. With less mana in the strike, I'm able to make it much denser than before.

I swing my blade at the wall and a thin crescent of mana-imbued fire magic comes out. I eagerly watch as the energy slams against the cave wall with a loud crack, blowing rocks and dust in all directions just like my last few dozen attempts.

"Hmm."

Taking out another MP potion, I try again. Concentrating harder this time, glowing golden-red. I manage to condense the mana even further down in my blade before letting it soar.

Rocks fly in all directions as I reach for another MP potion to try it all again.

I throw denser and denser attacks at the wall until I've hit my limit. After drinking 9 potions in total, throwing all of these attacks in under 15 minutes, and still making no progress, I set out a long sigh.

"There's definitely still something missing...."

Sliding down the side of the cave wall, I let my sword fall to the ground with a light clang and put out my flames to sit in darkness. Turning to my side to look at the faint white light shining in from afar.

My joints still ache, my back is prickling with a sharp pain, and my legs are begging me not to stand up again. I've nearly hit my limit. There's no way I'm making it all the way through this cave today.

Sitting in silence, looking down at the cave floor that will turn back into a solid mountain once I leave today, a curious thought comes to mind. I mumble under my breath.

"Mana... it's all just mana..."

I stand to my feet, trying to finish connecting the dots in my head about this new epiphany.

I'm not trying to cut through something like a solid object back in the outside world. I'm just trying to cut through a mana shield. These walls may look and feel like rock but is really just a low-grade mana shield in its simplest form.

If I hit it too hard, with too much energy, everything is thrown out of wack.

Grinning, I drink another potion and grip my sword letting it glow light red. I charged just 100 MP into the weapon and condense this small amount of mana into a very dense attack.

Using my perception skill while managing the flow of mana in my blade, I focus on all of the rock surrounding me. The more mana an object or creature in a dungeon contains, oftentimes, the more densely filled they are with that mana.

I attempt to match the exact density of my attack to the surrounding rocks. What I've found in doing so, is that this dungeon material lines up in perfectly symmetrical patterns.

I begin to glow brighter as I use up most of my MP on my All-Seeing Eye other than focusing entirely on the strike.

Unlike moving monsters with more complex systems, this rock is just sitting still. The mana is consistent and systematic. The deeper I gaze into its grid-like pattern the more simple this low-grade mana shield becomes.

After burning through over 1500MP in just a few seconds looking deep into my surroundings, the low hum of the dungeon rock all around becomes much more clear. It's all vibrating at a similar frequency.

I let out another whisper under my breath.

"This is it."

I've never taken the time to examine a rock so closely in my life. It seems my curiosity has paid off.

I grin, pointing my dimly glowing blade at a 2m high boulder that flew off the wall in one of my previous attacks. With a swift motion of my sword, I let my attack soar.

A flickering red and black slash comes out. So thin, it almost looks clear. Gliding through the air in silence, it makes contact with the large rock.

It passes right through without a sound.

It's just like Fisher's attack.

Almost....

It moves through the boulder in front of me with ease but explodes into a fiery mess on the rock wall behind it.

Letting out a laugh and throwing my sword high in the air to celebrate my first successful bit of progress, the boulder splits in half right down the middle. A wide grin creeps across my face as I walk over to examine my job well done

I reach down to take a look at my work. My fingertips glide over the surface of the rock, and the grin on my face slowly fades.

It looks smooth at first glance, but small bumps cover its surface creating a coarse sandpaper feel to it. I thought I did it, but apparently not... All these small impurities begin to eat away at the back of my mind.

If I want to get anywhere near that mirror-like finish that Fisher created with his flash from over 200m away. I have some serious work to do.

Just like when I trained to increase the amount of mana I can control, now, I'll have to practice something new.

After drinking another MP potion, I activate my perception skill again and take in the vastness of my rock wall surroundings. Condensing my mana and matching its low humming frequency to the microscopic grid-like mana patterns, I let another attack fly at a nearby boulder.

The same result occurs.

The stone splits in two, but my slash erupts into a ball of fire as it hits the rock wall behind it.

I try again and again.

Over the next hour, I continue burning through another 20 MP potions.

My breathing is heavy, sweat soaks my shirt, and the MP exhaustion has gotten much worse. Over-stressing my perception skill is starting to get to give me a serious headache. My whole body feels weak, tingling, and on the verge of collapse.

I throw my last attack at a nearby boulder. I've already mentally decided to take a long break after this one, so put my all into it. Watching the highly condensed 100MP slash float through the air in silence. It phases through the large stone, then surprisingly, keeps going through the wall.

The corners of my lips begin to turn as I realize I've made it to the next level of this meticulous process.

Moments later, I hear an explosion, and fragments of stone come flying out of the wall towards me in a ball of flames...

With a grin across my face, I slide down the side of the cave wall yet again. The moment I hit the ground, both sides of the boulder I sliced do as well.

Some of the excess fire residue from the explosion reflects off the glossy surface of the freshly cut stone.

Letting out a long sigh of relief, I throw my sword back into item storage while picking myself up off the hard ground with a tired grunt.

I feel the surface of the stone. It's smooth...

Nowhere near as perfect as Fisher's attack, but this is very smooth. Using the remaining stores of my MP, I activate my All-Seeing Eye.

Light swirls of pink and white mana seep out from microscopic cracks in the rock, but most of it is well-contained. It looks like an old mana shield that's leaking small amounts of energy. I managed to replicate Fisher's strike!

I smirk.

"Not bad. This is quite a good start."

I walk out of the cave with a bright smile across my face. After using up about 200k MP in the last few hours, the number one thing on my mind is food. The second is sleep.

As I begin walking back, in the direction of the Inn. My bones creak and my muscles ache, but a third thought keeps itching at the back of my head.

I wonder how this new technique I'm learning would fare against one of those Berserkers on floor 19...?

Soon, I'll have to find out.

Chapter 162

While pondering the idea of using this new technique against those Berserkers on floor 19, I make my way back to the Inn.

Opening up the front door with a creak, I walk inside to see the usual crowd. Just under a dozen hunters split up into a few parties, all sitting around circular tables enjoying food and drink.

I spot the blue and red-haired duo on the exact same table we ate breakfast at this morning.

As I begin to walk over, Rylan spots me at the door.

"Back so soon? What happened? You gave up already? It's been less than 4 hours, you couldn't have finished your training already... That's impossi-

I wave and give him a tired smile.

"Not done yet. Just taking a break."

My footsteps are heavy, making awkward clunking sounds as I walk over to the table of two. Mr. Conway spots me on the way over and shouts out from the back.

"Hey, the new Elite just returned from his first day of training! How'd it go?"

A few heads turn from the various hunters I pass by on my way to the back of the room, but I'm too third to pay them any mind.

"Good, fine. Food would be great."

He smirks giving me a firm nod.

"Take a seat, it'll be out before you know it."

I nod, giving the kind old man another thin smile, then take a seat.

Fisher waves to the Innkeeper motioning for him to add 2 more people to that food order, then turns to me. Finally, he speaks up with a stern look on his face.

"You're back too early. What happened?"

I reply.

"Way too much mana... I used too much mana. That's all, I'll be back out there tomorrow."

It's true. I thought I could handle more than this, I've burned through hundreds of thousands of MP per day in the past. That was in a much different environment though, it seems I do have limits...

Fisher nods.

"Yeah. It's better to take it slow and concentrate on as much as you can on each attack. I'm sure you've learned at least that much so far."

I reply.

"Blowing a hole through this mountain isn't the goal. It's letting the cut fly through the mountain itself that I'm really after."

A wide grin shows on Fisher's face as he gets up, pointing at Rylan.

"Haha! 10 silver, hand it over. I knew he'd figure it out!"

The redhead's face starts to match his hair color as he replies.

"H-Hey no way! It was like 3 hours or maybe 4 tops, that's impossible! You must have told him when I wasn't looking!"

He looks at me with a flustered expression.

I shrug, not knowing exactly what all the fuss is about.

Fisher eyes Rylan up and down, then the redhead reaches into his item box to place a handful of silver on the table.

"Fine, here you go. You won fair and square. I guess Jay did figure out the purpose of this training on day 1. Now we'll just see if he can pull it all together.

I throw my hands up in the air.

"Hey, hey. I still need another day or so. I'm still getting used to all of this!"

As both C-Classes begin to respond, Mr. Conway comes over with plates of food and drinks in both hands.

I dig in boys.

Using self regeneration after every bite, I recover a lot more. All my aches and pains begin to fade slightly once most of my plates are cleaned. I feel nearly 50% healed. Any more food or mana usage would just have diminishing returns. A good night of sleep is the only thing I know of that can help me now.

Fisher, taking his meal much slower, watches me with amusement. After 10 minutes or so, he speaks up.

"So, was it a lucky guess? Or are you actually able to sense the frequency of mana on that rock wall?"

I gulp down a bite of food and respond.

"A bit of both. I've never thought about a technique like this before, it's like I was slicing through the area between mana particles..."

Fisher grins.

"You're right. Don't get too cocky though, dungeon mass like this is one of the most simple forms mana can take. Facing a real enemy with honed mana control is a whole different story."

I nod.

"It's a good start..."

He takes a gulp of his drink.

"It is."

We finish up our meal without much more conversation. I'm deep in thought, thinking about how I'll improve this new skill tomorrow. Rylan is busy talking fishers ear off, and the blue-haired swordsman is replying in simple responses. Since this morning his mood has definitely shifted, something new is on his mind.

I'm not one to pry, so I decide not to bring it up.

The blue-haired Elite stands up to address both of us once our meals are finished.

"Well, Jay. Great first day of training, it seems you're on the right track. Rylan, you're an excellent time waster."

He cracks a smile as the redhead tries to reply, but he's cut off immediately.

"I'll be off to my room for the rest of the day, Jay I assume you'll need your rest as well. First thing tomorrow we'll meet for training. I'd like to see an update on your progress once you're fully healed. I'll see you in 10 hours, that work?"

I nod as he immediately turns to leave up the wooden stairs behind us. His math is definitely off, and it's messing with my sleep schedule... 10 hours from now is not morning, but I'll manage. In fact, it may just be perfect.

"Sounds good."

Rylan turns to me.

"Well, I better be off too! I just got word a new party from the C-Class exams is coming up soon. It's their first time in the Labyrinth. Wouldn't hurt to greet them!"

He hops up from his chair and skips to the door, leaving me alone at my table.

I let out a sigh, sit around for a few minutes, then make my way back to my room.

A nap wouldn't hurt... I'm pretty exhausted. Hopefully, I'll be healed up enough for some more training in a few hours. The faster I manage to learn this new skill, the faster I'll have the chance to face off against those Berserkers.

I walk upstairs to my small dusty room and fall asleep almost instantly once I hit the soft bedding.

A few hours go by, and my dreams are filled with ideas on how to improve my attack. That last slash I threw was a breakthrough, I need to keep improving on that...

Nearly 5 hours pass. My restless sleep has hit its limit. My body is healed enough, and my mind won't quit coming up with theory after theory that needs to be tested.

"That's it. I'm going back out there..."

After my night of sleep, which felt more like a long nap to me, I crawl out of bed and make my way to my door.

I make sure it's locked, then teleport out of the Inn.

In the blink of an eye, I'm back, staring at the large stone wall...

It seems as though this portion of the dungeon has already regenerated. It's been over 8 hours since my training session began, so I guess Fisher's estimation was right.

I stretch out my arms and legs. I'm mostly healed up, but still a bit stiff. I won't be releasing any large-scale attacks, so this session will be much easier on my body.

I take a fresh potion out of my storage and get to work.

Today, I'll be upping the ante.

I begin to glow gold and red while activating my All-Seeing Eye, peering into the flat stone cliff in front of me. To my surprise, the insides of the mountain are still hollowed and smashed to bits in the deeper areas. It's still healing up from my assaults.

I focus harder while imbuing my sword with under 100MP. Aligning the low humming frequency of the wall before me with my blade is near-impossible to do perfectly. I got close once, so I can do it again.

I let the first thin black blade of flames fly at the wall, and my new training session begins.

It pierces through without a sound, gliding in just like intended... Less than a second later, chunks of stone fly off in all directions.

I grit my teeth, but a smirk creeps through as I charge up my blade again.

Over the next 2 hours, I continuously throw attacks at the wall, improving my concentration, and becoming more and more in tune with the low hum resonating from the cliff face.

I burn through 50k MP. It's mostly just from my perception skill. Having it activated for long periods of time is costly, but it's worth it in this case...

I'm able to let out just over 40 attacks, improving slowly and steadily each time.

The thin black blades released from my sword glide through the rock face with no resistance whatsoever. Not even a trace of an entrance hole is visible.

At first, they would glide in, and explode within the first few meters of entry.

Now, I'm able to stabilize the mana enough to penetrate the rock face over 30 meters on my last attempt. Each time, it still detonates deep within the mountain.

Satisfied with my improvement so far, I turn to one of the small excess boulders lying around from my earlier less practiced run-throughs. I focus, then let out an attack.

It flies through the rock, then disappears into the side of the mountain behind it as well. As I hear the explosion deep within the rockface, the boulder before splits in two simultaneously. I grin ear to ear in the reflection of the sliced stone.

Excitedly, I whisper under my breath.

"Now... I need to try this out on a moving target."

I have more than enough time before Fisher wakes up, and all this fine-tuned technical training is making me antsy. Sure, it's cool to see some progress, but what's progress good for if I can't use it in a fight?

The glossy surface of this boulder I just sliced through is nearly identical to the texture of the strike the Elite made on that cliff's overhang.

I decide it's time for me to put this new skill to some good use. It'd be a shame to put all this free mana to waste... Just slashing away at a mountain...

I smirk, gripping my sword and igniting it into flames.

It's time to go back to Floor 19.

"Dungeon Walker."

Chapter 163

I'm back on the 19th floor, with one thing on my mind.

"I need to find a strong opponent to test this new ability on."

I activate enemy detection and inspect to begin taking a look around for a Berskerer to test out my new mana control technique on.

Every 1km or so, there's a level 400-405 hiding deep within the dungeon. The black hills, valleys, caves, and mazes fill my senses as I search. Finally, a reading that catches my eye pops up.

[1250m]

[Lv. 408]

A level 408... Immediately, I lock onto this familiar reading and Dungeon Walk back to the square-shaped black arena that I know so well. Drawing my sword and igniting my body and weapon into flames, I prepare for our second battle.

A 4m tall red-skinned Berskerer Giant stands in the open air with its long silver sword winging back and forth, mindlessly staring up at the sky. It's exactly the same as the last one I fought. The area destroyed from our previous fight is completely renewed as well, it looks like more than just dungeon mass respawns after a certain period of time.

The manically smiling green-eyed monster turns its gaze toward me just moments after I appear.

Just like that, we begin.

It plants its back legs and begins darting toward me while glowing with the red aura of a berserker skill activating. I grin, putting off a red and gold glow myself, and charging up my blade.

Last time I faced this beast, I used both of my weapons at full blast. I was able to slowly chip away at its defenses because of my attack's pure destructive power, but I'd like to win things a bit differently this time around if possible.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye.

The pink and white swirls of mana around me begin to fill my vision. The crystal-like black rock structures glow brightly with a similar grid pattern that the rocks on the 10th floor showed off. They're just much tighter gridlines, closer together, and vibrating at a much higher frequency.

I move my gaze to the fast-moving Berserker coming my way. Its silver-colored light armor pieces give off a dense mana reading too. Again, it's similar to the stones and crystal-like structures around

me, just much much tighter nit threads of energy creating an almost microscopic grid in my mind's eye.

"Perfect."

Grinning, I focus my attention on the charging monster's chest plate. Burning through an entire MP potion in a matter of seconds, I visualize every last mana particle in the monster's armor.

The green-eyed fiend cracks the ground with every step it takes. I drink another MP potion to prepare my attack. Charging up just 100MP, I burn through another full potion just to get near matching this new ultra-thin level of mana control.

My body shakes, and I grit my teeth as I grip my blade tight, attempting to line up the perfect attack.

Now, it's within range, but I am too...

"Dungeon Walker."

I teleport to the opposite side of the monster and let my strike soar. It's thin, with a black tint, letting out light red flickers of flames as it rips through the air toward the solid metal plate of armor covering its back.

My attack makes contact with the oblivious battle-hungry beast. I grin as I watch my strike disappear momentarily into the back of its armor. Fractions of a second later, I see a flash of white light and a small explosion of flames.

Gritting my teeth, and letting out a frustrated grunt, I air-step upwards to get out of range before it gets too mad...

When the fire and dust clears, I'm not too disappointed with the results of my first attempt.

There's a huge chunk of metal missing from the top half of its backside's armor. It seems like no actual damage was done to the berserker itself, but with just 100MP, I managed to break its armor that much...

I smirk, air-stepping back down to the ground about 30m away from the berserker. I drink another potion and prepare my next attack. This time around, I'll try to add even more mana to the blade.

The monster turns to me, locking its sharp green eyes on my blade. It's glowing red with 250MP worth of charge. At this level of precision, it's much harder to manage this much mana and keep it stable at an exact hair-line width and perfect frequency.

My arms shake as I grip my blade burning through copious amounts of MP on my perception skill to hold the concentration. Even of a fraction of a second slip-up makes for an entirely different attack.

I teleport to the now charging Berserker's blind spot and let my attack soar.

I land the hit. The thin black flaming blade slips through its armor, then a flash of white light triggers a fiery explosion, just like last time.

Thankfully, I'm fighting at a much closer range this time around. The beast doesn't have much time to dodge. Even if it could, I'm not sure it would...

As the flames and dust begin to clear I hear the clanging of metal on stone.

The red-skinned menace turns to me holding its long silver sword while its armor falls to the dungeon floor in pieces.

I cut through its chest plate with that attack. Parts of the metal are sliced cleanly in two, showing off a glossy texture, just like the boulders I cut through earlier.

Unfortunately, the monster is completely unharmed. There isn't a single scratch on its skin. The rippling muscles and bulging veins are untouched by my 2 attacks so far.

It shows me a wide toothy grin, then charges forward like the mindless battle junky it is.

I do the same...

Chugging an MP potion and charging up my blade for another attack, I get ready for the next phase of this fight. When I try to get a reading on the fast-moving monster's skin, it seems to be pretty weak....

If anything, it's even less dense than the rocks down on floor 10. This all seems way too good to be true.

Even its sword isn't much denser than the armor I just cut to pieces.

"I must be missing something."

I Dungeon Walk to its blind spot and prepare for my next move.

Imbuing a full 250MP into my sword again, I match up all of the necessary mana readings, similar to my previous strike, then let my attack fly.

The thin black blade of mana rips through the air toward the monster's open back. It jerks its head to the side moments before impact and I watch an interesting interaction of mana particles take place. My attack bounces off the creature's back with only the tiny white glow of excess energy being released

Fractions of a second before impact, an incredibly dense layer of mana seeps out of the creature's skin... Almost like a bodysuit made of pure mana. This is the mana control skill Fisher was talking about.

"Mana Shielding."

I smirk, getting ready for more as the menace walks toward me licking its lips and glowing crimson-red.

I charge up another attack with 250MP. I'm curious about one more thing. Its sword...

It comes running in at full speed as I throw another black crescent of energy its way. With a swift swing of that sliver sword, I watch my attack get deflected far off into the distance.

The same thin layer of mana covered its blade the moment it needed to deflect my strike.

I remember back to the last Berserker I fought, and when I appraised its sword.

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

This [Blood Bonded] perk must be similar to the bonding between an element stone and a sword like mine. It's an extension of the mana user, that's how it's able to use the technique on its weapons as well.

I grit my teeth and Dungeon Walk away the moment my attack is deflected. I'll have to try a new plan...

I start charging up another one, just shy of 100MP, it's low power, but I'm able to send these attacks off very quickly.

This is exactly what I do, with a burst of rapid-fire attacks, I begin Dungeon Walking around the battle-hungry monster throwing attack after attack at it.

I'm not trying to do any actual damage just yet, I just need to get a better reading on its mana shield's exact density and mana frequency levels. It usually only activates for a fraction of a second after each one of my attacks, this isn't nearly enough time to mimic it.

After close to 30 attacks, I feel like I've finally gotten a close enough reading. Burning through just over 4 more MP potions, I've finally got a feeling for this monster's mana shield readings.

Unfortunately.... Just knowing it isn't going to cut it. The tightly wound mana particles create a thin, nearly indestructible defense lining this Berserker. The levels are far beyond any rock wall, or even its armor I destroyed earlier.

I air-step down to face off against my test subject.

It's getting thoroughly annoyed. All this beast wants is a good fight, and all I'm giving it are weak attacks thrown from a distance. This time around, I'll give it what it's asking for.

I use up 2 MP potions as it runs in toward me. I close my eyes and picture the dense layers of impossibly small grid-like mana particles it spawns every time my attack comes near its skin.

Gripping my blade tightly, I attempt to match its levels of mana readers, but after 10 seconds the monster is drawing too near and my efforts are starting to seem futile.

I let out a frustrated grunt, releasing the attack, knowing it's not even a quarter of the thinness required to pierce its barrier, not to mention nowhere near enough power either.

I Dungeon Walk far away to its opposite side as it deflects my attack with ease using its sword, then runs by my previous position like a raging bull.

I attempt to charge up another attack, watching closely as the monster turns to run toward me again from the far side of the square-shaped arena. I have 20 seconds or so to prepare this time. I concentrate hard, barely using 100MP, attempting to match its mana shielding frequency with all my might.

I'm putting my all into this. With my hands shaking and head aching, I still create a blade way too thick to puncture its shielding and nowhere near enough pure mana to get close to the density required to make any damage.

As it nears I let out a yell of frustration, chucking the attack forward and Dungeon Walking away as it swings its silver sword to send my black blade of flames soaring off into the grey sky.

Clenching my jaw, I try again... From even further away. I airstrip backward to keep my distance and charge up for a full 40 seconds.

At the end of the charge, my brain feels like mush from focusing so hard on a single point, my hands and arms are numb from grabbing the rattling sword, and I've burned through 8 full MP potions on my All-Seeing Eye skill to release a measly 100MP attack.

A thin crest of black energy comes out of my blade. It doesn't flicker or shine, it just glides through the air without any resistance.

The Berserker ignores the insignificant strike, it has blocked dozens of these attacks and even taken a few head-on in the past. By now, it's just focused on me, its prey.

In an exhausted state, my eyes are locked on the attack I've just released. It may not be full of power, but I believe I got one thing right... It'll definitely be thin enough to slip through this monster's defenses...

Moments later, my theory is proven to be correct.

The thin black blade slides through the red-skinned Berserker's mana shielding just like it slid through the rock wall during my training hours ago.

Then... an explosion of white light and flames follow.

With a smirk, I Dungeon Walk away to get out of range from the rage fit that's about to take place.

As the flash of light and fireball fade, I hear an ear-piercing screech. Looking closely, I see a small blood-dripping gash on the side of this red-skinned monster's torso. Enough to make the crimson liquid dribble down its side, but not quite enough for the stream to make it to the floor.

"I did it..."

Dungeon Walking to the far side of the arena again, I prepare to charge up another attack.

"Good progress... Now it's time to finish this fight."

Chapter 164

I just landed my first successful attack on this monster. It took 40 seconds, and almost 20k MP... but I still landed an attack!

The tingling feeling, along with a mild headache begins to alert me that I'm definitely nearing the point of mana exhaustion. I'll be fine for a little while, but keeping this level of MP usage up will wear me out pretty quickly.

Even so, this newfound technique of mine is very intriguing.

What took over 10k MP in a single dual attack on my last attempt hours ago just to break through its barrier, is now soon to be rivaled by a 100MP attack. I just have to concentrate harder...

I've managed to perfect the hair-thin nature of the attack, but my mana density is nowhere near enough to do any damage. I'll have to compress even more MP into my next strike.

Each time I send off another attack it gets easier to replicate the exact size necessary to slip through its mana shielding. The part that doesn't get easier is the mana density... The only way to train that to a significant degree, is to increase my overall mana control.

Increasing my base levels of mana control would require me to consume massive amounts of mana over long periods of time... I'm severely lacking in both of these options at the moment.

I take a deep breath, then get back to work.

Over and over, I match the exact whisper-thin dimensions of the Berskerer's mana shielding, penetrating it with ease each time. Unfortunately, after 5 more attacks and nearly 75k more MP burned through on my perception skill, not much progress has been made.

Even with up to 60 seconds per charge, all I've managed to do is give this rage-filled monster a few paper cuts. The maximum amount I've been able to store in an attack has been roughly 150MP.

My head is aching and my hands are shaking. I've progressed a lot, but my mana control is just not powerful enough to put out enough charge into one blow.

"Looks like I'll have to do things the old fashion way..."

I start charging up my blade with as much mana as I possibly can. At my current rate of blows, I'll pass out from exhaustion before I do any real damage...

Charging up just over 5k worth of mana points, I start releasing less concentrated, but much more powerful blows. I begin Dungeon Waling around the poor beast throwing attack after attack from my flaming sword.

I prefer using two blades, but drinking potions along with releasing attacks makes dual wielding rather awkward.

After just a few minutes, and over 10 attacks later, the red-skinned Berskerer is on its knees. The bloodied and beaten monster still glares at me. Its facial expression says it's ready for another round, but this beast is in no position to fight.

I'm not either...

Since I woke up to start my training again, I've blown through another 200k MP... There's a slight ringing in my ears, a sharp pain in my head, and all of my limbs are tingling after every movement I make.

I stare at the weakened monster, ready to call it a day by just releasing one last brute-force attack. Instead, I decide to finish my training with a useful test.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye, I ready myself for one more attack.

My opponent crawls toward me with an undying will to finish me off, but this just gives me more time to study its mana.

This beast is on its last breath, in full battle mode, with all defenses on full blast.

I can sense the aura of mana shielding that it's continuously holding up as it nears.

Gritting my teeth, I put my all into one last strike.

Concentrating for over a minute, and letting the beast draw nearer and nearer, I compact roughly 200MP. Once it's less than 5m away, I let my razor-thin attack glide through the air.

I fall backward, but eagerly watch as my attack hits the wounded berserker head-on. It glides through its lower torso without a noise. The moment I fall flat on my back with a grin across my face, the monster splits cleanly in two. We hit the dungeon floor with 3 simultaneous thuds along with 2 clangs of our swords.

I let out a chuckle.

"Progress is progress..."

Laying on my back, I let out a sigh and stare up at the grey sky above me. I beat one of these monsters without using a Strengthening Fragment, and most definitely progressed my mana control training.

A 200MP attack sliced one in half, but it was far from full power. Still, this is a good start.

After relaxing on the cool hard floor of the black glossy dungeon surface, the fallen monster drops a mana crystal. Unfortunately, there's no other loot.

With a groan, I stand up to walk over. While doing so, I open up my item storage to let Ember out for the first time in a while.

He flaps his wings while stepping out of the white portal and flies into the sky. After opening up our telepathic link, the Dragon speaks.

"It looks like you've been busy. I haven't gained any levels, so it seems you haven't been busy enough."

I grin, picking up the palm-sized crystal off the ground and plundering it to dust on the spot.

"I've been training my mana control. The progress has been good, but I'm still not ready for the higher floors."

Ember nods, flapping his wings more, soaring higher up into the sky.

"Good to hear, your control does need work. The only reason you're able to handle so much MP is that self regeneration skill, along with your advanced perception abilities. Good training and more mana consumption will do you well. You seemed pretty happy with your fighting style earlier, so I didn't bother to comment on it much before."

I scratch my head, grinning, and watching the dragon stretch its crimson wings while passively throwing shade at my lack of fine-tuned mana control.

"Hey! I'm new to all of this ya know. These things take time!"

Swooping down, no more than 200m away, Ember begins to burst into flames, clearly targeting something.

He replies mid nose-dive.

"Looks like you saved one for me."

I squint, trying to make out what he's aiming at, then realize I've completely dropped my guard after that intense battle...

A new red-skinned Berserker Giant, level 402, has found its way to my position and was charging in my direction....

Ember soars down at the silver sword-carrying beast and lets out a heavy attack of flames from his mouth. The dark red beam of fire hits the monster point blank, creating an explosion over 20 meters wide.

Ember swoops upwards to let the beast deal with its attack. As the Dragon flies away, I watch in awe as the flames stay lit... Mine went out in an instant, yet Ember's stayed ablaze, doing residual damage to the angry beast even after the explosion clears.

The black-scaled Dragon dives in again, this time with his front leg outstretched bearing long red claws aimed straight at the confused fiery fiend.

Moments later, Ember rips the top half of its torso off along with its head... sucking the corpse dry of MP, then tossing it off into the empty dungeon's landscape.

My mouth stays wide open as the Dragon does a few twists and turns in the air before putting out its flames and coming back down to greet me.

"So, what will it be? Are we taking over this Labyrinth? I've been itching more and more to rank up recently."

Ember lands on the dungeon floor with a thud as I struggle to get out a word.

"You... You're this strong...? It took me well over a dozen hits to take out of those Berserkers!"

The black-scaled Dragon replies with a toothy grin.

"If it's that difficult to take these monsters out at your level, we'll need to up your total mana control. If you process more mana, the higher-density attacks become much easier to handle. It's only natural."

I nod slowly.

"I'm aware... but I don't exactly have months to go and train off in-"

I pause. Then reply.

"No... you want to go back to that place...."

Ember moves his head in closer, replying.

"It would be the fastest way for you to gain mana consumption proficiency. It'll be free MP with your plundering ability, and there will be no shortage of time. It's the perfect plan."

I gulp.

"I guess... We'll go back to The Great Plains... and enter another Titan's Domain..."

Chapter 165

"... and enter another Titan's Domain..."

As I speak these words, the thought of going back into that white-walled prison makes my stomach lurch. If I could never see one of those emotionless monsters again, I'd do almost anything to make that happen.

Almost, anything... One of my faults may be the undying urge for more power. All self-preservation and logical reasoning bends at the possibility of this.

Ember has a good point. I'm burning through way too much MP to reasonably keep this up. The only way I'm even able to handle these attacks is by using my All-Seeing eye to aid in the precision

aspect, and my self regeneration skill to heal from the immense damage done to my body after each strike.

Any normal hunter would be hospitalized after trying a single one of these attacks...

I gulp again as Ember replies.

"Shall we go now?"

I'm still a bit flustered at the thought of it, but very tempted for so many reasons. I'm actually seriously considering going back to that place...

I reply.

"You're sure it's safe? How do we know last time wasn't just dumb luck?"

Ember replies with an answer that makes me feel a lot better...

"While I was farming Titans on your command, I fell into dozens of domains. At my current Plundering proficiency, I can make one of those pocket realms collapse in just under a day."

I stare straight ahead, taking this new information into consideration.

"Really....?"

Ember bows his head as I smirk.

In real-world time, I have just a few hours remaining before my meeting with Fisher. If I stock up on supplies like food and water, I can train inside the Titan's Domain for as long as I want before coming back here.

After a long pause, I open up my Item Storage.

"Let's do it. We're going back."

The Dragon slips into my pocket dimension and I Dungeon Walk back to my hometown's starter dungeon without a second thought.

A wide grin creeps across my face as I step out of the exit portal into the outside world. I make my way to the village market grinning all the way.

I'm excited. What started out as a nightmare, is now turning into a gold mine for new power-ups. Falling into the Titan's Domain may not have been a pleasant experience at first, but It turn out it may become even more fruitful than I'd first thought.

I make my way to a local grocery store and begin stocking up on everything I'll need for this upcoming training session. I grab a small shopping cart and get to work.

I go overkill on the water... Stacking up 10 cases of 20 1-liter bottles, almost clearing out a whole section of shelving.

With food, I keep it simple. I stock up on 2 months' worth of fresh fruits, vegetables, dried meats, and nuts. My item storage works as a perfect preservation chamber, so none of this will go bad.

I grab a few comics and light novels I've been meaning to catch up on at the register while checking out. It's been a while since I read anything, might as well get something to keep myself occupied during my downtime so I don't go too crazy...

The store clerk gives me a funny look at the checkout counter but accepts my handful of silver coins without question.

As I roll my cart out the front doors, I make a sharp turn out of sight to immediately store my supplies in my item storage.

Lastly, I make a quick pit-stop back at my old apartment to grab a pillow, blanket, and a few pairs of clothes.

It's been almost 30 minutes now since I got to town. Not wanting to waste another minute, I jog back to the starter dungeon ready for what's to come next. I'm shaking with excitement, but also some nerves.

Whenever I feel like this it's usually for a really good reason.

The moment I step into the dungeon's glowing entrance portal on the far side of town, I teleport to my new destination, The Great Plains.

In the blink of an eye, I'm deep within the rolling hills of the bland landscape I know so well. Activating my enemy detection skill, I'm thrown off by a few unaccounted-for variables.

Spreading out my detection skill to the furthest depths of this dungeon, I pick up on all of the usual lower-level mobs and occasional mutants. There are a few distortions of 500m diameter blind spots that must be wandering titans, but one oddity sticks out.

[4500m]

[Lv. 606]

[Lv. 371]

There are two high-level hunters not too far off from me... One of them could be a monster, but they're traveling close together, and sticking nearby one of the blind spots... I'd assume they're a hunting duo, but a level 606 is really high for the place, right?

I whisper under my breath.

"Could it be Arie and a B-Class...?"

I remember back to when my team was sharing our weekly quota assignments, recalling Arie's was to take down a Titan. He did say that he'd be accompanied by a B-Class Archer. There's a good chance that's them.

Not wanting to make an awkward unplanned appearance, I Dungeon Walk in the opposite direction putting another 5km or so between us just in case.

If I get caught hunting Titans right now, there would be too many people asking many questions I'm not looking to answer. It's best I steer clear of that mess.

Once confirming there's nothing but a new slow-moving mass of endless mana within many kilometers of me, I open up my item storage to let Ember fly out.

Immediately, I open up our telepathic link.

"We're here, but we're not alone... There are others in this dungeon with us. We'll need to make each takedown quick and precise."

The black-scaled Dragon stretches its wings and replies as it senses the nearby sensations of humming mana approaching us.

"Understood."

I turn to face the low hum as well. Off in the distance, no more than 700m away, a wandering black hole of energy comes marching at us.

I take out my sword and instinctually burst into flames. Ember flies low to the ground, and I air-step forward to follow. I hear his voice in my head as we get closer and the humming mana becomes louder.

"As long as we're making physical contact, we'll be transported into its domain at the exact same time. I recommend you hold on..."

I stare forward at the black shadow of a humanoid figure in the distance, grit my teeth, then jump onto Ember's back as we continue to fly in the monster's direction.

[400m]

We soar closer and closer as the humming gets more intense. I hold onto Ember's back with my legs and carry my flaming sword with a death grip.

I know we'll be fine, there's just something not quite right about these monsters... The sight of them is always quite unsettling.

[150m]

Ember bursts into flames as well. We leave a trail of dark fire behind us as he speeds up, facing the Titan head-on.

[50m]

This is it... I'm going back in...

The humming sound of mana fills all my senses as both of us rocket toward the monster's midsection. Ember speaks through our link moments before impact.

"Don't let go."

[0m]

We collide with the 30m tall giant and disappear into a black void seconds later...

I'm not too sure what else I expected to happen, but this seems about right.

In the outside world, its domain must have expended to a 500m wide dome just like it did that that one time I attacked it with Arie. I'll never know for sure though...

My vision went black the moment we made contact... Ember and I are floating in the endless black mass that is the Titan's Domain. The sensation of dense mana all around me is both frightening and soothing...

The feeling of weightlessness returns as I peer down into the void, seeing a pinhole of white light below us. I know exactly where we're headed.

A few minutes pass and we fall closer and closer to the white box ominously approaching.

This time around, however, I'm riding a Dragon that knows its way around this place. With a powerful flap of its wings, I'm saved from hitting the hard floor. We glide in, making a perfect landing.

The ceiling above us shuts closed the moment we enter without a sound and I'm left staring at white walls that imprisoned me for months in the past.

After a gulp, I let out a sigh and jump off Ember's back.

The Dragon speaks through our link.

"Shall I collapse this Domain in 24hrs? Or would you like your training to go on longer?"

I pause, thinking about this option carefully.

When I did my initial scan of this dungeon there weren't more than half a dozen Titans that showed up on my radar...

"When you were hunting Titans on your own last week, how many would spawn at once?"

Ember thinks for a moment, then responds.

"No more than 7 or so a day at first. Although, the more I hunted them the less often those Void Creepers came out from their realm. It would be wise to train inside each one for much longer than 24 hours. We could even spend time in this one indefinitely if you'd like."

I nod.

"Let's do 10 days per Titan. We can farm Strengthening Fragments while I train."

I smirk as Ember responds.

"Very well, I'll limit my mana consumption by 90%. The Domain will become unstable within 10 days. Once it begins to fall apart, you may slice through its weak barrier, or wait for the domain to naturally collapse. It's your choice."

Excited for what's to come, I already start plundering mana from the rich stores all around me. Letting out a satisfying sigh while taking in the pure energy, I reply.

"Sounds good. I'll see you in 10 days."

Ember bows then curls up into a ball, closes his eyes, and begins to glow light red.

I smirk while channeling mana into my glowing blade.

This training session is about to begin. By the time I see Fisher for our next meeting, I'll be on a whole different level...

Chapter 166

Ember is already fast asleep, slowly draining the mana from the near-endless supply all around us.

I'm doing the same, on a much small scale....

With a grin across my face, I begin charging up my flaming sword. While doing so, I reach into my item storage to grab my dagger while whispering under my breath.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Both weapons pulse red and white as I begin filling them with the dense mana surrounding us that I've missed so much...

I start right where I left off the last time I was in this place. The difference is, I have no worries about being trapped in here forever.

I have food supplies that'll last me for months, assurance that I'll leave in 10 days, and I have a concrete goal in mind.

During my last trial in the Titan's Domain, I used up about 10 million MP.

It's gotten me this far, but I need to make some major upgrades. The most important thing I need to work on is replicating those paper-thin slashes, but easily charging a full bar of MP into them.

I'm level 409. So just over 2000MP is nearly a full bar. I'd like to be able to charge one up in just a few seconds so I can actually battle these monsters without using cheap tricks and wearing myself out completely after one fight.

My final attack on that Berskerer took over 60 seconds to charge, and I only managed to let out 200MP at the proper hair-thin width. I'm setting out to improve over 10x in both speed and power.

I'm not quite sure yet how much MP I'll have to process in order to achieve this, but that's my goal. If I can even come close, this will be a success in my mind.

I decide to let loose for a bit, but overall take day 1 rather slow.

Glowing gold and red, enjoying the abundance of free mana in the air, I begin to let out attack after attack at the white walls all around me.

They tear open large holes, letting me peer out into the void for a few seconds at a time before they heal up completely.

My already sore body from the intense training outside allows for 10 10k strikes, this is 5k MP per blade. It's just a warm-up, and it gets me used to this mana-rich environment again.

End of Day 1: 100k MP consumed.

Total MP consumed: 100k MP

I take it easy and pull out my pillow, a few comics, and a blanket along with some fresh fruit.

Overusing mana makes me very tired. I drift off to sleep within a few hours.

This may be the beginning to one of my most intense training sessions, but I'd like to take it slow. In here, all I have is time after all.

The Titan's Domain has been a nightmare in the back of my mind ever since I left it. Maybe I can turn this place into a vacation spot instead.

I wake up the next morning and get to work.

I need to get my body used to using more MP every day, along with trying to fit more and more energy into a smaller strike. I won't aim for any specific parameters at first, I'll just go with how I feel.

In the outside world, my MP exhaustion limit is around a quarter million MP points. At that point, my body completely gives up on me. That's with self regeneration being taken into account.

In here, It's at least double that. With so much energy in the air, it makes healing and releasing attacks much easier on my tired muscles and bones.

End of Day 2: 500k MP

Total MP consumed: 600k MP

I manage to consume just about half a million MP stretched over 8 hours on day 2. Nearing the end, I begin to get that familiar tingling feeling in my limbs, and the overall fatigue begins to kick in. I call it there.

The next few days go by fast.

End of Day 3: 550k MP

End of Day 4: 575k MP

End of Day 5: 600k MP

End of Day 6: 200k MP

Total MP consumed: 2.525M MP

My MP output slowly rises for 3 days straight. This is from me pushing the limits during each session. I've only been releasing 5k MP per blade. Channeling more seems to exhaust my mind too quickly, and less tires out my body. Using 5k per blade seems to be the perfect medium.

I've been training in 8 hours blocks, basically to full exhaustion every night. Each day I've been getting more and more tired by the end of it, just like the last time I was in here.

I thought it was the lack of food and water that made me feel this way, but it seems mana exhaustion played a much bigger role than I thought it did.

Less than halfway through day 6 I decide to take a break and rest my sore body again.

End of Day 7: 725k MP

End of Day 8: 740k MP

End of Day 9: 745k MP

End of Day 10: 250k MP

Total MP consumed: 4.985M MP

After my day of rest, I come back even stronger. I start off with a huge spike in energy. The mana consumption over these next 3 days slowly rises and is comparable to my peak last time I trained here.

When I wake up on day 10, Ember begins to reach his final stage of collapsing this Titan's Domain. I grab all my supplies and throw them in my item storage.

This has been a good start. Very uneventful... but a good start. I'll be able to pick up right where I left off on our next Titan.

The red aura begins to expand and the white walls around us start to fade away to reveal the black abyss behind it.

I decide to only use my sword to perform a test. I'll be seeing how much progress I've made so far over the last 10 days of training.

Concentrating with my All-Seeing Eye, while plundering MP from my surroundings, I begin to replicate the attack that took out that final Berserker.

Creating a hair-thin blade of mana deep within my sword, while channeling as much MP as possible into the attack without disrupting its width.

After about 60 seconds of charging and immense concentration, I hit my limit and let the attack soar.

A thin 550MP flaming black sliver of energy flies through the open air in front of me, slicing through the void like butter, but not making a sound.

I increase my perception to watch it until the end. It slips through the outer wall of the Titan's domain with ease.

Moments after, a wide slit opens up in the abyss of blackness surrounding me, and the process of a realm collapse from the inside out begins again.

Ember's aura gets brighter and the Domain gets smaller as we begin to fall through the darkness back into reality.

Both Ember and I hit the grassy floor of the Great Plains Dungeon with a loud thud.

I grin as my black-scaled companion wakes from his slumber.

"The collapse was a success, Master."

I grin, replying while searching around in my mind's eye using enemy detection to locate another Titan.

"It seems it was."

I pick up a small black gem off the ground and place it in my item storage with a smirk across my face. Next, I put my hand on Ember's smooth glossy scales, instantly teleporting us into the vicinity of the nearest Titan.

Other than the Void Creeper that team of 2 is facing, I can sense 3 more deep within the dungeon. There's 2 that are in range and one that'll take a couple-kilometer trek to get to. It's outside of my Dungeon Walker skill's range, so we'll have to either walk or fly over when the time comes.

I'll save that one for last.

As we blip back into existence, I hop on Ember's back, and we begin diving deep into the abyss of another Titan.

After a familiar series of events, the darkness fades and we're back in a solid white box once again.

Ember curls up and begins absorbing the Domain.

I take it easy for the rest of the day, then get back to work the next morning. I do a similar cycle of 3 days on, and 1 day off while making a mental note of my daily mana consumption.

End of Day 11: 775k MP

End of Day 12: 780k MP

End of Day 13: 785k MP

End of Day 14: 200k MP

End of Day 15: 815k MP

End of Day 16: 815k MP

End of Day 17: 820k MP

End of Day 18: 200k MP

End of Day 19: 855k MP

End of Day 20: 100k MP

Total MP consumed: 10.315M MP

Once the final day of this training cycle hits, I'm pretty tired out. I had an off day not too long ago, but my rapid increase in daily consumption is starting to slow.

Although the total amount I can manage to consume each day isn't rising as quickly, I'm still progressing at an alarming rate. I have to go through extensive self regeneration sessions every night before I go to sleep, eating excess food and sleeping longer throughout the night to mend my tingling hands and feet along with the headache that comes with overusing my perception skill.

As Ember begins to collapse this domain, I charge up another attack to test my progress.

I power up a single attack for about 60 seconds and manage 900MP into the paper-thin slash. It's a much darker blade now, and hardly gives off and flickering red residue.

Just like before, It flies through the open Abyss as the walls fade away, slipping through the outer edge of the void to make a tear.

It's almost disappointing to see. The Domain's reaction to this slash looks identical to the last one. It slips through and cuts it open in an instant. The Berserker's mana shielding is on a whole different level than these Void Creepers.

It's hard to get a solid idea of how strong these new attacks really are... I'm itching to try this out on a tough opponent, but I still need to get stronger.

After picking up the small Strengthening Fragment from the ground and doing a quick scan of my surroundings. I lock onto our next target.

Ember and I dive deep into another Titan's Domain.

End of Day 21: 855k MP

End of Day 22: 850k MP

End of Day 23: 855k MP

End of Day 24: 200k MP

End of Day 25: 855k MP

End of Day 26: 860k MP

End of Day 27: 850k MP

End of Day 28: 200k MP

End of Day 29: 860k MP

End of Day 30: 860k MP

Total MP consumed: 16.765M MP

My days are filled with charging swords and slashing walls...

It seems my progression has peaked around 850-860k MP. Whenever I reach this point, all systems in my body basically shift off and I need to sleep to recover. Even after using self regeneration after every 50k MP consumed or so used, this is still my limit.

I even drank a spare HP potion to see if it'd do a full recovery, but my mana exhaustion was not healed at all... It was just a waste of a perfectly good potion.

I have a feeling this isn't something that can be brute-force trained any further, I may have to increase my level to be able to handle more MP.

At the end of the final day, I test out my full power after consuming another 10 days' worth of unlimited free MP.

After a 60-second charge, I'm able to power up 1550MP into a slash at the exact paper-thin metric needed to make it through a Berserker's shielding.

Again, it's overkill for this Domain, but good practice....

I've almost made it to my goal of a 2000MP slash.

After the inevitable tearing and collapse of the 3rd Void Creeper's pocket realm, we fall back into the Great Plains.

Letting out a sigh, I breathe in the fresh air of the wide-open dungeon and take in the view while Ember wakes from his mana-plundering sleep.

Once he does, the Dragon's calm voice enters my head through our link.

"Another successful collapse, Master."

I nod.

"Indeed."

While picking up the small Strengthening Fragment from this session, I activate enemy detection and prepare to teleport.

As I look out deep into the depths of the Great Plains, my heart skips a beat.

Only a single reading pops up in my search for another Titan. The last time I checked, that hunter duo was facing one and there was another far off in a part of the dungeon I haven't been to yet.

The one I was saving for last is gone...

I whisper under my breath.

"Why... is there only one left...?"

Chapter 167

I expand my enemy detection range further and further into the depths of The Great Plains Dungeon in a panic...

Just moments ago, there was another Titan not so far outside my Dungeon Walker's range.

To me it was 10 days ago... so my memory is a bit foggy, but I'm sure I would have stayed in this one much longer to train if I knew there wasn't another left.

I'm positive I was saving that one for last.

I grit my teeth and open up the Telepathic link with Ember to see if he has any input.

"Our last Titan vanished into thin air... has this ever happened to you before?"

The slowly waking Dragon replies.

"It has... Sometimes they disappear through the rift if danger is too abundant in an area. Give it a day or two, they'll be back, I'm sure of it. Don't worry."

I shove my sword into my item storage with a frustrated look on my face.

"The rift..? What's the- I- ugh. Never mind that. If I knew this sooner, I wouldn't have wasted the last 3 on such short sessions... Even though I got a few Fragments out of it, I still need more training.

Ember nods.

"Understood, we can come back tomorrow and continue if you'd like. I don't think the Titans will abandon this Dungeon over a single incident. They're long-term thinkers. It'll take many repeated events to scare them off."

I sigh, taking a look around the dungeon one last time with my enemy detection skill. Confirming once again, the only remaining Titan is right next to that B-Class and their partner.

The air feels thin... lacking pure energy.

I've gotten used to a high-density mana environment again, I'll have to adapt back to using mana potions and crystals soon. I'm sure this time will be a bit easier to adjust.

Going back to the labyrinth right now is my safest bet.

"That seems to be our only option."

Although my training was cut short, I've more than doubled my total MP consumption. That 16M MP would have taken over 1.6k Gold Coins at market price.

I've definitely improved... I'm just not quite sure how much yet.

I teleport back to the 10th-floor Inn, materializing into my small bedroom. Dust flies up in the air at my sudden appearance and the dungeon's artificial sun shines through the dirty window.

I make my way downstairs.

I've had more than enough rest. Another month has gone by in my mind, but the world around me hasn't changed at all.

It's a bit less rattling this time because I knew it'd happen from the start. Still, I can't help from feeling like I've found some kind of unlimited power cheat code....

I could go back there and train every time the Titans respawn... As long as I bring enough food and water, I can indefinitely train my mana control.

Walking down the wooden stairs of the Inn, a smile creeps across my face as my feet make light-taping sounds that echo throughout the main tavern area.

The first voice that greets me is the Innkeeper along with his cheerful smile.

"Morning to ya Jay! You've been knocked out cold for hours, how was your sleep?"

I smile, walking by him to take a seat on one of the empty circular tables.

"Ah not bad, not bad, Mr... uhm-"

"No need to use Mr, just call me Conway!"

"Right, Conway."

I look down at the wooden table, embarrassed that I forgot his name while mindlessly slashing at white walls for a month. I swallow my pride and carry on our conversation like that didn't just happen.

"Some food would be great."

He bows slightly, then begins walking to the back room.

"You got it!"

I exhale, taking in my surroundings with an odd eerie tension in the back of my mind.

Everything in the Inn looks just like it was... There are all the same familiar C-Class squads from the Association sitting around tables eating food and trading gear, but something feels off.

It's way too silent. I'm so accustomed to the low humming of mana in my ears and nothing else. This bustling environment is over-sensitizing me again.

My brain and body feel drained just sitting here... There aren't unlimited stores of mana to plunder from all angles and I'm craving MP already.

The sounds of people laughing and talking all around me begin to get muffled in my mind, all I can focus on is my foot tapping on the ground as I zone further and further out.

Then I hear the same cheerful voice of an old man in my ear.

"Here you go Jay! Hope your training goes well today. I think Fisher should be out here in an hour or two!"

The Innkeeper's voice snaps me back to reality and I gracefully accept the steaming hot plates of food and cold drinks.

"Appreciate it."

He smiles and walks away with a skip in his step.

I eat up, but a funny question does stick out in the back of my mind. When does Conway sleep...?

I chuckle to myself, as I can't figure out just how he does it, but decide to pay it no mind and relax.

Watching hunters come and go for the next few hours is pretty nice. Much more interesting than my month-long vacation of solitude in the void.

Eventually, a certain red-haired man pokes his head through the front doors of the Inn, locking eyes with me almost instantly.

It's Rylan.

"Hey, hey! Jay, you're up! I'm excited to see your progress with Fisher today. Maybe I'll actually get to watch the two of you train... or maybe even spar!"

He comes marching toward me with a smile across his face, then sits down at the opposite side of the table.

"You know that team I went to meet? They didn't even want to check out the Inn! The lot of them just headed straight off to floor 11 without a word."

I respond, vaguely remembering that Rylan was going to meet a new team from the same C-Class exams as me. I wonder who they could be...

"Oh yeah? Are-"

He cuts me off.

"Those nobles are really a stuck-up bunch, aren't they? Walking around in their gold and silver armor. The Association just gives them a pitty contract if they manage to pass the exam. It's more for the off chance that they rank to an elite on their own. Most of them have the funding to do so anyways."

I raise an eyebrow, remembering back to one of my first clashes during the C-Class exams. It was a group just like the one he's describing... A team of men all dressed in gold and silver armor. The leader had an odd barrier skill. We clashed briefly, but I didn't see him again after that.

"Those guys were nobles...?"

I scratch my head as Rylan goes off on another tangent.

I begin to zone out again, feeling empty, craving a battle or some high concentrations of mana. My attention problem is getting worse...

I think it's just a side effect of my training. I got used to it last time in a few days, I should be fine this time around as well.

Finally, footsteps start coming down the wooden steps at the back of the room and a blue-haired swordsman comes walking down while wiping his tired eyes.

He's carrying a white glowing rectangle.

I hear him say a few words into it before he puts it away into his item box.

"Understood. I'll await your next call."

The Innkeeper greets him with a cheerful smile as he makes eye contact with me. The Elite quickly makes his way over.

"Morning. Glad you're early, come on, let's go. There's no time to waste."

A bit rude, but exactly what I was hoping for... I'm not in the mood to waste time either. If anything, I'd rather just climb the labyrinth on my own... The faster I can slip away from these 2 and continue my battles on the 19th floor the better.

I follow Fisher outside as he begins to make his way back to the mountain base in a rush. Rylan starts asking questions on the way.

"Hey, what's the big idea? What's with the attitude all of a sudden? You could have at least sat down with us for a little while or something."

Fisher replies.

"There's been a change of plans. Hopefully Jay's ready for the next stage of our training by the end of today. I just got word from the Director about a break up North. My squad may need to be deployed early, so I'd like to get through as much as we can before I'm called out for immediate action."

Rylan nods with a serious look on his face, then pauses for a few seconds before a grin curls on the corner of his lips again.

"So that means I'll definitely be able to see some cool training from you two today right??"

Fisher smirks with a tired look on his face, nodding to Rylan and looking back at me.

"Hope Jay's up for it. Let's see how much he learned yesterday."

I reply, in a low tone under my breath.

"I think I've learned quite a bit..."

We continue our short walk and make it back to the base of the mountain with sliced boulders and smashed rock laid out in piles all over.

I speak up before either of them has a moment to question it.

"I... came back and trained a bit more while you were asleep... I thought it wouldn't hurt."

Fisher bends down to take a look at one of the split-open rocks, feeling the glossy texture with two fingers, then turns to me with a surprised look on his face.

"Wow... not bad kid. Not bad at all."

I reply in an annoyed tone.

"I told you not to call me that! You're only a few years older than me ya-"

"Yeah, yeah."

The Elite takes out his water stone imbued sword and points it up at the rock ledge that we aimed our attacks at just yesterday.

"Go on, let's see what you've learned."

Immediately, I take out my sword and begin to charge it up. I haven't thrown an attack at anything but pure white mana shielding for the last 30 days. I've been so focused on the proper attack for defeating a Berskerer, that I forgot about this training completely.

Smirking, I whisper under my breath.

"This will be easy..."

I charge up 100MP into a small strike, thin and dense enough to cut through the skin of a floor 19 mob. Definitely overkill for this rock face. Without a second thought, I swing my flaming red blade at the overhang and let the dark crescent of energy fly.

It's barely visible and slices through the air without a sound. Almost identical to Fisher's attack yesterday.

It hits the rock ledge and glides through. To the naked eye, not a single cut is made. It just looks like my slash missed.

Half a second later, a massive chunk of the rock wall slides off as the thin black blade flies up into the open air of the dungeon.

I grin, watching the glossy texture of rock reflect the dungeon's sun back at us. The heap of rocks from above hits the ground with a thud, making dust fly up in all directions.

Rlyan's face lights up as he lets out a gasp, followed by a long laugh, turning to Fisher. The blue-haired Elite stands in awe for a moment, staring at the smooth rock above us.

Then, a satisfied look comes across his face as he puts his sword back into his item box and crosses his arms.

"Impressive. You really had no idea what you were doing before you came here, did you? You've just been throwing all that raw power at your enemies until now?"

I pause before replying, impressed that he can manage to throw in a jab in, even now.

"I... guess so..."

He smirks.

"Well... In that case, I guess we can start phase 2 of your training earlier than I thought."

Chapter 168

I look up at Fisher while powering down my sword.

I've had a lot of time to think about my situation here in the labyrinth while I was away training in the Titan's Domain.

When we first met, I was a bit annoyed with this blue-haired Elite for stepping on my toes during my solo labyrinth diving mission.

I still am... but he's just following orders. If anything it's the Director's fault. He's telling all the other Association lackeys around here what to do. I don't blame him for following through on his mission, but I still work better alone...

Fisher continues to speak.

"We'll be climbing the Labyrinth."

I hear what he has to say, but I was expecting it... I reply.

"I still want to climb these floors alone you know... Just because the Director wants us to team up, doesn't mean it has to happen."

Fisher smirks, letting out a light laugh.

"I remember when I still had the will to fight like you. Trust me, stay on his good side while you still can."

I lock eyes with Fisher. He looks back at me with a serious, worry-filled gaze.

I turn away first, replying under my breath.

"This is no fun..."

The Elite sighs, then replies.

"It's not meant to be fun. We're going to war soon you know."

I gulp, looking up at him.

"What are you talking about...?"

"The breaks up north, coming from the Dark Continent. They're the worst ones we've had in a long time... That's why we're even here in the first place, and why the Director put so much money into training you C-Class recruits."

Fisher digs through his item storage and takes out two palm-sized crystals. They're both completely white and give off a low mana filled hum.

"If necessary, we'll be using these to transport back to the Association HQ. They're one-time use transport crystals."

I raise an eyebrow, staring at the glowing items until Fisher puts them away and continues to speak.

"I hear you have a mana crystal quota too don't ya? We can help you fill that while we climb the floors."

With a grin, he points a thumb back to Rylan. The redhead jumps in.

"Hey! I never signed up for this free labor!"

Fisher turns back to him.

"I... think you did. You should be with your squad on floor 17 anyway. We'll drop you off on the way up."

He opens his mouth to reply, but stops and nods.

I think about it for a moment, then let out a sigh and a shrug.

"Fine, I guess I might as well."

Fighting this point won't get me anywhere.

I could probably farm 50k MP worth of crystals in a few hours if I teleported around any dungeon solo, but abandoning my mission isn't a good idea. Even if tricked into it won't get me anywhere close to the Director's good side.

Although Fisher seems to be completely tied up by the Association, I still sense some fight in him. I'm curious to learn a few more things about him, and see what else he can potentially teach me about mana control in the meantime.

Even though he didn't teach me much directly, he's been pointing me in the right direction every step of the way so far.

I speak up.

"Before I agree... Could I test out an attack against your mana shielding again? I'd like to see how far I've come since our last clash."

Fisher crosses his arms, giving me an arrogant smirk, while Ryaln's eyes light up behind him.

"Sure, go for it. It'll give you a good idea of how hard these higher-floor monsters will really be. Now that you understand mana control a bit better, you'll realize how outmatched you really are."

He takes a step back and puts both of his arms to his sides. Rylan gets out of the way as I step in from of him with a sharp look in my eyes.

"You're sure? You don't even want to block with your sword?"

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

"Don't worry. Go all out. I know your full potential power already, you'd need over double that to even think about breaking through my shielding. Try all you want."

I clench my jaw, then grip my blade tight while focusing on an attack. I make my strike as thin as possible, The same width as the attack that sliced through the Berserker's shielding.

My availability of mana here isn't as abundant as the environment I trained in, so I can already tell my proficiency has dropped. In just under 60 seconds, I focus around 1000MP into a deadly black fiery slash.

With a swift swing of my blade, I let it soar.

The swordless swordsman's expression changes as he watches the thin energy blade approach.

Using my All-Seeing Eye to watch from afar, I witness his mana shield activate less than a meter before impact. It's denser than any shield I've faced before... I didn't get an actual close look at it last time we faced off...

Well, I did. I just didn't understand how fine-tuned his mana control really was.

My sliver of energy meets his invisible wall of mana. For a moment, it seems like time stops... My blade hits the center of his chest and comes to a complete halt, pushing forward with nowhere to go...

Moments later, I see a dim flash of white light as Fisher moves out of the way and the blade flies past him, disappearing into the rock face 20m away.

A toothy grin creeps across my face at the sight before my eyes.

At the bottom of Fisher's torso on the side my blade flew off to, there's a small rip in his shirt, and a light trickle of blood coming off a tiny paper-thin gash.

The blue-haired Elite curses under his breath as I celebrate with a childish attitude. Rylan's eyes open wide as I power down my sword and Fisher speaks while putting a hand over his side. He activates a light blue glow and the bleeding stops immediately.

"Damn it- How'd you possibly power up this much in less than 24 hours... That kind of improvement takes months of training! You-"

Rylan steps in.

"Looks like someone might be taking your spot as the new youngest Elite hotshot. Wouldn't you say?"

He looks over to me, and I just reply with a shrug.

Fisher speaks up.

"Well, that certainly settles it. You're at least ready to train on the 19th floor. Maybe even the 20th... Not going to lie, I thought I'd have to beat the Behemoth for you. At this rate, maybe you'll actually have a chance at that thing after all."

"..."

I'm still silent, staring down at my dark blade. Excitement fills my body as I realize just how far I've come.

It's been a grueling 30 days for me, but it feels like it went by in a flash...

"Come on, we might as well start now while the day is young. I brought food and water, let's start our trek upwards."

I look up Fisher.

"Already?"

"Do... you have anything else to do?"

"I...."

"Thought so, come on. We'll farm mana crystals with you up until the 17th floor. That's where we'll drop off this tag-along with his team."

The redhead rolls his eyes, and I nod.

"Once we make it up there, I'll have to check in with the Association one more time before going up to the dead zone."

I raise an eyebrow.

"The dead zone?"

Fisher nods, taking out his silver quota tablet.

His looks much different than mine. It has 4 clear gems attached to each corner.

"The Association can't contact me that far up. Monster's with higher mana control tend to live in much more mana-rich environments. It screws with long-range connections. That's why we call it the dead zone."

I nod slowly, not understanding a word he just said. The only thing on my mind is the fact that his tablet has clear gems on it and mine doesn't.

"Hey, why doesn't my tablet have those- The Director didn't-"

All four clear stones on the tablet begin to light up with a white glow. I stare mesmerized.

The blue-haired Elite's eyes instantly go back to the tired look I saw moments ago when he was waking up from his sleep at the Inn.

He grips the tablet tightly.

"What kind of timing is this... you speak of the Director's name and he comes calling..."

I gulp.

"He's... calling? Through that?"

The lights on all four corners of the silver tablet begin to shine brighter and brighter until a very familiar voice comes ringing out into my ears.

"Fisher. Fisher. Do you read me? We're going to need your immediate dispatch on a series of C-Class Dungeon breaks along the northern border. Please report your training progress with your assigned member of the new Elite squad."

Fisher replies.

"We're just about to start phase 2 of Jay's training."

"... Phase 2 already? ..."

"Yes, Sir."

"..."

There's a pause on the other side of the line for almost 10 full seconds.

I grit my teeth while listening, but can't hold myself back any longer. I storm over to Fisher with my eyes locked on the glowing quota tablet.

I've been thinking about this man for over a month straight.

"Let me talk to him, I'd like to give The Director a piece of my mind. I signed up for a solo labyrinth mission, and I'm going to get what I was promised!"

I reach over and grab the silver rectangle right out of Fisher's hand.

"Hey! Hello? Can you hear me?"

Another long pause follows, then the Regional Director's voice finally rings out of it.

"Well, what a surprise. It's nice to talk to you again so soon Jay. It seems there's been another change of plans."

Chapter 169

"What do you mean there's been another change of plans? There's always a change of plans... Ya know! I have a few things I want to talk about with you!"

I've been particularly irritable lately. Maybe it's from the lack of mana, or just my time away from people and stimulation again. I know shouting at the Director and calling him out on the spot is a rash decision, but my mouth is moving faster than my brain right now.

"...."

He responds after another long pause.

"Well, I'm glad you're so energetic today. I hear your mana control is much more refined than I predicted it would be. It seems you've managed to exceed my expectations once again."

I grit my teeth and think about going off on a rant about him lying to me every step of the way during my time at the association, but pause and hold my tongue.

Red-faced and gripping the glowing white box, I take a deep breath in and out before calmly responding with a more calculated approach....

"Good to talk with you too, Director.... I was surprised to be assigned a training partner in the Labyrinth. I was under the impression I was climbing solo."

I gulp, hoping my delicate wording is enough to get my point across, but not bite the hand that feeds me too hard just yet.

There's another long pause as Fisher makes his way over to me with an angry expression of his own across his face.

The Director responds before the blue-hairs Elite can get a word in.

"Jay, I do apologize if you feel you've been lied to during your first two weeks at the Association. It's only natural, you haven't exactly been completely truthful with us either."

My heart skips a beat as I hear this line from the old man come through the glowing box...

I don't reply.

The Director's voice continues to ring out.

"I enjoy playing games, as long as I know I'll win in the end. Your recent developments have me rethinking a few moves..."

Another pause follows.

The suspense is killing me.

I begin to repeat his words in my head over and over to try and figure out what exactly he's getting at. I haven't been truthful? As long as he wins? Rethinking moves?

It sounds like this old man has gone crazy... by the way he's speaking, it really seems like he looks at life like it's a big chess game or something...

I finally respond after Fisher elbows me in the gut, whispering in my ear: "Come on, say something!"

I respond in a low calculated tone.

"Mr. Director. I appreciate the assistance with my training recently, but I remember you telling me this was a solo mission. For now, that is my only complaint. I'd like to know exactly what I'm

getting myself into before I agree to something, and trust that I'm in safe hands.... Especially with all this talk of the Dark Continent. I believe we need to come to a better agreement."

Another 5-second pause follows before the old man's voice rings out.

"I understand how you feel, and I believe we can come to a better conclusion after your current mission is complete."

I clench my jaw, but hold back from cutting him off as he continues.

"For now, could you please hand the transmission tablet back to Fisher? I have urgent matters to attend to. You may even get what you're asking for sooner than you think."

There's another long pause.

Then Fisher finally takes the device from my hands while putting it up close to his face and walking away from me.

"Sorry about that, I copy. Give me an update on..."

His voice begins to fade away as he walks further from me. I'm confused and still a bit angry standing next to the grinning redhead.

Rylan and I make casual conversation for a few minutes while the elite talks on the phone for an uncomfortable amount of time.

We make good conversation though, I learn a few things.

Apparently, the redhead has only managed to consume around 3 million MP in his career at the Association. Considering his age, this seems very low to me.

After a thorough explanation, the reasoning is his skill, swordsmanship. It takes many training hours to burn through a full bar in his physical condition with a nearly passive skill.

The same goes for many common skill users like body hardening or certain passive weapon handling abilities.

That's why combat magic wielders are more likely to be chosen as Elites. They have a natural aptitude for consuming and controlling mana at much higher levels than common skill users.

One thing I've learned from his excessive gabbing is that it is possible to imbue mana into a weapon or armor piece if it's bonded with the user. This is why I'm able to put mana into my sword and dagger.

Non-combat magic users are able to achieve this too. It just takes much more mana control training and a special type of weapon.

The Berskerer's blade I picked up earlier comes to mind, but I decide not to mention it.

Finally, after many long minutes that felt like hours, Fisher returns with a puzzled look on his face. The silver rectangle stops glowing and he puts it away into his item box. His movements seem rushed.

"Well, what do you wanna hear first? The good news, the bad news, or the even worse news?"

I reply.

"Give me the bad news first."

He nods, pulling out the two small white crystals from his item box and bringing them up close to my eye line.

"Well, It seems I've been called out on some urgent business. It's those C-Class breaks by the border, they need more Elite teams to handle the mutants. Some of them have high mana control proficiency, this is a rough one."

I don't say a word as he continues.

"If we can clear everything out, I'll be back in 2 to 3 days max. Our training may have to end prematurely."

I gulp.

"Okay... so what's the good news then."

Fisher throws me one of the white crystals.

"Well, it seems you got on Brutus' good side once again... He says you're ready to climb the labyrinth yourself.."

I catch the small gem and reply as a grin creeps across my face.

"Okay- but what's this for?"

The Elite smirks.

"The Director says that's for if you decide to face the behemoth before I get back. You have a reputation of getting in over your head... Use it if you're in any life-threatening trouble."

He lets out a laugh as I feel the small white crystal up and down with my fingers.

"To activate it, all you have to do is crush it in your palm. You, and anything on your person will be transported to a safe point within the Association HQ. If a monster happens to be in contact with you, they'll be transported as well. So be careful."

I let out a chuckle.

"So you're saying I could transport a boss monster into the Association's HQ...?"

"Hey! Don't get any bright ideas, I just saved you from a whole lot of trouble on that call you know! Plus, the transport point is mana shielded up to B-Class level attacks. Whatever you manage to drag in won't be a problem."

I let out a sigh.

"Yeah, yeah. I was just kidding..."

"Good."

"Thanks, I'm glad this worked out. I'll get to climb the Labyrinth alone just like I wanted... I know you were just doing your job and all, it's just I-"

"Save it. I haven't gotten to the worse news just yet."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Oh- Right...."

Fisher points behind me at the redhead staring up at the open dungeon sky.

"He's your problem now. Get him up to the 17th floor to meet his team, Director's orders. Then you can train up on the 18th and 19th by yourself."

I look over at the oblivious fiery haired swordsman.

"..."

Fisher continues.

"Based on the attack you just threw at me, you'll have no problem facing the base-level mobs on floor 19. They're fast and good with their weapons, just don't get lost in the mazes. I'm sure once you see how powerful they are, you may have second thoughts about soloing floor 20."

I let out a light smirk, knowing that I'm facing the floor 19 boss the next moment I get free... He continues.

"As I said before, I'll be back in 3 days max. I'd recommend facing the 18th-floor boss a few times to get a feel for its abilities before going any further and....."

Fisher continues to give me tips like a concerned parent as I zone out fantasizing about the floors above.

I'm rudely snapped out of it by the blue-haired swordsman's hands waving in front of my face.

"GOT IT?"

"Yep. Got it. Thanks, Fisher."

He tightens his gaze, then moves his eyes over to Rylan behind me.

The redhead is already on his way over.

"I heard most of that, no need to fill me in!"

I open my mouth, but Fisher cuts in.

"Good. Help Jay farm mana crystals on the way up as we promised."

The Elite takes a few packages of food and water out of his item box, throwing them on the ground in front of us.

"Hope these will be more than enough for you two. See ya soon."

He waves us goodbye without another word. The white crystal gets crushed in his hand and a bright white light flashes before our eyes.

When it fades, Fisher is gone...

I turn to my new traveling partner, then let out a sigh as he picks up all of the materials on the ground to place them in his item box.

I speak up.

"Looks like we'll be climbing the next 7 floors together."

He turns to me with the same bright smile as always.

"Looks like it!"

Secretly, I'm planning my next moves to get onto the 20th floor. The faster we climb these next 7 floors, the better. I'm itching for a real fight. The first moment I get to ditch him and face the 19th-floor boss I'll take it.

I have 3 days while Fisher is away to defeat the Behemoth all by myself.

Chapter 170

Rylan packs up all of our gear. Both of us ready our swords before walking deep into the 10th-floor dungeon.

He's not my preferred travel companion.

I'd rather just Dungeon Walk up to floor 19 myself, but at least I know 7 floors up from here is the highest he'll go.

With Fisher watching my every move, I was worried I wouldn't comfortably be able to go all out. It may have been interesting to see how an Elite fights, but It's much more fun to do it on my own.

We begin marching up the floors at a pretty solid pace. I don't mind the wait. Just 2 hours or so per floor is nothing compared to the month-long mental solitude I've faced 2 times now.

Rylan is spitting facts about the Association in my ear all the way up. A good history lesson never hurt anybody.

We take breaks every 1 or 2 floors to stop and rest. The redhead is actually not bad with his sword. The mobs we're facing aren't too strong, but they aren't too weak either. He is a mid-level C-Class.... The hunter's cheerful attitude just distracts me from the fact that he's been in the association for over a decade.

Rylan is a seasoned fighter in his own right.

After about 9 hours of straight walking and slashing, we make it to floor 14. We take a long break near the entrance portal on this floor, there's just 3 more before our destination.

The redhead speaks up while swallowing a mouthful of food he just recently pulled from his item box.

"Hey Jay, why'd you become a hunter at the Association anyway? You don't seem to like the director much, and you don't even wear a standard-issue uniform."

I grab an apple from the food pile Fisher left us and take a bite. Swallowing before I answer.

"I just wanted to get stronger. This seemed like it'd be the only way."

Rylan nods, looking up at the sky.

"Well, they only pick out one new elite squad per region every year, so you totally lucked out!"

I shrug.

"Lucked out? Maybe. I think luck just gets you where you deserve to be faster. For better or worse, right?"

The redhead looks at me with a confused look, then carries on with his nonsensical rambling differing the conversation to a completely different topic.

We carry on with our walk upwards soon after.

Another 4 hours pass and we make it to the 16th floor. This is the miniature version of The Great Plains dungeon. Apparently, this is the place where Rylan and his team usually train. He speaks up.

"This is our last floor, we should be able to meet my team by the boss room portal. The Director sent them a transmission to let them know our estimated arrival time. That's where we usually meet up before jumping floors anyways."

We head to the back of the dungeon without another thought.

Although we rushed through these 7 floors, about 25k MP worth of crystals was farmed from mobs that attacked us on the way. I'll have to scrounge up another 25k myself at some point during the week.

As we approach the backside of the dungeon, my enemy detection radar picks up on double the readings it's supposed to. There are 4 extra entities nearby, and they're all over level 360...

I speak up to Rylan as we approach the top of the final hill that leads down to the portal below.

"Hey... We have company. It's not just your team down there."

We make it to the top of the last rolling hill and who I see next surprises me. I use Appraisal and inspect on a tall man in silver and gold armor with long blond hair and bright blue eyes.

[Lv. 377]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Steel Sword] +900 Strength

[Enchanted Armor Set] +1100 Defense

[Enchanted Gold Ring] +50% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Ring of Quickness] +55% Speed

[Enchanted Platinum Ring] +70% Mental Strength

[Dragon Scale Pendant] +50% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Barrier Summoning]

Swordsmanship

I whisper under my breath as I realize this is one of the hunters that I clashed with at the C-Class Exam.

"It's him..."

He's definitely gotten some major upgrades in both his level and gear.

I freeze, and squint my eyes to get a better look at him. While doing so, Rylan's voice calls out.

"Oh look who it is! We caught up to ya'll. What are the odds?"

He starts walking down the hill toward his teammates who happen to be mingling with the armored team of nobles. They seem to be talking about the higher floors of the labyrinth.

I follow Rylan and we make our way down to greet them. The noble team leader turns to greet us, but a surprised expression followed by a grin creeps across his face when he sees me.

"It's you. I was wondering where you ended up after all this time! Well, until recently that is."

The team leader puts out a strong-looking right hand. I walk forward to shake it to be polite. I've completely forgotten his name, so I hope he introduces himself again...

"It's me! George. George Arden the 3rd. You're Jay, right? One of the first hunters to ever break through my skill's defenses, I can't forget a face like that! Although, you do look much older. It's been a few weeks at most...."

Sure, it's been a few weeks to him, but I've been through hell and back since I saw him last. I'm glad he's in such a good mood today. We're on the same side this time around, that's a relief.

I swallow hard before answering, scratching the back of my head after letting go of his firm handshake.

"I- yeah. It's been a long few weeks, the lack of sleep much be showing on my face. It's good to see you too. Looks like we both go contracted after the exams."

He grins as his 3 teammates stand at the ready behind him in almost identical silver and gold armor.

"Yeah, we were able to manage a non-exclusive contract. I used the Arden family name to ensure a good deal for us. The Director gave us clearance to farm up on the 18th floor this week. Yeti Charms fetch a good price off in the lower-tier Regions without higher-level Labyrinth activity."

I nod, putting together the puzzle pieces in my head. It seems his family is in the trade business. He said he was George Arden the 3rd. His grandfather must have taken advantage of the dungeon breaks when they were just starting up 80 years ago, or possibly during the Great War just 50 years back.

This could be how they bought into a noble name. It's just my theory for now. I'm not one to pry. Either way, I'm happy he's so friendly with me all of a sudden...

The tall armored noble continues to speak.

"I heard through the grapevine that you'll be one of the Vice Region's Elite this year, along with that girl that wields Ice Magic. Maria, I believe her name was."

I'm unsure where he got this information so fast. I tighten my gaze, then in a polite manner.

"It seems to be the case. Why...?"

He bows his head slightly.

"Once your Elite training is complete, I humbly ask for you and your team to visit my estate just East of the capital. I'm sure it would be a profitable meeting for both of us, in many ways."

He smiles as I think about his offer.

He's met me one time in the past so far. Although we ended our clash with a tie, I haven't exactly done anything to get on this noble's good side.

This title of 'Elite' must mean more than I thought it did.

I let out a thin smile and respond.

"I- sure. I have a lot of missions ahead, so it'll be quite a while, but I won't pass up your offer. How can I uh-"

He cuts me off.

"Very well. Just ask any Association higher-up about the Arden family. They'll point you in the right direction."

I nod slowly as he begins to turn back to his team, waving and giving me a last word of goodbye.

"I'm glad we met again Jay, looking forward to doing business with you in the near future."

I scrunch my eyebrows, still a bit confused about this entire situation. I respond as he completely ignores Rylan and his squad members and jumps into the open boss room portal with his team.

"See ya-"

They're gone, leaving us in the empty fields of the miniature Great Plains.

The redhead meets back up with his team while I continue to think about the interaction I just fumbled myself into. I guess... that's just another thing I have to add to my long list of things to do.

I hear Rylan's voice call out to me.

"Hey Jay, it was a nice walk up here. My team is about to move up to the 17th floor to face the High Ogres like we've been training for all this time. Care to join us in the boss fight? I assume you'll be climbing higher too, right?"

I smirk.

"It was a pleasure climbing with you as well. Maybe I'll see you later, or when I meet back up with Fisher in a few days. I'm going to stay here and farm some more mana crystals for a few hours before heading up. Gotta hit that quota!"

He nods with a cheerful smile, turning to enter the spinning grey portal himself.

"You got that right! We'll be setting up camp to sleep in a few hours back here on the 16th floor once we're done farming for a bit. If you need a place to rest after training, come back and stay with us."

He throws me a day's worth of food and water, then disappears into the portal with his teammates.

I wave goodbye.

"Take care, see ya."

Once they're gone, I let out the longest exhale of my life...

"Finally, I get to solo hunt again."

Without another moment of hesitation, I activate my Dungeon Walker skill and teleport straight up to the 19th floor.

"It's time to test out the limits of my newly upgraded mana control."