

D. Diver 181

Chapter 181

Ember and I plunge through the smoke and fire, diving into the wide-open hole created by my final attack against the Silver Knights.

Although troublesome, I know the opponent lurking behind this wall will be a greater challenge than anything I've faced before.

I'm ready for battle.

Grinning ear to ear, and flaming from head to toe, we burst through the thick smoke we finally make it inside.

The black-scaled Dragon lands with a thud and the dust settles slowly.

Just from the echoing sound of Ember's hard landing, I can tell the room we've just invited ourselves into is much larger than the entrance hall we've departed from.

My All-Seeing Eye is active, but the dense clouds of thick murderous mana-infused aura block my vision on all sides. I can only sense what's behind me, and that's not much... I know there's a dangerous beast ahead, and all I want to do is fight it.

The dust finally clears completely and the front half of the room we've landed ourselves in becomes much more clear.

It's similar to the entrance hall we just left but with much higher ceilings. Fire crackles behind me, and begins to creep along the sides of the walls, but the wide room goes on for easily 20 meters on both my left and right side.

The retreating red cloud still covers the back half of the room in front of me, so it's hard to tell how deep it really goes.

We're in what looks like a massive banquet hall. Tables are set with fine white cloth, silverware, and plates are delicately placed in front of each seat.

This hall must be big enough to feed hundreds, and they must be expecting some important company....

The perfectly set tables go on as far as the eye can see, almost 40 meters before fading away into the dark red mist at the back half of the room.

I look up at the ceiling to see it's made of the same familiar yellow and orange glass. The intricate designs in this one are even more beautiful than the entrance hall.

A pulse of energy comes out of the mist like it's putting out its feelers. I feel the evil entity controlling it for a moment and instinctually shiver.

I gulp, focusing my attention back on the now fast-flowing mist-like aura, then open my link with Ember.

"It looks much more active than it was moments ago. This is... be the floor boss, right?"

Ember nods one time as I jump off his back.

"It is definitely near..."

The light sound of my boots tapping the cold stone floor is the only thing that fills my ears as I walk past the white tables cautiously.

I try to use Inspect and Appraisal, but nothing seems to make it through the mana-dense red mist.

Not a single reading can be made from this odd phenomenon. It's similar to when I try to use my enemy detection skill on a Void Creeper. It's definitely there, but it's blocking me from sensing it.

Ember trails close behind me.

I'm ready to Dungeon Walk us out of here if anything goes south too fast, but my curiosity is eating away at me.

Every step closer to the swirling red aura makes me shake more and more with the excitement an intense battle brings.

Whatever is back there is stronger than anything I've ever faced before....

Gritting my teeth, I make it to a portion of the banquet hall where red mist covers the floor. I hover my foot above the mana-dense aura for a moment, then stomp downward, letting that murderous presence creep up my spine...

I shiver, but let my flames burn brighter to block out the eyes on the back of my head and continue to walk forward.

This is all just an intimidation tactic. I know these moves well, I've used them many times before. I won't run from the fight before it's even started.

Walking further in, the dense aura on the floor gets deeper and darker. It's up to my shins now, I activate my stat-boosting skills on full blast to push through with more willpower. I can feel it begging me to fall victim to its mental trap.

There's a light tugging sensation at the back of my mind, trying to break in.

It's similar to when Ember attempts to open our telepathic link. Very similar...

I bit my bottom lip, focusing on the target in front of me, and wading deeper into the dense aura that now drifts up to my waist.

I activate my MP plundering ability, attempting to absorb some of the aura that fills the room. The Knight I faced before now wasn't a fan of this ability, so maybe It'll have a greater effect on the fog here as well.

The moment my skill activates, the mist surrounding me instantly retreats. I can see my black boots on the stone floor below me with perfect clarity.

Just like when I started to take the last Knight's energy, the aura here seems to have a mind of its own. Or, it's being controlled by a mind that doesn't like its MP being depleted.

Even though it parted the moment my skill activates, I still plundered a small amount of mana. It's possible, just not very effective.

I grin, then call out deep into the mist.

"You didn't like that much, did ya?"

I chuckle, keeping my plunderer skill active while making slow footsteps further toward the back of the room. Ember follows behind me, sporting a toothy grin as well.

The light crackle of flames and low hum of mana coming off my sword and armor fill the silence as I prepare for a fight to break out.

Walking deeper into the murderous fog, it continues to drift away from both Ember and me as we keep our plundering abilities active.

Light shines down from above in golden rays as it's filtered by the glass artwork above us.

The red aura is falling in on itself faster and faster towards the back of the room.

The mist isn't even trying to get near us now. It just seems to be consolidating on a single point. To me, it looks like the caster is deactivating this magic spell.

It's the perfect time to take advantage of the situation.

I eagerly outreach my senses. Letting my All-Seeing Eye seep further into the room as the mana-blocking mist fades away. My Inspect and Appraisal skills finally pick up on a reading.

The presence in the back of the room finally reveals itself. My eyes widen and my heart races when I see the information that finally comes into full view.

[Lv. 489]

Active Items:

[The Behemoth's Armor Set][Blood Bonded] +99% Defense +79% Speed +69% Agility

[The Behemoth's Platinum Ring] +106% Mental Strength +86% Strength

[The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet] +111% Defense

[Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Buff:

Transformation [Hidden Ability]

"Finally... we meet..."

I continue walking forward in a straight line as the red aura retreats, getting denser and denser as it compacts into a much darker ball of mist at the backside of the room.

More empty tables with perfectly set silverware and plates reveal themselves as the red fog dissipates.

The only thing on my mind is getting a good look at this monster.

Its armor and items all seem to be on a whole new level than any monsters I've faced in the past.

It has two advanced combat magic skills: Earth Summoning, and Mana manipulation.

I've seen both of these Combat Magic abilities performed before in their lesser forms, but never the advanced versions. Abby has an earth summoning skill, and I remember watching Nessa Mimic Mana Manipulation during the C-Class Exams.

These are the upgraded versions and will be used by a monster with mana control possibly stronger than my own....

I grit my teeth, continuing to march forward. A smirk creeps its way across my face the closer I get to the consolidating clouds of red mana...

I begin to think about its hidden ability, the "Transformation" buff, but I'm rudely interrupted by the tugging sensation on my telepathic link once again.

Staring straight ahead, I grip my sword tighter.

Ember's link is already open...

The closer I step to the cloud of dark aura at the back of the room, the harder the tugging sensation at the back of my mind becomes.

It's easy to block out at first, but each footstep in the direction of the monster before me makes it harder and harder to concentrate.

What was at first a light tugging, has turned into a rhythmic tapping and scratching at the back of my brain.

I let out a grunt, drinking an MP potion, and keeping my eyes focused forward on the Beast behind the veil of blood-colored mist.

I cross the halfway point of the large open banquet hall. I'm 40 meters in, and from what I can tell... There's about 40 meters or so to go until the back wall.

I turn back to Ember, speaking through our link.

"I'll be going all out... Only interfere if I give you the word, or if I'm unable to do so."

Ember nods in agreement as I turn back toward the fog and walk another 10 meters forward at a much faster, determined pace.

My jaw is clenched and my eyes are locked on the outline of a tall dark oddly humanoid-looking figure at the back of the room beneath all this fog.

The scratching feeling attempting to dig into my mind gets louder and louder, but I continue to push through. If I can't even get up close and personal with this Floor Boss, I'll have no chance of beating it in a fight.

Another 10 meters go by, and the fog has completely contracted into a large glowing ball at the back of the room. It glows red, while the outline of a black shadowy figure can be seen within it observing the room before it.

The buzzing sound of mana begins to fill my ears and the scratching speeds up while getting louder and louder within the depths of my mental barrier.

It feels curious and devious, but calm and collected. Whatever is prying into my mental walls just wants to talk... I'm just not sure If I want to hear what it has to say.

I take another step forward while letting out a grunt, blocking out the noise.

The scraping becomes unbearable as the mist retreats entirely, only to stop, surrounding the dark entirety s head.

The moment it stops, the scratching feeling at the back of my head breaks through... It's unbearably loud, then eerily quiet...

I hear a deep powerful voice enter my telepathic link, all I can do is stop and stare as its voice echoes in my mind.

"Visitors don't come here often... I never would have expected a Demon and a Dragon to show their faces in a place like this."

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I hear words echo through my brain from the figure at the back of the room loud and clear, but I'm not sure I can believe what I'm hearing.

It speaks.

"Visitors don't come here often... I never would have expected a Demon and a Dragon to show their faces in a place like this."

I stop walking forward and raise my sword.

The red cloud of mana-infused fog consolidates around what seems to be the being's head.

Standing on an elevated stage at the back of the room, it towers above me around 3 meters tall. It's wearing what looks like a black suit of armor. It's so dark that it looks like the shadow of a Knight in physical form.

The blood-red mana creates a sphere around the figure's head. It continues to speak.

"Have you come to challenge me? I thought I'd never see that day when Dungeon Masters went rogue. To think you'd attack a Labyrinth at a time like this! Defying our leader's rules before the great collapse? Could my eyes be playing tricks?"

The figure lifts one of its arms, pointing a finger at the wall to my right side.

I watch small threads of thin mana leave its jet-black fingers and shoot off toward piles of empty silver armor and wooden crates. The threads attach themselves to the piles of abandoned armor, then they begin to move...

I whisper under my breath while jumping backward to put a few rows of white tables between us.

"Mana Manipulation..."

That's how it worked before. That's why I was gaining no levels from defeating those guards. The Knights outside were just tools being controlled by this ominous figure's mana.

The armored suits begin to glow, then stand up on their own, covered in a dense layer of mana shielding. The shadow figure speaks up again.

"You may leave now, I'm not one to fight my own kind over a meaningless break-in."

I tighten my gaze, watching the Boss at the back of the room and keeping an eye on its new minions. It continues to speak through our link.

"Unfortunately for you, the Dungeon Master will be hearing of this, I must report all oddities."

The manipulated suits of armor stand guard and the shadowy figure doesn't move. I smirk, finally replying.

"You're... The Behemoth...?"

My smile turns into a chuckle.

"I thought you'd be a lot bigger..."

The clang of metal armor rings out in the room as the monster before me breaks its thin threads of mana that were previously keeping the guards upright.

It takes a mighty leap, jumping off the stage above to drop down in front of me.

My eyes are locked straight, and my sword is fully charged, but I continue to sidestep through the white tables keeping my distance of about 15 meters away.

It hits the ground with a loud thud, cracking the stone tiles and sending a shock wave through the ground.

Its deep voice rings out in my head as the monster moves closer. I can't see its face through the cloud of red fog, but I can feel a curious evil gaze.

I keep all my stat-boosting skills fully active, glowing red and gold while drinking a mana potion to re-up my MP bar.

The moment I raise the glass bottle, the anonymous figure speaks again with a lighter tone than before.

"A potion... You're a human aren't you...? Now... this is quite a surprise."

I finish my bottle, replying through my link.

"I am, and you're the Lower-Floor Boss are you not?"

It pauses for a moment, then lets out a slow laugh.

"I am. Straight to business it is. You're the first one in over half a century to challenge this floor using those unique skills. Telepathy and a Plundering Ability... from a human..."

It laughs loudly and slowly while I grit my teeth, continuing to sidestep through the tables, trying to get a good angle on the monster as it walks around crushing more and more stone tiles with each step showing no urgency to fight me.

It seems this monster has some self-control. Most Bosses are mindless beasts that attack anything in sight. This one seems to have free will.

It doesn't matter much to me though.

I reply.

"That's all I needed to hear. You're the Boss, so I'll defeat you."

I watch the Knight shaped shadow gaze up at the ceiling, fully exposing its left side. I air-step forward, aiming my charged sword directly at its weak spot.

It's standing in the middle of the banquet hall without a weapon or a shield... It has let its guard down because it thought I was on its side.

This is the perfect time to strike.

I let out a 1000MP slash from less than 10 meters away just moments after it speaks its last word. The dark crescent of fire rockets toward the Floor Boss without making a sound.

It doesn't move a muscle, the Boss just stands completely still... Blissfully unaware of my deadly approaching strike.

As my attack gets closer, I feel the ground rumble beneath my feet.

The stone tiles next to the shadowy outline begin to ripple like water and the perfectly square-shaped flooring begins to twist and turn.

With my All-Seeing Eye active, I watch mana pour out of the monster's arms and legs saturating the floor below it.

The air and dungeon mass all around this creature waves and churns as my attack nears.

The stone floor rises from the ground in a liquid form, wrapping around the dark figure's legs and climbing up its torso.

My eyes widen as I watch its entire body become covered in a thick layer of stone. Mana threads are weaved in and out of the material in such a fine grid-like pattern that I can barely tell the difference between a mana shield and the rock it's manipulating into a stone suit of armor.

Now, standing over 4 meters tall, a grey suit of stone armor turns to me. It molds its right arm into a double-sided stone blade to counter my incoming attack.

It coats its weapon in a dense layer of shielding and thrusts it upwards as my black blade makes contact with its stone armor. Without a hint of resistance, my incoming strike is deflected into the sky.

It spins out of control, cutting through the glass ceiling above and flying off into the Dungeon's open air.

I gulp, as I just witnessed all of this go down in fractions of a second...

This monster went from a defenseless shadow talking smack, to a Stone Knight ready for war.

The Deep voice of the Floor Boss rings out in my head again.

"If it's a fight you want, then it's a fight you'll get. You better not waste my time. With skills like yours, and the nerve of you to come in here with another Labyrinth's Dragon, you better put up a good fight."

The stone armor covering its left arm shifts into a sharp blade as well. A small slit in its stone helmet opens up and dense red fog pours out. I still can't see the monster's eyes, but I know it's staring right at me.

So I glare back.

Glossy sharp blades of stone line both of its arms, and they're dripping with dense mana. Similar to my own sword...

Not only are its bladed arms leaking mana-dense aura, but the entire rest of its body is covered in shielding intertwined with its mana-manipulation ability.

It's nothing like the shielding I saw from any monsters before, not even like Fisher's when I tested my strike back on Floor 10.

Most shielding is invisible to the naked eye. I'm only able to perceive it because of my All-Seeing Eye ability.

This shielding is glowing crimson-red, bright as day. Even without the use of my perception ability active. I'd be able to see its defenses without a problem.

The blood-red glowing stone-covered Knight takes a step forward. I expect it to crack the floor beneath its feet, but the ripping water-like visual appears again as it seemingly bounces off the floor.

In the blink of an eye, the creature lunges toward me with its bladed arms pointed at my neck.

I Dungeon Walk backward about 20 meters the moment my battle instincts kick in. Opening my link with Ember, I give the order that starts our brawl.

"Run. This is a battle between the Floor Boss and me. It has two skills that I'll need for future fights, and I want to defeat it fair and square then steal its power."

My eyes light.

From across the room, the Stone Knight comes charging toward me. Its red glow reflects in my eyes as my battle-obsessed grin creeps across my face.

I run forward as Ember flaps his wings to fly high up into the open air of the large banquet hall.

The battle against the Lower-Floor Boss begins. Soon I'll find out why this beast is called... The Behemoth.

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I glow red and gold while my blade burns crimson with a black aura leaking from its core.

My eyes are locked on the Stone Knight charging towards me, its dual blades for arms are covered in a thick red layer of mana shielding.

The aura of fog that filled the room earlier has condensed into a smaller form and seeps out from the small slit in the approaching Monster's helmet.

It takes long strides, bouncing off the rippling floor without making a sound.

This must be a perk of its Earth Summoning magic. The stone all around us can become its weapon whenever it chooses.

Then again, it could be its mana manipulation skill. The entire Labyrinth is made of mana, it could just be toying with dungeon mass itself.

Either way, I've been training for a moment like this. It may seem stronger than me now, but by the time this battle is over, I'll be on top.

Every footstep of mine makes holes in the fragile tile floor as I propel myself forward with wind magic. I zig and zag between the white-clothed tables and gear up for another strike on the gracefully moving stone Knight.

A 1000MP attack from a 10-meter launch distance was deflected without a second thought, I'll need to put the pressure on for this next strike.

I grin, grabbing a table with my left hand as I air-step by and flip it up into the air. I continue running forward and do the same for the next table, then again, and again.

The glowing Knight stays at a steady pace, gaining distance on me every few seconds.

Once it gets too close for comfort, Dungeon Walk 10 to 20 meters away while continuing my table flipping and zig-zagging madness.

Its deep voice rings out in my head.

"Do you mock me? You challenge a Floor Boss, but run and hide the moment your cheap attack fails to do any damage!"

I smirk, getting a clear line of view of its open back. My preparations are almost complete.

The monster is right, it does seem like I'm just running away. It can think that all it wants for all I care, I'm just setting the scene for our battle to commence.

While setting Dungeon Walker points across every square meter in the banquet hall, I've also made quite a mess. Perfect for quick cover during a long and tiring fight.

I focus on empty space right behind the Stone Knight's back, less than 1 meter away from its blind spot.

Its left side is wide open again. This time, I won't waste this chance on a long-range attack with low levels of MP. I'll strike where I know it's weak, and with enough MP to shatter its shield.

With my All-Seeing Eye in full focus, I let my mind dive deep into the depths of its shielding to replicate the paper-thin width of its grid-like stone armor.

With the 1500MP stored up in my blade that I've been charging while evading its advance, I Dungeon Walk in to launch my attack. Simultaneously, the monster opens our link to speak into my mind.

"Just keep on running and hiding human! Do you really think you could-"

Its deep voice halts the moments I blip towards its backside.

I'm already halfway through releasing my attack before it begins to turn, attempting to block with its glossy-bladed arms.

My black flaming energy attack comes shooting out of my sword at point-blank range, making contact with its unguarded backside. The flash of white light is blinding, and the intense buzzing sound of mana fills my ears as I'm forced to air-step backward. I don't want to be caught up in the explosion of fire that follows.

I propel myself way up into the air, smirking as I hear a murderous roar of a wild beast ring out below me.

Its battle cry shakes the room. The walls crack under the pressure as flames from my attack explode outwards and an intense red fog leaves the monster in the center of the room.

I continue upwards, nearing the ceiling, shielding myself from the shattered glass that now falls from above.

The Dungeon sky is now wide open above us, clear as day.

This is the first time I've heard the floor boss make a noise, that isn't through our link.

It sounded like a beast... That roar was nothing like the intelligent creature I've been communicating with.

As the flames clear, I get a good look at the damage my attack has done.

A large 10-meter-wide crater is made in the center of the banquet hall. A dozen tables have been burned to ash, but the Stone Knight still stands tall.

I smile, as I see a large crack in its armor. The back side of its suit has been fractured, and a blade-sized hole remains.

I landed my first hit.

Red mana leaks out and I begin to air-step down while charging my blade again. The damage seems to be pretty bad, and our fight has just begun.

While getting closer, my smirk leaves my face, and the blade in my right hand shines brighter.

I watch the floor begin to ripple as more liquid stone inches up the monster's leg to heal the crack on the Stone Knight's back.

Its voice echoes in my mind.

"I underestimated you, that was quite an attack. It may have worked well on me unguarded, but you're not going to have as easy a time with me as you may have on lower dungeons in this Labyrinth. You're facing a Floor Boss now, I won't let my guard down again."

I grit my teeth, then Dungeon Walk to the ground floor. I begin my zig-zag patterns through the fallen tables charging my blade for another round.

Sure, it can say whatever it wants, but I know that attack did some damage. I'll do it again.

My eyes are locked on the Stone Knight. It stands in place, not moving at all. I focus on its blind spot. Drinking an MP potion, I boost my perception skill to watch for any irregularities in its mana control.

It stays exactly the same.

It's leaving itself wide open again...

"Why...?"

The Knight's head moves back and forth, tracking me as I blip around the banquet hall. The thick cloud of mana-imbued aura coming from its helmet trails behind it as it shifts its positioning ever so slightly every time I Dungeon Walk to a new location.

It takes a fraction of a second for it to lock its vision on me every time I blip around the room.

Those fractions of a second are more than enough time to launch an attack and teleport myself into its blind spot just like before.

It takes under 6 seconds to charge the 1500MP attack that injured it so badly before. I'm fully ready to do it again.

Without any hesitation, I blip toward the monster's back while it's looking the opposite way.

Swinging my sword upwards, I grin, watching the flaming blade make contact with its backside for a second time.

The moment my sword and its shielding collide, I feel the floor beneath my feet ripple. The armor before my eyes disintegrates leaving nothing but frail stone devoid of mana.

My attack slices the melting stone suit of armor in two, but the Knight within it twists its body out of the way with ease.

My attack flies forward, gliding through the banquet hall's stone wall without making a sound. It shoots off into the depths of the lava-filled dungeon outside.

The shadowy Knight completely left its suit of armor and dodged to my right side...

I dart my eyes back and forth locking onto its location. The monster points a hand to the floor. Stone from the ground surrounds its arm and it creates a double-sided glossy blade instantaneously. The Knight lunges towards me and swings its weapon at my chest.

I grit my teeth, registering the attack, and Dungeon Walk away the moment its mana-covered stone blade makes contact with my armor.

There's a flash of white light the moment I blip away, teleporting across the room.

Fragments of metal and fountains of blood fly off in all directions as my chest plate is blown to bits by the impact of its attack.

A deep wound opens in my upper chest and shoulder. I let out a grunt as it starts gushing blood onto the floor.

I've lost over 600 HP in a single blow, that's roughly 1/4 of my health and it hardly even hit me.

The white flash of light was the Floor Boss' sword breaking through my armor's mana shielding. I have no way of increasing its strength or density... All I can do is channel MP into this set.

For now, I'll just have to be thankful it took the brunt of the blow.

I focus on the broken armor covering my bloodied chest and shoulder while the black shadowy figure walks over to me from a distance.

The floor around it ripples as stone flows up its legs to cover its body entirely once again.

I'm down on one knee, gripping my sword, drinking an MP potion, and channeling mana into my armor while activating my self regeneration skill.

The Stone Knight speaks through our link.

"One hit. Ha! One hit and you're on your knees, knocking at death's door. What a sad excuse for a rogue Dungeon Master. I thought I'd get to see some real action today."

I take a deep breath, focusing on the slowly approaching Stone covered Floor Boss. My flesh grows back and the blood from my wound stops dripping onto the floor.

The shattered armor covering my chest begins to glow with a dim white light the moment I channel MP into it. Just like the time I put this armor on, it feels like an extension of myself. It's almost natural to heal it just like my bloodied shoulder. I use self regeneration on the armor set and it completely restores its natural form.

I smirk, then stand up to face the approaching Stone Knight.

I point my glowing sword forward, bursting back into flames while glowing red and gold.

"Is that all you got? We're just getting started."

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I point my blade at the approaching Stone Knight as it makes the floor ripple like liquid beneath its feet. The monster doesn't make a sound as it draws near.

I finish regenerating my armor and wounded chest, checking my item storage for HP potions, but not reaching for one just yet. I've only lost 1/4 of my health, I can handle a few more of those hits thanks to this chest plate.

The Stone Knight speaks up.

"You surprise me again. A regeneration skill that lets allows you to repair your flesh and bonded armor. It's been ages since a human could do such a thing. You are an odd one... No matter, you'll die here and now."

With its word of warning the Stone Knight speeds up its charge. The slow march toward me turns into a full sprint in the blink of an eye at an unbelievable pace.

I Dungeon Walk away, narrowly avoiding its dual-bladed stone arms.

I've charged up my sword, but the Knight has already turned to my new location without a moment's hesitation. The floor beneath my feet ripples as I take each step, making it harder and harder to keep my balance.

The Floor Boss must be using the mana-manipulated floor as a radar system.

I blip away again as it approaches.

The moment I materialize back into existence, it's on my trail without a second of warning just like before. The stone tile beneath my feet feels like it's breathing down my neck...

The low hum of mana fills the room. It gets increasingly louder every moment I wait to launch my strike.

I watch the ground mold to the approaching monster's feet, propelling it forward. There are waves of liquid stone moving the monster at me with great speed. It's similar to my air-stepping technique, but the Boss is using pure dungeon mass to do so.

I teleport away, with a fully charged changed sword, locking onto its blind spot again.

If I can just land one more hit, I'll gain the upper hand. I'm sure the first attack I threw damaged it in some way. There's no faking a roar like the one that came out earlier. That was the battle cry of a wild beast. One that was trying to get out.

Although I'm curious to see what lies deep within this mysterious Knight, I have a feeling it'd be much better to end this battle here and now.

Holding onto 1500MP ready to release, I teleport 5 meters beside the Stone Knight and begin to swing my sword.

Its head shifts to meet my gaze halfway through my strike, then I Dungeon Walk to its left back side, less than a matter away.

With my eye on the prize, I let the mana-imbued fire magic deep within my sword fly.

The second it leaves my blade, it's destined to hit. Even with the monster's incredible speed, it can't dodge and attack this quickly at such close-up range. The only thing it can do is brace for impact, or attempt a block.

I smirk, air-stepping backward. I remember what happened the last time this strike hit, and I don't want to be anywhere nearby when it explodes again.

The Knight turns, sensing my presence almost immediately. It whips its left arm in the way of my strike, attempting to block the attack from reaching its blind spot.

A bright flash of light blinds my vision of the master as I continue to air-step upwards. After the blinding light, a dark explosion of flames follows, and the devastating roar from that beast within rattles my eardrums again.

The entire room shakes.

Through the ball of fire, I witness a thin pillar of rock jut out from the center. Riding the top of it is a red glowing Knight in a suit of stone armor. Its left arm shattered to pieces. Only a faint red glow and a black shadowy outline underneath remain in the place where its bladed arm was before.

The liquid pillar of stone begins to flow up its leg and consolidate around the arm simultaneously as it shoots up towards me.

I see red mana-imbued aura leak out for a moment, but it's all trapped back inside seconds later as the Stone Knight's arm completely closes back up good as new.

I grit my teeth, air-stepping to the side while charging my blade again.

It follows, riding its pillar of stone with ease following me high up into the air.

It's tracking my movements and gaining on me much faster than I can fly. I Dungeon Walk down to the ground floor, far off from the explosion on the opposite side of the room.

It instantly changes directions the moment my feet touch the rippling stone-tiled ground. This confirms my hunch that the floor beneath me is being used as an enemy detection system.

I look around to watch the walls begin to waver and the entire room twists and turns like it's alive. This monster has me surrounded...

The Stone Knight flies downward, letting out a loud slow laugh before speaking through our link.

"Another fine attack, but now I know all of your tricks. With an attack that needs to be charged, you'll have no way of breaking through my armor before I take you out myself. Run all you want, this will be your end."

The mana-dense red aura trails behind its head as I grit my teeth and Dungeon Walk away, narrowly avoiding its newest dual-blade attack.

The rippling floor senses me the moment I blip across the room and it's hot on my tail instantly. Every time...

I let out a frustrated grunt, drinking another MP potion while attempting to charge my blade again.

I hate to admit it, but this creature may be right.

At this rate, all I'll be able to do is run and hide while launching attacks on its Stone Armor every few seconds.

It may be let out a painful roar, but I haven't seen any direct evidence that I'm actually harming this Floor Boss with any real physical damage. This all may just be in vain.

I need a way of releasing attacks faster...

After all my training, I've progressed so much, but already hit a roadblock mere seconds into this Boss fight.

I blip to the opposite side of the room again, now with my blade glowing red hot and leaking black aura from a 1500MP charge.

I lock onto the monster's blind spot and ready myself for a strike.

I back up, using a cluster of fallen tables for cover as the Stone Knight stares me down. It lets its pillar of stone melt back into the ground and begins walking towards me slowly.

Its arrogant deep voice echos in my mind as I think of a plan....

"Come on, launch another attack. I dare you."

Its slow laugh mocks me as my All-Seeing Eye scopes out the battlefield for anything to lock onto that will help.

I need to land more than one critical hit on this beast before it recovers...

There has to be a way.

It approaches. I take a deep breath, then let out a whisper.

"I guess it's already come to this..."

I smirk, then begin swinging my blade. With an instant teleportation to the monster's lower left side, a dark crescent of mana leaves my sword.

The Stone Knight senses me behind it, turning its bladed arm to instantly block my strike. It knew I was coming, but this is what I was betting on.

A white flash of light shines between us, and I air-step backward to avoid the explosion of dark flames. This is just like before. Through the fire, like a picture-perfect replica of our last encounter, the Knight jumps up through the fire below.

This time, it seems to be laser-focused on me with its right arm outstretched. It's using most of its power to propel its body upward.

The left arm that took the brunt of the blow is leaking red mana, healing up, but not quite as quickly as before. It's much more focused on catching me.

I whisper under my breath while slowing my momentum.

"Getting a bit overconfident I see..."

I reach into my item storage and grab a small black gem, throwing it into my mouth without a moment of hesitation.

This Stone Knight has every right to be overconfident. As it said before, my attacks take way too long to charge for it to be worried about another so soon.

That is, unless I were able to drastically increase my attack speed and power in an instant...

I stop in mid-air, about 30 meters above the ground as I feel the Strengthening Fragment I just consumed begin to activate.

The upward-charging Stone Knight doesn't slow for a second.

I let out a yell, ready for battle.

The dark flames surrounding my body double in size, and the red and gold aura buzz with much greater intensity. My blade instantly fills with MP and glows bright red. A deadly black aura spills out of it as it begs to be released on the approaching beast below.

Energy courses through my veins as I feel the near-unlimited link to the Void Creepers realm open up in my chest.

Mana flows through my veins and I begin to feel invincible.

I point my sword downward and air-step at the approaching monster. In a free fall, I swing the glowing blade across my body letting a 2000MP slash fly.

Now, the real battle begins.

Chapter 185

The full power of a Strengthening Fragment surges through my veins as I fall toward the approaching Stone Armored Floor Boss.

The warm sensation of dense mana fills my chest and starts pumping through my veins to fill my whole body with energy.

I stare down at my opponent with newfound hunger to kill.

Its left arm leaks red aura and it points its glossy dual-sided blade at me. This monster is focused on one thing, and one thing alone.

Catching me, and finishing this fight.

Unfortunately for it, I have other plans...

Over the last 3 seconds, my attack power and charging speed have more than doubled. The full power of a Titan's Domain is at my fingertips. I plan on using every last drop of MP that I can harness.

I've grown a lot since the last time I tried one of these so-called "War Drugs". Now is the perfect moment for me to test one out in full battle mode.

Gritting my teeth, and smiling ear to ear, I leave a ripping heat wave of dark fire residue behind me as I free-fall in at the monster below.

In the blink of an eye, my sword is glowing red and leaking dense black mana, charged up with over 2000MP.

My eyes are locked on the Stone Knight, and I swing my blade across my body as I fall closer and closer to the murder-hungry Floor Boss. The dark crescent of flames erupts from my sword, and I stay close behind pushing the attack forward with my blade.

My glowing weapon collides with its glossy double-sided blade on the monster's arm. I watch its mana shielding crack beneath my sword's pressure on impact and the stone coating around its right arm shatters from the blow.

Mana-infused fog seeps out, and I follow through with my swing thrusting with a heavy downward motion.

I've made it through the first layer of mana shielding and cracked through its armor of stone. I'll slice its real arm below in two in a single strike.

This monster won't know what hit it.

As its armor shatters away, my fiery sword hits something hard....

Too hard...

I grit my teeth and push down with all my might, letting out a yell and fully releasing the 2000MP blade of jet-black advanced fire magic at the monster's unprotected right arm.

It doesn't budge at all....

More red aura seeps out from the broken stone armor and I hear the ear-piercing cry of a wounded beast.

The buzzing twang of mana on mana and the monster's roar both echo throughout the banquet hall. The walls and ceiling shutter as sound waves threaten to bring this entire castle to the floor.

The Monster's right arm begins to move upwards, pushing my blade back up toward me. I Dungeon Walk to its backside the moment it does, releasing another 2000MP strike.

I smirk as I see it make a direct hit.

This one explodes into a fireball and white flash of light as I air-step back. I let out another crescent of mana into the fireball of flames.

There's so much power surging through my body, this fight feels like a certain victory. My speed and attack power is on another level... I'll bring this beast to the floor before it knows what hit it.

As the monster tries to fly out, It's shot down with a point-blank attack in the chest. Its armor shatters, and a white flash triggers another massive ball of flames.

I Dungeon Walk out of the fire's range, then begin flying in circles all around the beast, releasing attack after attack into the massive fireball that fries this monster alive.

I'm burning through thousands of MP a second, using my All-Seeing Eye to pinpoint its exact location within the fire and shooting off flaming crescent after flaming crescent at the Stone Knight.

Over 10 seconds pass and I've launched a dozen attacks into the expanding pit of flames from all sides.

All that's heard is the Floor Boss' murderous roar, getting louder and louder with each strike I land. The room shakes and the grin across my face grows with each successful hit.

I can feel the depths of the Strengthening Fragment in my chest grow stronger and stronger. Usually, I'd feel overwhelmed by its power, but right now I feel invigorated.

As I let out my 15th attack, the ball of flames at the center of the room begins to glow with a deep red color. My flames are much darker than the presence that is making itself known.

I watch with my All-Seeing Eye as the fog from earlier begins to expand, making it harder and harder to sense the beast's exact location within.

I know this trick well, but still have no way to deactivate it. It doesn't matter. I have enough excess power to continue launching attacks even with a blind eye.

It lowers itself to the ground slowly and I follow, Dungeon Walking and air-stepping around in circles while slowly descending to ground level.

I release a barrage of attacks into the growing mist, using nothing but my battle intuition as an aiming mechanism. I'm shooting blind.

Every few hits still land, but my precision isn't as perfect as before. Most of my fiery strikes go flying through the fog and castle wall, gliding silently off into the open dungeon.

The beastly roar of agony finally stops, and the deep voice of the floor boss echoes in my head.

"It seems you're not as incompetent as I first thought..."

The room ripples and I hear a mild buzzing sound as the intensity of mana in the air picks up.

"I'll have to use my true form... I haven't had fun with an opponent in ages. Maybe you're worthy."

With my eyes wide, focusing on the center of the now dissipating red cloud of fog, I see a jet-black Knight standing out in the open of a burning banquet hall floor.

For at least 20 meters in all directions, the fallen tables, abandoned armor sets, and various wooden crates are burnt to ash and smashed to pieces.

The floor doesn't ripple, and the Knight's Stone armor has crumbled to pieces from my barrage of attacks.

Its head is still covered in a cloud of red aura, and its shadowy body has small red slashes all over it. The odd creature leaks mana, confirming my strikes were worth something, but not a lot...

The small red slashes that cover its body begin to glow brighter and brighter red.

As I watch, the energy in my chest that flows through my veins is building up quickly. The Strengthening Fragment is still expanding and its needs to be released.

I burn through MP by focusing on my perception skill and the boost the flames surrounding my body as well. All of my buffs are active and I glow red and gold. This isn't enough... The only true way to relieve this urge is by letting out attacks from my sword.

It's the quickest and most efficient way for me to use of MP.

My eyes dart back and forth as I begin to Dungeon walk through the fallen tables, watching closely as the cracks in the Black Knight's armor glow brighter and brighter.

The dim glow of red light begins to turn into white-hot energy.

I can sense an immense power within. Just through the cracks, the density of the mana seeping out is overwhelming. The high-pitched buzz rings in my ears.

It's near impossible to sense what's really within, but I'm sure that I'll soon find out...

The beast lets out an ear-shattering cry. It surprisingly knocks rubble loose from the ceiling above. Rocks and fragments of leftover glass begin to fall from the ceiling as I continue to eagerly circle the now fully red and white glowing Black Knight. I'm waiting for a time to strike.

It's been almost 15 seconds since I took the Fragment, and my fingers and feet are starting to tingle.

This is never a good sign...

I need to release this power, and I need to do it fast.

Gritting my teeth, sweat drops down my forehead as I circle the room, faster and faster, just watching the monster glow while I burn through MP on my more passive skills.

If a 1500Mp strike is what it took to break its stone armor, and a 2000MP strike is what it takes to scratch the surface of its Black Armored body, then I'll just have to dig deeper.

I can't take the wait any longer. With this Strengthening Fragment pumping me up with power and the adrenaline of battle flowing through my veins, all I can think of is letting loose and allowing the power to take control.

That isn't how I'll grow... I need to keep my focus...

Clenching my jaw, I blip in toward the red-glowing Knight and swing my blade.

It instantly turns its head to the side, then thrusts its right arm in the way of my attack. An incredibly dense, much darker red mana shielding forms around its black armor, and my 2000MP-charged sword halts mid-strike for a moment.

I grit my teeth and channel more MP into the blade, making it denser and thinner with every millisecond that passes.

Letting out a yell, I squeeze 250 more MP into the attack and shatter its advanced shielding. A bright flash of light shines and the slash explodes into a fiery ball of flames. I air-step back grinning and satisfied with my attack, but watching with an intense gaze, planning my next move.

The tingling in my hands and feet has stopped, but I need to keep this up, or it won't end well. Ember is standing by if need be, but I want to defeat this Boss on my own.

I charge my sword and dive back in the moment the flames die down and I get a clear view of the Knight.

Dungeon Walking to its opposite side, I swing my blade again with perfect precision. While I attack, I glance at its right arm. Another small slash forms on its armor, leaking out more red mana-imbued fog.

I let my second strike fly, it blocks with its left this time.

The Knight isn't attacking, it's only blocking. The monster is focusing straight ahead, not paying me much mind other than producing shielding to lessen the damage of each attack.

Fire expands and the white light shines.

The monster still doesn't budge.

As the flames clear, I see another gash on its left arm, leaking more man-imbued aura.

I smirk, but cautiously continue rushing in with attack after attack. I'll take advantage of an opening, but this feels too good to be true...

Its glowing aura grows denser, but the Floor Boss doesn't retaliate one bit. It just blocks, allowing me to land attack after attack on it.

I Dungeon Walk to and from it, landing more and more blows on the defenseless Boss.

I can tell it's gearing up for something, but there isn't much else for me to do but attack. This is the perfect time to do so, there's no point in running to hide when I'm making such good progress.

The Strengthening Fragment expands even more, as I constantly release more MP. I use up more and more of its power, releasing attack after attack for another 10 seconds straight. I've left another dozen marks on the beast in front of me.

The red gashes line its back, chest, legs, and arms now. The monster drips with red aura, it looks like blood. For some reason, it doesn't seem to care much at all.

Finally, its voice rings out in my head.

"You're finished. The fight ends now."

I stare straight ahead as the red and white glow surrounding its body expands more and more... The gashes in its body begin to crack open even further, letting out more of its ominous aura from within.

My mouth opens up wide as I watch The Knight itself expand with the aura.

Its full body begins to grow...

The dense mana within its armor starts to burst out at the seams and a long white horn starts to jut out from the red mist covering its head.

The Block Knight's arms and legs shatter the dark armor Holding it back and bright red and white glow from beneath shines even bright.

It continues to expand.

The chest plate breaks and a monstrous figure begins to form from within the light.

What was a 3-meter tall Knight moments ago, now makes the ground quiver under its clawed feet. I see tough red skin and bulging muscles peek out from the white light, but its true form is still hidden. It's over 8 meters tall now and still expanding at a steady rate.

I speed up, darting in between tables, and watching from a safe distance as this beast continues to morph and grow.

I can't believe my eyes...

"Is this... why they call it the Behemoth...?"

Chapter 186

The monster continues to grow before my eyes. It lets out a ground-shaking roar more powerful than any of its previous bellows. The sound waves that come out begin to crumble the stone walls and ceiling above.

I can feel the eerie sensation of mana begin to spread out into the air.

Broken pieces of support structures and fragments of glass fall from above, raining down upon me.

It lets out a visible shockwave of red aura that feels like an intimidation attack, but I'm positive that isn't one of its skills.

This must be some form of advanced mana control or a perk of its mana manipulation ability. The shockwave can be felt like pins and needles all over my body and deep in my veins.

I stop moving for a full second, watching the Black Suit of Armor completely crumble away and fall to the floor as a four-legged monster grows from within.

It falls forward, still gaining size while now standing on four legs. A long tail materializes from its backside and a shining white horn juts from its forehead, bending up and back to cover the weak points of its neck and spine.

Finally, I get a good look at this monster's face as it expands out from the red mana-imbued fog.

Its eyes grow bigger than my entire head and are a deep black color all the way through. The beast glares at me as it shows its rows of jagged white teeth dripping with saliva.

Not stopping its expansion in the slightest, the growing tail of the creature hits the back wall of the banquet hall and it begins to crumble and fall.

Its muscles bulge and expand, growing large veins that stretch its dark red skin to the point where it looks as if they're about to pop. Its dense striated flesh doesn't even look real...

Thick muscle mass lines its arms, thighs, and neck. Even its tail drifts back and forth powerfully knocking down massive walls with ease and grace.

Stone collapses as the Monster now grows to over 20 meters long. It's still glowing bright red and white, growing taller and bigger every second I wait...

The murderous cry almost looks visible in the air as it comes out of its massive gaping maw. This is the exact roar that I heard from the beast at the beginning of our fight.

Now, it seems I've finally met the real monster that guards the 20th floor.

This is the Floor Boss that separates normal hunters from those that the Association calls "Elites".

This is...

The Behemoth.

The entire back wall of the room collapses and the monster thrusts itself upwards onto its hind legs. All of the remaining stone bricks that make up the back wall fall to the ground and are crushed under the monster's heavy body.

Finally, the red glowing halts, and so does its expansion. The Behemoth in its final form is almost 35 meters long...

It towers above me, larger than any creature I've even dreamed of fighting in the past.

My eyes dart around the room to spot Ember through the open ceiling. He's watching the battle below commence with a patient stare.

Although frozen in awe for a moment, I snap out of it and devise a new plan.

I can sense Ember's eagerness to jump in the fight from here. The black-scaled dragon swoops down toward me without hesitation as I make eye contact with my partner.

I air-step upwards to meet him in the sky halfway. The Behemoth turns its gaze to watch us meet in the air. Standing on its hind legs, this monster sends out another shockwave that shakes me to the core.

I land on Ember's back as I feel the mana all around us twist, turn, and hum with a powerful presence.

I look down to see the stone walls of the castle's banquet hall we just left crumble to the ground and turn into a liquid state. The entire castle begins to bend to the monster's will.

It roars and moves forward.

The ground below bends and ripples as the monster takes another stride forward with its long claws swiping through the air. It attempts to swat us out of the sky.

I Dungeon Walk while on Ember's back, teleporting both of us to the far side of the beast.

Instantly, I let out a fully charged strike when we materialize into its blind spot. Just over 2000MP worth of fire-imbued mana hurdles at the monster's back.

It turns with astonishing speed. The beast's dark eyes lock onto us immediately, mere milliseconds after we blipped into existence behind its back.

I watch a dense shield of mana form over its bulging back muscles and my attack bounces off without much resistance at all.

There's a dim white glow, confirming that I've at least dented its shielding, but I didn't make it through. This new form that it's facing us in now is magnitudes more powerful than the puny Black Knight from before.

I thought it was the overconfident one... but maybe it was me all along.

I shake my head, then smirk, teleporting us to the opposite side of the beast as it swings its tail toward us. We disappear and it narrowly misses us, slamming down on the banquet hall floor below.

It doesn't crack the ground, but sends ripples throughout the floor.

I extend my All-Seeing Eye's range and witness the shockwave make the entire rock island we stand on bend and shake.

Another roar sounds from the monster as it turns to face a new position.

It begins to point its front claws at the ground.

My eyes widen as I watch the liquidated castle floor begin to cover its arms and legs.

The entire castle around us for at least 30 meters in all directions melts and forms a thick layer of stone armor around the Behemoth.

Its long white horn juts out of the top of its helmet, and a long tail is covered in a series of linked armor pieces, reinforced by the red glow of shielding.

The rest of its body looks similar to the Stone Knight I faced earlier, just 10 times taller...

The slit in its helmet shows off its beady black eyes and the entire stone suit glows red with visible mana shielding.

A roar rings out through another opening in its helmet to reveal its open mouth of serrated white teeth. I charge my sword, riding Ember's back around in the air, staring at the Behemoth in front of me.

It's truly a monster....

Defeating a beast like this will be a challenge worth the wait.

I smirk as the stone-covered monster swings its left arm. It's molding the liquid mana-imbued stone into glossy blades just like our last encounter.

Just much, much bigger this time around.

I reach into my item storage and pull out my wind dagger.

Not only does it give me a few much-needed base stat boosts, but it'll also let me launch double the attacks.

I jump off of Ember's back toward the oncoming Stone Monster's arm. I open our link as I air-step toward the incoming blade while glowing dark red from my right arm and bright white from my left.

"Ember, watch from the sky. Only interfere if necessary."

I grit my teeth, as a wide grin grows larger and larger across my face. I land with both feet onto the base of the monster's bladed arm, running across it toward its open helmet.

The monster lets out a roar, frustrated at its missed swing, but eager to catch me off guard. I feel the air pressure change from the incoming air and the putrid-smelling breath of the beast as I get closer and closer to its open mouth.

Channeling the Strengthening Fragment's power into both weapons, I charge up over 2300MP per blade.

Ember swoops down, then with a powerful flap of his wings, passing me on the left side before flying up into the sky.

"The fight is in your hands now, Master."

I let out a yell, swinging both swords, letting out two highly refined blades of mana. They head straight for the thin eye slit in its helmet.

The white and black crescents of energy are silent as they soar in at the monster's face. It stares straight ahead glaring and not budging at all.

I let out a laugh as the attacks make their way through the slit, and the monster doesn't even attempt to dodge...

A blinding white light shines from within the armor, and a display of flames and wind collide with each other making the explosion grow even greater.

I stare straight ahead, eagerly waiting to see the damage my attack has done while charging up both blades for another round.

I instantly teleport to the opposite side of the beast, away from the growing ball flames.

The murderous roar of an injured monster consumes the dungeon again. It's followed by that same shock wave of energy that ripples through my veins.

I shutter reflexively...

I burst into flames brighter to brush it off, staring into the fireball before me.

To my surprise, the instant I Dungeon Walk away, a massive glossy blade of stone shoots out from the depths of my attack's explosion.

I Dungeon Walk upwards to dodge, but my eyes open wide the moment I do.

I whisper under my breath.

"My range is limited..."

With my All-Seeing Eye active, I spread out my senses to find the root of this new problem.

Usually, when I activate my Dungeon Walker Skill, I can see unlimited pathways to all the available teleport points in my mind.

For some reason, right now, the only place I can travel is within 500 meters of this beast.

That last surge of energy created an odd dome of mana around this island... It glows light red and gives off a similar light buzz and mana consistency of its fog. I can't sense anything outside, even my perception skill is blocked.

This fight just got a whole lot more complicated.

Chapter 187

After launching my dual-bladed energy attack, and attempting to Dungeon Walk away, I stop mid-stride as the odd sensation of a dense dome of mana shielding covers the entire island that this fallen castle sits on.

The murderous roar of the Behemoth makes my head spin as it storms through the ball of flames from my previous attack.

Using the liquidated ground, it glides toward me with astonishing speed.

The monster clears hundreds of meters of distance between us in seconds. I Dungeon Walk to the opposite side of the island to avoid the charge.

Gritting my teeth, I watch the massive beast turn its body in an instant and come rampaging toward me again.

The cloud of fire, dust, and smoke that covered its entire body moments ago has dissipated as it continues to turn around.

I start to grin as I see the top portion of its helmet break off, and a large red glowing gash appears on the monster's face, right through its left eye.

Flames flicker on the wound as my advanced fire magic residue seeps into its body.

It glows white, and I watch the flames go out, but then a red glowing gash remains. The Stone Suit of armor begins to liquidate again, forming the helmet back in place exactly the way it was. The only difference this time, is the slip where its eyes were before is no longer there.

This confirms it. I've injured the monster for real this time, and the beast will be more cautious moving forward.

I look up to the sky as the Behemoth runs across the island with its blades for arms pointed at me in a furious rage.

I see Ember high up in the sky and I'm hit with a moment of panic as I attempt to open our link...

Nothing comes through.

I try to Dungeon Walk up into the air to get near, but he's out of my range.

The red mana-dense barrier has us separated completely. I dart my eyes back and forth, then teleport to the far side of the island next to the light red mana shield.

I let out two 2000MP attacks.

My black and white blades of energy drift right through without a sound.

It does nothing at all...

I try to touch the barrier with a bare hand, but the closer my skin gets to the buzzing red energy, the hotter it becomes.

The skin on my fingers, wrist, and forearm begins to sizzle and melt off the moment I get within a meter of this odd barrier.

I let out a painful grunt as I back away and regenerate my right arm's wounds.

The Behemoth is closing in again. I'm trapped within a barrier with this beast until I can figure out how to break it open from the inside. Ember is stuck on the outside for now and I can't teleport up to him or open our link... The only immediate way out of here is to take this monster down.

I already injured it once, I'll just do it again.

While charging both my weapons, and air-stepping into the sky to level with the approaching monster's eye level once again, I release a dual energy strike of 2000MP per blade.

As the white and black crescent of mana silently rocket toward the monster's head, I Dungeon Walk to its backside.

I'm fairly certain it'll dodge or block those incoming strikes with ease. I prepare my real attack while it's occupied.

Taking almost 2 full seconds, I watch my previous strikes collide with the monster's right arm as it lifts it in the air to block.

The red mana around its body strengthens on impact and my distraction shots are deflected into the air with ease as I predicted.

Simultaneously, I dive straight at the Beast's backside with my eyes locked on its flat Stone Armor. With a yell, I bring both my weapons across my body releasing 2350MP per blade onto its blindspot.

I didn't touch the ground at all before this strike, it must have not picked up on my presence.

Smirking, the loud buzzing twang of mana on mana fills my ears and I watch the stone Armor under my blades crack with the intense pressure being pushed down upon it.

The heavy stone, intertwined with dense red mana fractures more and more as I plunder MP and push down with all my might.

The cracks become larger, moving along the Stone

Monster's backside. The moment I break through, there's a white flash of light and a fiery explosion of wind and flames.

The monster roars as a 5-meter-wide hole opens in its armor and two mana blades slash open its back.

I let out a laugh as I watch the white and black energy attacks rip into its flesh, then explode into a display of wind and fire.

I Dungeon Walk backward, but am hit with a familiar feeling shockwave of energy...

This time, my full body shivers, and I let out a reflexive grunt followed by a groan. I grit my teeth as the wave passes, but my All-Seeing Eye picks up on the worst part as I come back to my senses.

The 500-meter-wide dome of dense mana has shrunk to less than 200 meters. My teleport point flexibility has severely dropped again, but that still isn't the worst of my issues...

My feet and arms begin to tingle and feel rather numb. It's been almost 40 full seconds since I took the Strengthening Fragment. The side effects of not using up enough MP are actually kicking in.

I'm burning through thousands a second on my fire, stat boosting, and perception skills, but every moment I'm not in battle is a moment wasted on this precious temporary upgrade.

This lessened range may be a blessing in disguise. It just means I have to finish this battle quicker. Either I defeat this boss here and now, or it defeats me.

I air-step upwards as the furious beast. Its back is still flaming as it liquidates more fallen rubble to heal its armor.

At this point, It's crushed every bit of the banquet hall and surrounding rooms in sight. We're facing each other out in the Open Dungeon air now... The Castle is basically destroyed...

I can feel the heat of the lava pools all around me, and can even see the flowing molten rock from a distance. I'm sweating and breathing hard, taking in more and more mana from the expanding Strengthening Fragment as I stare down the Behemoth and I fly towards it in the air.

My heart pounds faster and harder and I grit my teeth, gripping both blades tight while charging them with as much dense mana as they can hold.

The island has become a war zone.

With a yell, I let out two airborne attacks and it raises its arms up to block.

I Dungeon Walk to its backside.

The air is hot and thick with steam, but there's also an eerie buzzing sensation that hasn't gone away since the monster's last shockwave.

I reappear on the monster's backside, ready to let out another attack on its unguarded back.

The Stone armor is still reforming from my last slash and I can see the wounded area. I'll be able to land another devastating hit.

I smirk, air-stepping in closer while swinging both of my blades, letting MP flow through my body and into another full-power strike.

My eyes widen as I see its right arm swing backward and intercept my attack...

It guessed where I'd appear in an instant.

No... It knew.

The twang of mana on mana rings out as my dual energy attack cracks through its stone armor and hits its body.

On the opposite side, my attacks that were meant to be a distraction hit its left arm and crack its armor on the opposite side as well.

The beast lets out a roar, but it's nowhere near as damaging as a vital point like its midsection, neck, or back.

As the explosion ensues, I Dungeon Walk away.

Another surge of dense mana hits me as I reappear.

I flinch, and the energy wave starts to burn my skin and insides, similarly to the red mana shelling that surrounds this island.

I let out a painful grunt, as my HP drops a few hundred points, and I use self regeneration to heal the internal and external wounds.

I look around, and the dome has shrunk again.

There's no more than 100 meters of space to move around in here...

The air all around me is now lightly tinted red similar to the fog in the castle before our match even began. My eyes dart around as my All-Seeing Eye's ability to track mana lessens and lessens.

I grit my teeth and whisper under my breath.

"This is bad..."

I hear an echoing roar and watch the beast charge toward me as the red fog grows thicker and thicker, making my virility even worse.

Another shockwave of mana hits me and I let out a yell, regenerating my body, but losing even more HP. I'm down to almost half health...

This battle has made a drastic turn for the worst. I charge my blades and Dungeon Walk to its backside to let out another attack.

These next few moves will decide the true winner, I'll make every last drop of MP count.

Chapter 188

Clenching my jaw, I burn through thousands of MP while using my perception skill to try and get a hint of vision through the thick red fog. All it's giving me is a headache in return.

The dense mana barrier this beast has created is shrinking every time it lets out a shockwave, and it's getting a bit too tight for comfort.

I'm sitting at just over half health, with a 100-meter-wide dome closing in, and a vicious building-sided monster somewhere in the vicinity but entirely invisible to me.

I can hear its roar, heavy breathing, and movements from a distance, but the monster is fast and smart. With this limited visibility, it silences its movements when necessary and slips in and out of my range of perception.

I need to keep my guard up at all times, this fight just got a whole lot more serious.

Swinging both my white glowing dagger and my red shining sword across my body, I start letting out a barrage of 2000MP attacks over and over deep into the fog.

They silently drift through the red mist as I begin air-stepping around, bobbing and weaving through the rubble-covered battlefield.

I can feel the stone floor beneath my feet ripple and bend. Before now, I would try flying into the sky to get away from its radar system, but the thick fog-filled air is no different than the floor.

It knows exactly where I am, and there's nothing to do about it.

I grit my teeth, continuing to launch energy attacks into the heavy fog with only the sounds of a fast-approaching monster as my guide to aim each strike.

I know the crescents of wind and fire I'm launching are not strong enough to injure this beast, but I need to continue burning through mana to appease the Strengthening Fragment while simultaneously pinpointing this monster's exact location.

Just over 2000MP is enough to spark a dim glow of white light on collision. The buzzing sound of mana being released on impact gives me just enough visual and auditory cues to ready my next strike.

It's near, and coming in hot.

I stop my attacks after throwing half a dozen from each blade as I see the white signals of impact come closer and closer.

"It's time."

I charge up both weapons and plant my feet, looking up into the red fog while squinting, using my perception skill to attempt to look through it with all my might.

White, red, gold, and black aura grow around my body brighter and brighter as my breathing slows and all I can hear is my own heart beating in my chest.

Moments later, my window of opportunity opens.

The Behemoth lets out a roar, breaking through the fog and swinging its right bladed-arm downward at me.

With less than a second to think, I watch the glossy stone blade approach me from above as I Dunegon Walk away, positioning myself right over the beast's head.

I look down at the long white horn that juts out from its stone armor. My eyes dart back and forth until I lock onto a small portion of armor that's opened up just below its extended shoulder.

This is only possible because of its downward strike meant to attack me.

I smirk, bringing both of my weapons across my body and letting out a yell and two 2350MP crescents of mana.

The white and black attacks soar through the fog, gliding downward without making a sound.

The beast continues to lunge forward. It disappears into the fog along with the attacks I threw as the visibility gets even worse. I air-step backward as a ball of flames erupts into my field of view followed by the roar of an injured beast.

I watch the red mana cloud around me waver, then another shock wave rattles me to the core. I freeze up, gritting my teeth, attempting to stay in the sky. This one is the strongest one so far...

My eyes open wide as I see the glossy blade of a flaming Behemoth lunging out from the fiery explosion below without a moment's notice.

Its shoulder's armor is cracked and broken. I can see two large gashes in its flesh, but the monster isn't concerned with it in the slightest.

It's focused on me...

I'm falling from the sky, attempting to gain my composure from the last shockwave of mana and watching the glossy blade of its flaming injured arm come right at me.

I can barely see 5 meters ahead, but I know I'm in trouble... and there's not much I can do.

Its stone blade gets closer and closer as I burst into flames and activate my Dunegon Walker skill less than a meter before impact.

Letting out a yell, I hit the hard floor below after blindly teleporting to the ground. I begin launching attacks in all directions once again.

All I see is red fog... and all I can feel is empty space all around me...

The ground ripples and flows and the mist that fills the air intrudes my lungs with a murderous presence. The buzzing sound of mana fills the air and clouds my brain more and more every second that passes.

"I need to keep pushing through..."

I've injured the Behemoth again, but it's not slowing down at all. I don't think I've even touched 20% of its HP.

The dome goes silent.

I can't hear a thing but continue launching attacks in all directions

Nothing hits. My white and black blades just glide through the red mist and disappear into nothingness before me.

I check my health bar, and gulp as I see it nearing 1/4. I grab a C-Class-graded HP potion from my item storage and drink it without a moment of hesitation.

I feel my body rejuvenate instantly, but that doesn't help my current situation as much as I'd hoped. This monster is still invisible to me, lurking nearby.

I continue air-stepping around the rubble, letting out 2000MP attacks in the hope of catching a glimpse of a small white glow, but have no luck...

The fog is growing even denser, and it's hard to see more than 3 meters ahead now.

I'm covered in sweat, breathing heavily, and my heart is beating out of my chest... For some reason, a grin creeps across my face.

I'm in the worst possible situation, but I'm loving every second of it. I'll make it out of here alive.

I launch another dual attack from my blades as I twist around a rock pile ahead to watch them both collide with something hard right in front of me.

My eyes widen as I watch a glossy stone sword covered in red mana shielding appear from the mist.

It's almost like it just appeared out of thin air. Luckily, the collision of my two energy attacks gave me an early warning to air-step upwards, narrowly avoiding the incoming stone arm.

The moment I jump up, its blade follows me from below. I let out another two attacks in the direction of the monster's body to give me a better idea of its exact positioning, then start to charge up my real attack.

The moment I see two more dim white lights through the red fog, I teleport blindly above their exact location.

With a yell, my dual 2350MP attack makes contact with the beast below. I can't see where I hit, but I know it was a successful shot.

I feel the heat of my fire magic erupting and hear the loud cries of the behemoth underneath me.

I grit my teeth and attempt to air-step backward, but I'm hit with another surge of dense red mana from the injured beast.

I grunt, then let out a yell of agony as the wave of MP makes its way deep into my veins.

My skin burns as soon as I'm hit, and I feel my organs twist and turn.

Almost 1/4 of my health drops from this single wave.

I cough up blood as I'm paralyzed in mid-air for a fraction of a second. I grit my teeth and see the flaming arm of the stone-covered Behemoth's blade come flying out of the fog in front of me.

I Dungeon Walk to the floor, and its glossy blade cuts through the air right where I was moments ago.

If not for my attack hitting its armor earlier, covering it in fire magic, I wouldn't have sensed the monster's sword in time...

Immediately, I start sending more waves of mana into the thick fog. My arms and legs are starting to tingle again... but there isn't much I can do about it.

I've increased my MP output to nearly full capacity. I'm not able to possibly let out more than 5k MP worth of attacks at a single time with the appropriate density and width.

The hot and heavy feeling of a Strengthening Fragment's final moments starts to burn in my chest.

I know this feeling well. If it takes over, I'll pass out soon...

I whisper under my breath while throwing another dual attack into the red abyss.

"I have to finish this here and now..."

The faint white light of one of my detection shots finally makes an impact on the beast. I lock onto its location and instantly begin charging up a new attack. This one has to be big...

Letting out a yell, and teleporting blindly into the fog directly above where the light from earlier shined, I release an attack downward with all my might.

I feel the final remnants of the Strengthening Fragment give me a boost of MP, greater than any attack I've released before.

A dual strike with just over 2500MP per blade rockets downward at the monster below.

Almost instantly, I hear the roar of a furious beast, and the heat of an explosion, but something unexpected happens.

Out of the corner of my vision, and entering the perception of my All-Seeing Eye, one of the monster's massive bladed arms comes swinging through the fog on my left side.

I sense it just in time, and begin to activate my Dungeon Walker skill, but am simultaneously hit with its wave of dense red mana...

My heart stops as I let out a groan. Another 1/4 of my health is ripped from my body, and a mana-reinforced blade comes soaring towards my unguarded frontside.

I just landed my most powerful attack so far on the Boss, but it was thinking one step ahead.

I wasn't fast enough.

Its blade makes contact with my chest plate...

I watch the bright flash of mana-imbued armor begin to fracture and burst. A white light blinds me as I'm faced with a sudden feeling of dread.

Until... I'm snapped out of it. The explosion from my armor bursting shocks my system and allows me to move once again.

"One last chance."

Bursting into brighter flames, and ripping myself out of temporary paralysis, I Dunegon Walk to the floor below just as the monster's blade starts ripping through my flesh.

Its long sword covered in thick red mana cuts through my armor like butter, slicing open my chest and lower abdomen.

If not for the shock of the armor's destruction, I would have been cut in two...

I let out a gasp as I hit the stone ground below. Red liquid pours from my chest and stomach. My feet and hands feel numb and the red fog all around me is getting thicker and thicker.

I can't sense a thing in this war zone and the buzzing in my ears makes it hard to think.

I let out a yell as I close up the wounds in my chest with self regeneration. My health has dropped below 10%.

Every part of my body aches and burns with unbearable pain. I reach into my item storage for an HP potion but pause before bringing it up to my lips.

I smirk, looking deep into the dense fog, and activate my newest skill instead.

"Final Breath."

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"Final Breath."

I activate my newest skill and feel it start to take full effect.

This is the stat-boosting ability I witnessed the final boss on the 19th floor activate just moments before our battle was over.

It gave the monster an incredible boost in all stats and even its mana control.

I grit my teeth as I feel the skill take over.

It begins to drain the MP from the Strengthening Fragment lodged in my chest. The red and golden glow from my other stat-boosting skills gets overridden by an ominous black aura.

More and more MP starts flowing through my veins. My head begins to ache and I feel a sharp pain in my chest.

My advanced fire magic is consumed by this new skill and shifts its coloring to a jet-black hue as well.

I let out a yell, as the skill [Final Breath] fully activates. The pain is unbearable...

Then...

I don't feel the boring sensation in my heart at all from moments ago...

My headache is gone.

I... don't feel much of anything at all.

My eyes dart back and forth. The red fog that was so thick moments ago that I could barely see a meter in front of me now seems like just a thin mist slightly blurring my vision.

Falling rocks and crackling fire can be heard in perfect clarity from over 50 meters away, and the exact position of the behemoth lurking within its mana-imbued veil of fog seems so obvious.

I take a step forward.

It seems like time has slowed down...

All my senses are heightened drastically, but it all feels so natural. The mana being absorbed from the Fragment in my chest is flowing through me at almost 4 times as much as moments ago. Yet, it doesn't even feel like I'm consuming mana at all. It just feels like I don't need mana at all...

"This is... [Final Breath]..."

I hold my sword in my right hand and watch the red glow and dark flames morph into jet-black darkness to match my aura.

The wind dagger in my left does exactly the same.

My All-Seeing Eye expands its range and I can feel the entire Boss Room with perfect clarity once again.

Ember is high in the sky and there's hot lava pools surrounding me on all sides for kilometers.

I take a deep breath in and out as I pick up the pace, and start sprinting towards the direction of the newly located Floor Boss.

Everything around me is silent.

The only echoing noises I can hear are the slow footsteps of my own run and the steady breath coming out of my nose.

I can see the entire battlefield in my mind's eye... Everything has become crystal clear all of a sudden.

The red-skinned Behemoth is less than 50 meters away, reforming its stone armor. There's still fire burning on its shoulder and arms. Plus, my last attack shattered a good portion of its helmet and armor on its back.

Half of its face is exposed revealing one of its beady black eyes. The monster's gaze is locked on me as I approach.

It's injured, but nowhere near defeated.

The power building up inside of me right now is like nothing I've ever felt before.

I feel at peace...

The near-unlimited energy from the Strengthening Fragment mixed with the controlled power of my Final Breath's stat-boosting skill has made me feel as though I'm invincible....

This can't last for long, and the side effects won't be pretty, but I'll use every opportunity I can get right now.

Piles of bricks, shattered stones, and burning tables fill my mind's eye as I run through the red fog. I activate wind magic beneath my feet to increase my speed, but black energy comes out instead.

It propels me forward all the same.

Now, cracking the hard castle floor with every stride I come closer and closer to the Behemoth before me.

My inner mind's vision shows me the scene in black and white. The only thing that stands out is the dense shielding around my target's body, it's bright red.

I hear the beast let out a roar as I draw near.

It senses me and begins swinging its arms as I jump up into the air to meet its attack.

Earlier in our fight, I would have been on full guard, ready to Dungeon Walk away at any second, preparing to dodge its incoming swing, but now is different.

I know exactly where its attack will land. My All-Seeing Eye's boosted proficiency from the [Final Breath] skill has made the Floor Boss' movements seem slow...

I smirk, twisting in the air to narrowly avoid its blade with ease.

Just like earlier in the fight, my right foot lands on the glossy surface of its arm. I begin running downwards toward the monster while charging up my own weapons.

It all happens in an instant.

The moment I begin to think about imbuing my blades with mana, they're charged to full.

Dense black aura fills them both in an instant, and It's hard to even calculate how much they carry. Nearly 5000MP each, but this mana feels much denser and more deadly than anything I've ever felt before.

I can feel its mana shielding crack beneath my feet and I watch fracturing stone armor fly into the air as my steps crumble its bladed arm.

The fiery hole in its helmet lets one black eye peek out.

The monster isn't frightened though... it just stares straight ahead...

I'm completely calm as well, gripping both weapons tight and running down the arm of the beast, swinging both swords across my body with the intention of landing a dual energy strike on its neck.

At the same moment, I feel the shielding from its entire body begin to weaken. I'm less than 5 meters away.

It's an odd sensation.

The monster knows I'll hit it soon, but it's decided to lower its guard...

I keep my eye on the prize and continue running down its stone arm. My footsteps destroy the rock even more with each stride as the shielding below fades away.

Its large black eye stays locked on me, and the Boss doesn't move a muscle.

I am running at it with speeds over 3 times as fast as before, so even if it tried to move, it'd be futile... Maybe this is why it stopped.

It knows it's the end.

"No... that's not it."

I can still sense the energy in its body moving around. It leaves the rest of its body completely unguarded while focusing all of the shielding around its neck and head. It becomes denser and denser as I fall closer.

It's putting all of its strength into a final block, while I put all of my own into a final strike.

I smirk, taking another stride and following through with my swing.

Dark black ominous mana leaks from my body, traveling through my blades, and it's released into two crescents of incredible strength.

Everything is silent, and I watch my attacks fly...

Then, I hear a voice. It's the Floor Boss opening our link.

"Another unexpected turn of events. It seems you'll be the one who steals our power..."

Two dense crescents of pure destructive mana come shooting from my weapons and rocket at the horned beast's neck.

Its eye stares deep into mine and speaks again through our link as it senses the end.

"It was an honor to meet a man like you again. It's been 50 long years since a rival for the throne challenged us. The great collapse will be more exciting than I anticipated."

As it lets out its final words through our link, I watch my two blades of dense mana collide with its final layer of dark red mana shielding.

I can tell it's close to twice as powerful as the base-level shielding surrounding its body before.

Liquidated stones wrapped in the threads of mana from its manipulation skill are intertwined to make a barrier strong enough to stop any one of my earlier strikes without fail.

I let out a laugh mixed with an excited yell as I follow through and fall towards the monster's open helmet watching my dual strike.

Trails of dark mana connect my incoming attacks to the aura that surrounds me. It feeds the attack with more and more power.

The two crescents grow as the final remnants of the Strengthening Fragment within me are completely absorbed.

My arms and legs begin to fall numb as the full attack finally leaves my blades and makes contact with the beast's shielding.

My eyes widen as the behemoth's entire pool of mana collides with all of mine.

There's an incredible flash of white light as I watch my dark wind crescent shatter its shielding like a hammer hitting fragile glass.

The fire crescent following takes this opportunity to slice through the beast's neck without a hint of resistance. It glides through the monster's tough red skin and thick muscles with ease.

My wind attack explodes as the fragments of its shielding disrupt the strike. This causes a chain reaction of black slides of wind to disperse and interrupt the blade of fire halfway through the Boss' neck.

The explosion of Black flames is magnificent...

All I can do is watch in awe as I'm thrown backward by the force of my own attack.

The final sight before me is the monster's black eye closing and its lips curve up to make a thin smile as it's completely consumed by black flames and blown to pieces.

For every mili-second that passes, my senses become more numb. Mana leaves my body at a rapid rate. I fly through the air, sensing the dome of shielding around me finally disappear. A black ball of fire envelops everything within a 50-meter diameter.

It's my own flames, so I'm not burned, but I can feel the extreme heat...

It's... comforting...

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I smirk and start to close my eyes as the familiar [Level Up] notifications ring out in my mind.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

[YES][NO]

More blue text fills my vision as I begin to lose consciousness and fall through the air.

I choose [YES] for each and open my status before my eyes completely shut.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 422

Hp: 85/2115

Mp: 60/2115

Strength: 1122 [+1290][+987][+561][+1784][+561][+561]

Speed: 1224 [+734][+612][+1946][+612]

Agility: 1321 [+594][+1189][+661][+2100][+661]

Defense: 926 [+370][+713][+463][+1472]

Mental Strength: 1041 [+625][+416][+468][+926][+822][+521][+1655][+521][+521]

Skills:

Absorption [Special Grade]

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spacial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength

Dual Wielding [Special Grade]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Final Breath [Special Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Items Equipped:

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

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength]

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

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

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+115% Strength][+89% Mental Strength]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set:

[Wind Aspect][88+% Strength][+90% Agility][+79% Mental Strength]

[Berserker King's Armor Set] [Blood Bonded] +77% Defense

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

Bufs:

[Final Breath: Special Grade] +159% All Stats

[Berserker] +50% Strength + Mental Strength

[BloodLust] +50% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength

[Extreme Strength] +50% Strength

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My eyes shut and the feeling of weightlessness takes over my body. My senses go dark as I fall down to the floor.

The warm flames from the blast below envelope everything in sight and a grin creeps across my face as I pass out from extreme fatigue on the spot.

The only thoughts running through my mind as I plummet toward the floor are: "I did it. I defeated the Behemoth."

The curious final words of the floor boss get lost in the chaos of my rapidly decreasing active conscious brain power.

Everything goes black...

"..."

Time passes.

"..."

"... Master. Are you finally waking?"

"..."

I lie on my back and a light breeze is flowing on my face.

I let out a cough and struggle to open my eyes.

Everything around me is so bright. There's a pale green tint that fills my vision as I try to visualize my surroundings.

I hear Ember speak through our link again.

"It's been over a full day, Master. You've been completely unconscious since the battle ended."

I stay on my back, letting my eyes adjust to the view above me. There are white clouds, but the sky is tinted with an unsettling green hue.

I feel hard scales beneath me and catch a glimpse of two black wings flapping on either side of my vision.

I'm in the air, riding on Ember's back.

I try to move my hand up to feel my face, but my arm won't budge. Letting out a groan, I checked my status to see my HP at under 100 and my MP at nearly 0.

My arms and legs feel numb while my mouth is horribly dry. I shiver, letting out another cough that sends a sharp pain through my chest and back. I grit my teeth and close my eyes until the pain subsides.

After taking a deep breath in and out, then letting the cool air pass by my face for a moment, I reply through my link with Ember.

"Well, it looks like I won. Good to see you're all right too."

I let out a light chuckle with my eyes still closed. It hurts to even let out a thin smile, but knowing Ember is below me makes me feel a little better.

My stomach feels empty, and my skin feels itchy. Everything hurts, but everything feels numb at the same time.

I'm horribly ill. This must be the worst case of mana withdrawals I've ever felt before.

I lie motionless for over half an hour before building up the strength to open my eyes again.

The white clouds and pale green sky fill my vision again as I activate my storage skill to let 3 items fall out onto my chest.

Two potions and a bottle of water come down with a thud, landing in the opening where my chest plate is broken in half.

Using all my strength, I lift my right arm to bring an HP potion to my lips.

Sweating and grunting, I uncork the small bottle and drink the cool green liquid, letting out a sigh of relief as I immediately feel energy flood back into me.

After this, I let the empty bottom drop to my side, and let my arm fall too.

That was exhausting...

My breathing is heavy, and sweat covers my forehead, but I need to finish what I started.

Letting out a grunt, I reach for the MP potion in front of me and repeat the process. The moment the pink liquid touches my lips, I begin to feel even better.

Still, I have to let the empty glass bottle fall to my side and take a small break before reaching for the water.

This fatigue is brutal...

I begin using self regeneration, but it isn't helping much. I can't exactly heal withdrawals with simple potions or skills. Usually, it just takes food, water, and time to heal something like this.

I reach for the water and drink about 1/4 of it before forcing myself to stop.

With a satisfied gulp, I close my eyes again and fall straight to sleep.

Everything goes black...

"..."

Time goes by, and I wake up feeling somewhat better.

I open my eyes to see the same oddly colored sky with occasional passing clouds. I immediately open my link with Ember as I struggle to sit up.

"How long was I out?"

My abs ache and my joints crack as I use both arms to keep myself steady while sitting up. Ember responds.

"Only a few hours this time, 7 or 8 at most."

I nod, looking to my side and seeing a huge pile of gear wrapped in what looks like a red fabric. It's perfectly balanced on Ember's back right beside me. I hadn't even noticed until now.

I clench my jaw and lean over to open the cloth to see what's inside.

I use Appraisal.

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+115% Strength][+89% Mental Strength]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set

[Wind Aspect][88+% Strength][+90% Agility][+79% Mental Strength]

[The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet] +111% Defense

[Horn of The Behemoth]

My long dark sword and bright red dagger lay on the velvet fabric next to a small silver rectangle about the size of my palm with rounded edges. It's attached to a thin black string and sits next to a massive curved white horn.

I immediately store my two bonded weapons into my item storage, then pick up the small silver rectangular object.

[The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet] +111% Defense

It's heavy in my hand, but no more than a centimeter thick, and 5 or 6 centimeters long. The defense buff on it is higher than anything I've ever seen before.

It's completely blank and smooth, just a full bar of platinum with an enchantment on it...

I smirk, taking off my Cyclops pendant that has a 40% buff and replacing it with this one at 111%.

I throw my old pendant into my storage. It holds some sentimental value, so I'll keep it for now.

Lastly, I look over at the large white horn. The item has significantly shrunk compared to its actual form during the fight. This is normal for magic items, but it's still odd to me.

I look at it closely, activating Appraisal again, but nothing comes up on the curious item.

All it says is "Horn of The Behemoth" over and over...

Maybe it's a crafting item of some sort, or possibly just a trophy for those that defeat the 20th-floor Boss. I doubt the latter. All items have some kind of purpose in the end...

I let out a sigh, then roll the horn into my item storage and promptly fall onto my back again, exhausted already.

Breathing heavily, I open up my storage and take out some fruit and dried meat. I chew on it slowly while drinking more water and opening my link with Ember.

"So.... What happened...? Where are we?"

The dragon gliding peacefully through the air responds in a patient tone.

"You've defeated your first Lower-Floor Boss. We've made it to the 21st Floor. Before we were transported to this higher Dunegon, I managed to collect all the item drops and your weapons."

I grin, closing my eyes again and falling back to sleep, letting out a last sentence to Ember before everything goes dark.

"Thank you."

"..."

The next moment my eyes open, I feel pretty rejuvenated, but still nowhere near fully healed. I'm able to sit up almost immediately and stretch my arms and back.

I let out a yawn and bend over the side of the flying dragon to take a look at the view below us.

I'm left speechless at the sight before my eyes...

We're high up in the sky, and everything around us is stained with a pale green tint...

There are white stone pillars as far as I can see.

They're thin, just a few meters wide each, and they reach up high in the air. Some even jut up higher than the altitude we're flying, but a majority can be seen down below.

The tops of them are complly flat and now that I'm coming back to my senses, this entire dungeon gives off a low hum of mana from all directions.

I turn my head around, taking a look behind me to see hundreds of them. There are white stone pillars everywhere.... and nothing else.

The more I look, I begin to notice oddities. Some off in the distance seem thicker than others and even have jagged-shaped tops.

I can't even see the floor below, there are clouds in the way both above and below us.

My hands and feet are still tingling, and everything aches, but I let out a grunt and manage to stand to my feet as Ember continues to gently soar through the sky.

I smirk, breathing in the fresh air around me and squinting off into the distance.

"The Labyrinth is far from its end. One Floor Boss down, many more to go. It looks like after we take a pit stop back on the 10th floor to rest up and check in with the Association, there will be many more floors to climb."