

D. Diver 201

Chapter 201

I hear the confident voice of a woman fill my ears as Leo disappears through the front entrance of the wooden cabin.

My other teammates are a few steps ahead of me, so they enter and I follow soon after.

Taking one last look over my shoulder, making a mental note of the open desert and lonely deserted town, I walk through the tavern's front door.

A bit of dust has kicked up from the 5 of us walking through, but it settles as I shut the heavy wooden frame behind me.

The sight inside is about what I expected.

There's a few rectangular tables that line the walls and a long wooden bar at the back of the room. Stone walls and visible support beams jut out, making the room feel much cozier and well-built than it seemed from the outside.

To my right, about 5 meters away, there's another smaller bar, but with no drinks or food. Mana crystals and potions line the shelves like a mini-mart and an old man sits behind it with a kind smile.

It seems a bit out of place at first, but still not too surprising. Hunters come through every town, it'd be a waste not to serve our needs.

The sight that catches my eye next is the woman named Charlotte. This is the person that greeted the silver-haired artificer as he walked through the door.

She's.... also... almost exactly what I expected after hearing her voice.

A slightly heavy-set, red-haired woman greets us with a wide white smile. Her voice is much deeper than Maria's or Abby's but still has a unique feminine charm to it. Her laugh rings out through the room, making this woman the center of attention.

"Welcome, welcome! You're the new hunters they were telling me about aren't ya! Come on, take a seat!"

Still analyzing the scene, I walk forward. The 5 of us pass a few lone old men sitting at various tables with drinks and empty plates. If I had to guess, they've been here all night...

Some stare, others keep their heads down, but none say a word as we make our way over to the smiling woman with rosy red cheeks.

She turns around and starts gripping wooden mugs, filling them up with a golden brown liquid from a barrel behind the counter.

"Welcome to The Wall, or as the association calls it The Gate. We're one of the only ways into Section 4."

The genuine smile across Leo's face grows as he watches the woman work. Eventually, he motions for us to sit down at one of the nearby tables up close to the bar area.

As soon as we sit down, Charlotte comes walking over with handfuls of drinks. Every time she gets near all my worries seem to fade away, all I want to do is smile back.

I hear Arie make a comment from my left side.

"Now this is how ya treat guests! Draft beers with the rising sun, we should start all our mission like this."

The loose braided hair of our redheaded waitress bobs behind her as she sets our drinks down on the table. Leo speaks up the moment she does.

"The usual, a plate for all 5 of us. These 4 have a mission on the other side of the wall today. They need to be ready."

She smirks, pushing a drink to each of us and letting her gaze wander up and down until her green eyes meet mine.

"You, you're the one Brutus told me to keep an eye on. No trouble until you leave, got it?"

Leo shrugs while Maria and Abby giggle.

I throw my hands in the air but graciously take the drink she pushes towards me while rolling my eye and responding.

"Great to meet you too, I'm Jay."

She gives me a firm nod, matching my smile, then begins to turn around.

"I read up on each of you before you arrived, so save the intros. I know you better than you know yourselves."

Leo smirks and whispers to us in a hinged tone.

"She's probably right. Charlotte is... very perceptive."

I squint, activating my Inspect and Appraisal skills as she walks behind the cluttered bar, yelling something through a door to what seems to be a small backroom kitchen.

[Lv. 243]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Earrings] +55% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Inspect [Special Grade]

Charm [Special Grade]

I let out a light sigh under my breath, relieved that she doesn't have any perception skills that are able to pick out any details I'm not looking to share.

This is the second person I've met with a special grade inspect skill, unfortunately, the first gave his up to me in the heat of battle back in my hometown.

I know how it works because I have it. She can see all of our levels, that's about it... Charm on the other hand, I've never heard of a skill like this.

I can only imagine what It does.

I deactivate my skills but continue to hold my tight gaze. Abby interrupts my concentration posing a question to Leo.

"So, now that we've been blindly dragged halfway across the country, could you explain a bit about our mission? Gates? Sections? Why these dungeons are all breaking? I need some answers here."

Arie tips the back of his mug to the ceiling as he finishes his drink in a single gulp. The archer places the mug back on the table firmly, grinning, and crossing his arms without saying a word.

Maria turns to the silver-haired man wide-eyed, ready to hear what he has to say. I do the same, but still, keep an eye on the redhead leaning up against the door of the backroom.

Leo nods and replies.

"Understandable. I think we can get into the details now."

He leans forward, placing both hands on the wooden table with a light thud. Our drinks slosh and the room goes silent.

"The wall outside stretches across the entire dark continent. It was built after the Great War just 50 years ago. The Association refers to the land inside this first wall as Gate 1."

I bring my mug of cool liquid to my lips, chugging some, but immediately feel my passive poison resistance skill activate nullifying its effects.

Leo goes on.

"As you've probably inferred, the fact that the gate is labeled with a number means there are more inner gates. Our mission today has nothing to do with them. To make it easier on all of you, let's say the dark continent is a perfect circle. Clearly, it's not. It's more of a jagged sideways egg shape, but a circle will be good for a visual."

My mind begins to wonder, piecing together all the information that's been given so far as the silver-haired artificer goes on.

"So.... A Circle. With the inner walls of Gate 2 cutting out the center, we're left with a doughnut-shaped landmass. It's cut into 4 sections pretty evenly, leaving us with 4 curved sections. We're on the lower east side of the continent. Section 4."

The 4 of us at the table nod, thinking to ourselves as this all becomes a bit more clear.

Then, Arie speaks up.

"What about the towns inside? I know the Association doesn't care one bit to supply them with resources to survive, but I clearly remember back in our meeting we were told to protect them at all costs. You have anything to say about that?"

Leo tightens his lips and nods.

"They're human beings. Of course, we'll protect them. The government's allocation of resources is not my field of expertise, I just work here... I'm not exactly sure what you want me to say about this."

A lot of the Dark Continent towns and cities were founded by rogues and runaways after the war. Even though the new generations may be innocent people, they still don't have a right to citizenship in our nation. They'd have to go through immigration just like any foreigner would."

Arie lets out a light scoff, rolling his eyes, then shrugging it off. He raises his mug and makes eye contact with Charlotte in the back of the room. She shouts back.

"Another round coming up, your meals are almost ready too."

Arie turns back to Leo.

"I was just curious on your position, no hard feelings."

Leo nods.

"None taken."

He looks over to Abby.

"I believe you have the map that shows the rough positioning of each break. Also, you all know how to clear a dungeon right...? I assume you've done it before if you've gotten this far."

Abby replies.

"Yeah, all we have to do is take out the mutant boss and the dungeon will collapse. Even the monsters that escaped from the break will disappear from the surrounding area."

Leo nods.

"Perfect, after we eat and get your housing situated. I'll let Charlotte lead you to the gate so you can begin your mission."

I grin excitedly. It's been ages since I got to witness a break firsthand. There's always much better loot from mutant drops, and even unique skills sometimes.

This is going to be a fun mission.

I hear the redheaded bartender come skipping over with two massive circular trays of steaming hot breakfast foods along with juices and water.

"Dig in, you all have a long day ahead of you!"

Chapter 202

Charlotte, the orange-haired bartender comes over to us with a bright smile across her face and two steaming hot circular trays of food.

Pitchers of juices and ice-cold water slosh around, making my mouth water at the sight of them.

"Dig in, you all have a long day ahead of you!"

We do as she says.

After 30 minutes of a satisfying feast, the 5 of us sit back and enjoy the peace and quiet of a near-empty tavern in the middle of the open desert on a full stomach of good food.

Charlotte watches from the back of the bar, keeping an eye on the door and other lingering guests.

I'm too curious to wait any longer. I look over to her and our eyes meet as I speak up.

"Hey, great meal! I appreciate the hostility but could I ask... what do you do for the Association exactly? I'm just new around here, I didn't even know these walls existed yesterday.."

She replies in an excited tone as she makes her way over.

"Well you're welcome, I'm glad you enjoyed it. If you must know, I'm the Gate 1, Section 4 lookout. There aren't many towns around here, so if anyone's looking to catch a ride on the train out, they'll have to stop by this town. I have a pretty good eye for troublemakers, and can get people to talk if I need them to."

My gaze tightens.

"You can... make people talk?"

Leo interrupts.

"Char's the best the Association's got. If you need questions answered, she'll get 'em for ya!"

The orange-haired bartender turns to Leo, tightening her lips and letting high a half-nervous laugh before responding and hitting Leo on the shoulder with a playful slap.

"Hey you know I like to keep that a secret before I get to know new guests."

He rolls his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah. These 4 aren't your average hunters though, try it out, let's see if your smooth talk can do anything to this bunch."

She looks back over to me. Instantly, I feel that soothing sensation I experienced when I first walked in.

The first time around it was nice, but now, I know something's up. My battle instincts kick in, and I activate my All-Seeing Eye. Something doesn't feel right....

The woman begins walking over to me and speaks in a slower rhythmic tone.

"Sure Leo, I'll give it a shot, but it's always more fun when they aren't suspicious."

As my perception skill activates, I begin to see a light orange-colored mist surrounding her body. It spreads out and engulfs our entire table the second she gets close.

I don't feel threatened...

Quite the opposite actually.

The closer and closer she gets the more I don't mind this odd invisible mist.

My smile matches hers and my All-Seeing Eye deactivates once she puts her arm around my shoulder.

"So, tell me something about yourself, Jay. Something I wouldn't know."

In a daze, I begin to speak.

"Something you wouldn't know? Well there's-"

I pause as I feel MP being drained from me...

I tighten my jaw and lurch back, realizing exactly what's going on. My poison resistance passive skill has kicked in, and it's nullifying the effects of something...

Everything clicks as I dart my eyes back and forth to see my teammates blissfully unaware of what's going on.

Charlotte's eyes meet mine, sharper than before. I reactivate my All-Seeing Eye to watch the light orange mana-imbued fig retract back into her body.

She takes her arm away from my shoulder and lets out a laugh.

"Well, I guess that answered my question, doesn't it? You are a unique bunch aren't ya? They wouldn't choose you all as the next elites at such a young age without good reason I guess..."

Leo smirks, and my teammates don't seem to realize what happened at all.

I keep my eyes locked on her, she speaks up again.

"I won't use that ability on you or your teammates, I promise. Sorry for the intrusion, I thought it'd be fun."

I turn to the silver-haired artificer and he shrugs.

"I knew you'd resist her charms. Well... I had a feeling at least, just wanted to see if you could. "

He laughs.

I swallow hard, then reply with a long sigh, sitting back in my chair.

They're just trying to have some fun...

I guess I shouldn't overreact too much, but I have too much at stake to be goofing around like this.

This was a good wake-up call. Although this little train ride and team reunion has been nice, once we make it over that wall, our time for leisure will be over.

There will be monsters trying to kill us at every turn. It's time to get serious...

Arie speaks up.

"Alright, I'm just going to ignore whatever that was... Let's stop wasting time. I want to get over that wall."

Maria chimes in.

"Me too, I want to test out my new skills on some real danger!"

Charlotte smiles, and I hear a train whistle blow in the background. She turns to Leo.

"That's your cue, there isn't another train for a few hours, you either take that one out of here or you're stranded in the bar with these fellas."

She points at the near-lifeless drunks, scattered throughout the desolate bar.

Leo gets up from his seat at that comment and begins walking to the door.

"Well, on that note I better be off. Char, be nice to them. You 4, good luck, bring me back some good loot!"

He smirks and kicks open the tavern door to catch the incoming train.

We're all left in silence.

The bartender continues.

"So, you all want to take a look at the other side of the wall? I can take you there now."

I stare at the swinging door as Leo walks away towards the train. Abby's voice snaps me out of it.

"Yeah, let's take a look. I've been itching to see what's on the other side since we got here."

Char replies.

"Perfect. Follow me, we're going for a short walk. It shouldn't take more than 10 minutes to get to the first viable entrance point."

She yells out to the older man running the small mini-mart at the front entrance of the tavern.

"Hey Dan, take care of the place. I'm taking the hunters out for a walk."

He gives her a firm nod but doesn't say a word.

Charlotte begins walking at a brisk pace toward the front door.

"Let go, no time to waste, one of the breaks is nearby. Maybe you'll all be able to take that one out by lunchtime."

I turn to all my teammate with a grin on my face. It seems like our monster hunting has about to begin.

We all get up from the table and follow the redheaded woman out the front door.

She takes a sharp left turn, following a small sandy dirt road away from town. Her steps are quick and nimble, much more agile and coordinated than she first lead on.

No more than 3 minutes pass and we're already hundreds of meters away from the small settlement of wooden buildings.

She calls out.

"Almost there, don't you worry."

I wipe sweat from my forehead and follow. Maria skips along by my side as Abby stares up at the high wall to our left side.

Arie follows behind with his arms crossed.

We're walking closer to the massive wall, but also making out way parallel to it. I don't see a gate or entrance in sight. All I can see for kilometers is an impossibly high stone wall...

Something has been off ever since we left the small city. I can feel small vibrations in the air. I activate my all Seeing eye.

The moment my skill activates, it all begins to make a bit more sense.

The wall is mana imbued... just slightly. Not nearly enough to fully pick up without my precision skill, but clear as day with it activated.

I whisper under my breath as my eyes follow the towering mana-shielded wall all the way to the horizon.

"How odd..."

Shielding like this would cost a fortune... and this wall was made 50 years ago....

I ponder the thought for a few minutes but give up on trying to figure it out once Charlotte's voice rings out from in front of us.

"Here we are. The entrance to Gate 1, Section 4."

We all come to a halt.

The desert air is dry, there's hardly a plant in sight, and the hot sun is beating down on the back of my neck is already burning my skin.

I blink, staring blankly at rungs of thin dark metal that create a ladder jutting off from the side of the wall all the way up to the top.

The corners of my mouth begin to curl and I let out a laugh followed by the chuckles of my teammates.

"This is the entrance... to the wall... ha!"

The orange-haired woman jumps up to grab one of the rungs and begins to climb quickly and gracefully.

"The real section 4 entrance hasn't been touched in decades. This is one of the only non-shielded portions of the wall that we can climb. Other than here, you'd be fried to ash the moment you got close. Come on, no more questions, follow me."

I smirk, then jump up to grab one of the metal rungs. The moment my hand touches it my skin feels like it's being seared on a hot pan.

I let go and curse under my breath, regenerating my hand behind my back.

Char calls out again.

"Oh yeah, and be careful. The bars are hot."

I activate my body hardening crystals to cover my palms. This makes holding the rungs a lot easier.

I follow the redhead upwards.

Maria activates her ice magic to do that same and follows behind me.

Abby similarly covers her hands with a layer of stone.

Arie grabs a pair of work gloves from his item storage.

I should have thought of that...

It's a long climb upwards. Even at our fast pace it still takes a few minutes to get to the top. I'm sweating and breathing heavily by the time we do.

The 5 of us look over the edge, and I can't believe the sight before my eyes.

Charlotte was right, the first dungeon break is nearby. It's right below us in fact.

Our mission in the Dark Continent has finally begun.

Chapter 203

I peer down into the desolate landscape behind the stone wall that blocks the dark continent from the rest of the world.

There are rolling hills of sand and jagged pillars of rock that stick out in seemingly random formations. Abandoned dirt roads lead off in all directions and the hint of civilization still lingers... barely...

I can feel the slight buzzing vibrations of a strong mana shield not too far away both on my left and right sides.

What Charolette said about the wall earlier makes sense. To keep monsters inside these walls, a very strong barrier needs to be built in place. I just don't understand how exactly this massive structure was made.

That'll be a question for another time I guess.

Looking out into the desert before me, I see multiple plumes of smoke way off in the distance, and approaching are smaller clouds of dust and sand.

Their movements are definitely not human, the amount of material being stirred up is way too large. They must be monsters.

I whisper under my breath.

"There's at least half a dozen monster's coming our way right now."

I smirk, looking down at the light golden brown dust clouds and swirling sand below. Activating my Inspect and Appraisal skills, I scope out the targets approaching right away. They're under 200 meters from us and incoming fast.

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 395]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +88% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Earth Summoning]

The closer I look, the clearer those 6 clouds of dust flying up into the air distinctively become. I smile, looking over at my teammates, I see their excited looks as well.

"Golems, I've never fought one of these before."

Arie reaches into his item box to take out his bow.

Maria's hands begin to glow light blue, while Abby's feet glow a deep emerald green.

The orange-haired bartender that led us out here speaks up in a cheerful tone after she lets out a chuckle.

"Well, you four look ready for battle already. I assume the Association received the copy of that map I sent over."

Abby nods, and Char continues.

"This is the closest break to the wall, there are no towns or people nearby. It was all abandoned years ago. This one should be one of the easiest breaks. Golems may be tricky at first, but once you get used to them they aren't much trouble to take out... Well... that's what some of the Elites that pass through have told me."

I nod, trying to get a good view of one of them, but the 40-meter drop and long distance are making it difficult to see.

Charlotte continues while pointing out into the desert.

"The break shouldn't be more than a kilometer or so that way. On a clear day, you can usually see the portal from atop the wall. This whole week the desert has been acting up. More sandstorms and dungeon breaks than ever before. The visibility has decreased a lot. I'm sure you'll all manage to find it though."

She smiles, crossing her arms as the ominous dust clouds get closer and closer to the base of the wall that we're standing on.

I look down, seeing no ladder on this side of the wall...

I could float us all down with my wind magic, but I'm not looking to do that with the Association's charming lookout right behind me.

Abby speaks up.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Enough sitting around, let's go kill some monsters!"

She jumps off the side of the wall without a moment of hesitation and begins to glow bright green.

My eyes widen as I watch stone materialize beneath her feet. A floating staircase leads downwards behind her as she gracefully jumps from step to step.

"Follow me, I've learned a few tricks since we all fought together. It's time to show off!"

Maria lets out a laugh and jumps off the high ledge as well, following closer behind on Abby's staircase of stone.

Arie smirks and jumps after them, making his way down to the desert floor too.

I turn to Charlotte and she nods, giving me a word of goodbye.

"Best of luck down there. Come on back to the tavern whenever you all need a break. I'm sure there's lodging in some of the smaller towns deeper into the Dark Continent. Staying there will make your travels easier, but my bar is always open to ya if you need to come back! May your hunt be bountiful!"

I give her a firm nod, then jump off the wall to land on the first stone step made by Abby's Advanced Earth Summoning.

"Appreciate it. We'll be back before you know it!"

I turn and follow my team downward while reaching into my item box and pulling out my flaming sword.

I sense the stone staircase rumbling behind me. I turn my head to watch it begin disintegrating just a few meters from my steps, giving me just enough room for comfortable strides.

I think to myself as I make my way down.

Materializing stairs like this is a neat trick, I'll have to test out something similar with my own earth magic soon.

Bursting into flames, I run down the steps and make it all the way to the desert floor mere seconds later.

The 4 of us land on the ground with a thud. I look forward, activating my enemy detection skill to scope out the monsters ahead.

The wide grins can be found across all of our faces. It feels like forever since I've been in a real battle. This is going to be good.

[60m]

[60m]

[100m]

[100m]

[150m]

[170m]

I call out.

"They'll be attacking in groups of 2. Let's split up and take them out. Then, we'll make a game plan for the actual break."

A unanimous firm nod is my response as Maria and Abby start running towards the enemies without a moment of pause.

I watch the green-haired healer take out two Black daggers, then they begin to glow to match her aura.

Maria takes out a long thin silver sword, one I've never seen before.

It begins to glisten and glow a similar color to her ice magic...

I use Appraisal on the two items out of curiosity.

[Enchanted Daggers [Q]][Earth Aspect][+89% Strength][+81% Agility][+81% Speed]

[Enchanted Long Sword [Q]][Ice Aspect][+93% Strength][+79% Agility][+79% Speed]

I do a double take, but it's exactly as expected. They've managed to get element-imbued weapons, most likely a treat from the Director. Their stats are pretty good, almost on par with some of my gear. The only thing that I'm unsure of is that "[Q]" marking on both of them...

The girl's blue and green auras grow brighter and brighter as I watch the ground ripple beneath Abby's feet and the sand and air around Maria freeze solid, leaving a 5m wide path of pure glistening ice behind her.

Arie looks over to me, drawing his bow and creating a thin white arrow. I activate my All-Seeing Eye and am thoroughly surprised by the precision at which it is being summoned.

His unique skill allows him to draw "Spirit imbued Mana" just like my fire magic has "Fire or Elemental imbued Mana". It's formed into a dense and thin arrow with similar qualities to the attacks I release from my sword and dagger.

It's hard to tell its exact power from just a glance, but if I had to guess... It seems to be thin and dense enough to break through a Berserker's shielding.

This is most likely not his full power... Was he hiding his strength before? Was I too weak to tell? Or was his training that intense...?

Arie speaks up.

"Hey, you ready?"

I shake my head, then smirk, igniting my entire body into a dark ball of dark fire.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

We both turn and run toward the approaching dust clouds with our eyes locked on the towering shadows of the approaching enemies.

I know they're golems... I've even read about these creatures before...

Massive stone semi-humanoid creatures without a soul. The power within them must come from their cores. I'm betting on that being their weak spot. Other than that, this is completely new territory for me.

I've never seen one before. I thought my first golem encounter would be in a dungeon, but I guess I'll be facing them out here in the real world.

My battle-ready smile grows as I begin to hear and feel the rumbling sound of large beasts approaching.

The first two massive monsters begin to finally come into my visual range.

[18m]

[20m]

Maria and Abby lunge straight into battle 10m ahead of us. My gaze begins to rise upwards as the monsters we're about to face finally come into full view.

This is it...

Our first team battle in the Dark Continent is getting started.

Chapter 204

Our first battle in the Dark Continent is getting started.

The hard sand-covered ground feels like it's rumbling beneath my feet. The cloud of golden brown dust in front of us grows larger and larger until one of the monsters finally shows itself...

My gaze lifts upwards as Abby and Maria charge at the beast that finally reveals its form.

A pair of dark orange glowing eyes is the first thing that I see appear through the cloud of sand, then a 2-meter-thick arm of stone reaches out to hit the ground by the two girls' feet with a ground-cracking thud.

Unlike the armor of the Behemoth I fought recently, the stone covering this beast's body is part of its being. I watch the rest of the monster come out from its veil of sand.

A massive stone humanoid figure comes stomping out.

The sound of stones scraping together fills my ears while I watch the 6-meter-tall monster let out a roar. It lunges forward.

Glowing lines of dark orange energy begin to shine brightly around its chest.

They look like pulsing veins of mana that spread all throughout its body. Their energy frequency gets lighter and lighter the further from its midsection they travel.

I whisper under my breath as I watch Abby create floating stone stairs upwards gripping her daggers. The summoned rocks disintegrate the moment her feet leave them.

My eyes are locked on the orange light within the golem.

"That must be its core..."

Maria runs around its left side and her sword begins to glow a much darker blue.

The orange eyes of this monster track both of the girls at once. Its face shows a gruesome beast-like expression made out of sand and stone.

It's an imitation of a human's face, but distorted and constantly shifting as it moves around the battlefield with slow yet powerful thrusts of its arms and legs.

Abby jumps up at the monster with her black blades now glowing green, while Maria starts swinging her sword upwards from below.

My eyes open wide as I watch 3 crescents of energy erupt from their weapons.

Two green beams of light come shooting from Abby's daggers while a thick blue blade of ice comes from Maria's sword.

I grin, letting out an impressed laugh as the attacks hit the monster's shoulder and lower leg.

An explosion of rock and ice fills my vision, then the sound of a familiar metallic clang fills my ears.

Arie and I jump backward while watching the dust clouds erupt upwards, then slowly settle.

The attacks they let loose were powerful, but far from refined at all... It seems Maria and Abby are in their brute force phase of mana control training.

The roar of the first golem sounds out and I see the orange glow of its eyes shine brighter. The sand and rock residue in the air starts to fall back into the monster's injured arm and leg.

Its limbs were completely blown off in the attack, but it's able to reform any part of its body at will.

Abby and Maria are way ahead of the curve. Both of them have drunk MP potions and are already charging up another attack.

I watch the ground around the monster ripple.

This is Abby's magic, not the golem's.

Heavy mana-imbued stone holds its legs in place, and Maria launches an attack at its torso.

A metallic twang and explosion of ice forces out a frustrated roar of agony from the massive monster stuck in place. Stone flies in all directions as Abby releases her own dual attack into its weakened torso.

Another metallic twang of mana on mana followed by flying stone and a bright explosion of orange energy concludes this battle.

It's over already...

In a dazzling display of bright blue and green light, the mighty stone desert golem is blown to pieces.

I watch a shattered black orb fall from the monster's mid-section and its eyes fade from their fiery glowing orange hue to a pair of dull grey lifeless round stones.

The remains of a fierce monster crumble to the ground, leaving nothing but sand and stone in its place.

With no time to waste, an identical golem comes charging in from a nearby dust cloud and both Abby and Maria take it on without a moment to think.

I stare in awe for a moment, then Arie elbows me in the side.

"They really have grown a lot already, haven't they?"

He smirks, and I nod. The archer points off to the other clouds of dust and sand approaching. Two pairs of glowing orange eyes can be seen from a distance.

"Come on, those two are ours. Let's take 'em out."

Without another word, the two of us begin running toward the pair of golems with our weapons drawn. Arie summons an arrow and I charge my sword.

I'll only use 300MP for this monster. With the density and control of my attacks, more would be overkill.

Activating my All-Seeing Eye and we run closer to the beasts, letting our attacks fly.

The monstrous slow-moving golems activate their shielding moments before impact, but my thin black crescent of flames glides right through its chest without any resistance.

I watch the thin white arrow shot from Arie's bow glide through the brightest point of the golem's core right next to mine.

Before we're even 15 meters away from the two colossal monsters of stone, their roars have stopped and their circular glowing cores have gone cold.

Both creatures of golden-brown sand and stone crumble to the ground. The dust clouds dissipate while Arie and I keep running forward. With eyes locked on the final two golems, the end of this battle is in sight.

As I pass the rubble of the monsters we just took out, my eyes catch a glimpse of the leftover pieces of the glossy black core. Using my Appraisal skill, I scan it as we pass.

[Shattered Golem's Core]

Its mental strength boosting stat is gone, along with the [Enchanted] tag and its [Sand] description.

Without a dungeon for the mana material to absorb back into, I wonder how drops will work out here. They may just completely dissolve once the break is cleared... Or maybe a percentage of them will stay in solid form.

In time, I'll find out.

Looking back up to the action, I see Maria and Abby both finish up their last golem and join us on our run toward the final two.

Each of us glows green, blue, white, and dark red as we charge at the monsters.

Once within range, the orange eyes of the final two golems give us a clear target to strike. With wind in my hair and the excitement of a new adventure ahead, I let an attack fly.

All of my teammates do the same.

Releasing a wave of mana at the two approaching golems, we all celebrate early, knowing these beasts never stood a chance.

A moment later, after a flash of blue and green light, both of the golems are torn to shreds, then finished off by a thin white arrow and a dark crescent of flames.

Before the monsters are even within full view, they crumble to the floor and the dust of our first team battle settles.

I slow my run down to a light jog, then even more into a slow walk. Eventually, we all come to a halt and the swirling dust around us clears to reveal the wide open desert.

Arie stops right beside me and throws his bow back into his item box. I do the same with my sword after sending out an enemy detection pulse to make sure we're all in the clear.

There's not a single being within over 500 meters of us, we're safe for a while.

I let out a sigh and take in the empty desert view as Abby and Maria approach. The blond-haired ice magic user yells out in an excited tone.

"That was awesome!!! More, more! Let's go find that break!"

I smile, responding as both of them slow down and come to a stop.

"I agree, moving onto the break next is a good plan. We've all improved a lot... but this is just the beginning."

Abby nods firmly and chimes in, pulling out the roughly drawn map.

"You're right. This break is labeled number 1, the weakest of all 6. Let's collect these broken cores, then head out to clear the boss room."

We all reply with a firm nod, then Arie points to the map.

"It looks like there's a small settlement we can visit afterward too, it's not far. I know this portion of desert like the back of my hand. We'll be entering The Sun Scorched Flats over the next few days. Our last break looks like it's near a city named Solara."

He stares out into the rolling sandy hills.

"I guess all of you will get to see my hometown sooner than I thought."

Chapter 205

The 4 of us backtrack and collect all the shattered black cores from the fallen golems. Their bodies of rock and sand have not disappeared at all.

They're just laying in chunks and piles all over the desert floor. It's been close to 10 minutes now, so that confirms my theory that the monsters that die out here won't dissolve until the Dungeon collapses.

The cores from the monsters that Abby and Maria took on are blown to pieces. The two of that Ari and I faced solo seem to still almost be in a fully salvageable state.

They're made of a hard black glossy crystal-like material. It glistens in the mid-day sun as I pick one of them up to examine at a closer range.

The core is palm-sized, and about 3kg. It's pretty heavy and feels like it's about to fall apart if I hold it any longer.

I throw the fragments of one of the cores into my item box, and Aire does the same with his.

Abby and Maria collect the larger fragments of the other golems and store them in their item boxes as well. We might as well grab everything we can get, these fragments may be valuable if they don't dissolve once the dungeon collapses.

Abby speaks up.

"Alright, let's all head to the break!"

I activate Enemy Detection and start to sense more monsters in the direction Abby points. They're approaching fast, in groups of 3-6.

I reach back into my item box to pull out my flaming sword, then think about throwing on my armor...

It's not necessary for these battles yet, but it wouldn't hurt to be prepared for the boss if it's a high-level mutant.

I speak up before we leave, pulling out my bonded set of lightweight armor.

"Hey, one second. Let me throw this new armor on."

Maria's eyes light up and she walks over while I fit the gear to my chest and arms.

"These are nice, where'd you buy them? The Association shop? Or was it a rare drop? Or..?"

I smirk, clicking the last silver piece onto my forearm, letting a few hundred mana points flow through the entire bonded set.

"It was a labyrinth drop, I got it in a boss room while training this week."

Arie joins the conversation.

"Nice set, you'll have to show me around the capital labyrinth when we get back."

I nod, then he points to Abby already making her way into the open desert.

"Come on, let's go."

The 3 of us follow, continuing our trek through the desert. According to Abby's calculations, the break is about 1.5km northeast of us.

The closer we get, the more enemies I spot on my radar.

They can be tracked by eye once they come within 200 meters or so. The visibility was alright up on top of the wall, but the rising and falling hill of the desert landscape make it harder to see where we were headed.

I'm relying on Abby's sense of direction and double-checking it by following the higher-density areas of enemies nearby.

We run into another few groups of golems on the way, but easily take them out. Every enemy ranges from levels 394-396. Even fighting one on one, all 4 of us can take the golems out on our own without a problem.

By the time we reach the portal, I have 6 full cores worth of fragments in my item box.

Maria calls out from beside Abby up front.

"That's it! I see it, the break!"

We climb up a final sandy hill and I see it as clear as day. There's a large dark red swirling portal of mana-imbued transport magic.

As we stare, more stone golems pour out.

The sound of stone scraping stone fills my ears as they step into our world.

The 4 of us jump down the hill and take out the final group in a matter of seconds, then jump through the blood-red gate.

Once inside, I look around to notice the landscape of the golem dungeon. The ground is hard stone, the exact same light brown color as the monsters we've been fighting.

There's a bright blue sky above and raised plateaus of rock walls and deep valleys for as far as the eye can see.

What puts a smile on my face is the approaching hoards of golems, unaware that they'll soon meet their end.

Using Inspect and Enemy Detection I scope out the area.

My teammates get situated and take in the view as well.

Just like the monsters outside, mostly all the golems in here seem to be around level 395. Although, closer to the back of the boss room, I sense two readings well over level 400.

It's odd though....

My Inspect skill labels each of them with a singular level while my Enemy Detection skill refers to these monsters as multiple enemies.

I'll have to face them and scan with my All-Seeing Eye to get a better sense of what's going on.

The 4 of us make our way through the unique landscape for over an hour.

For the large portions of deep valleys and canyons where it would take too long to walk down, Abby leads the way creating her floating stairs that crumble behind us.

I could give it a try myself, but she seems very content as the navigational leader right now. There's no need to show off just yet.

I'm waiting eagerly for the Mutants and Boss to come.

As we get closer and closer, the incoming golems get stronger. They're not powerful enough to put up a great fight yet, but their levels are nearing 400.

Another oddity I've found is that these golems dissolve back into the stone ground after they're defeated, even the shattered cores. None of the 2 dozen monsters that we've defeated so far have dropped a single item either.

Finally, an hour into our trek, we make it to a point of very open flat land. There's a massive structure of orange-brown stone to our left and a ravine to our right.

Peering downward, I can't even see the bottom.

We come to a halt and I take out some water to give to everyone in the group.

Arie looks down into the darkness below with me, then turns around.

"We're about halfway there right?"

Abby chimes in.

"Yep!"

I nod, picking up a few readings with my skills active in the background.

[1200m]

[Lv. 409]

[Lv. 408]

The distance between us and these final enemies is about the same as the distance we've already traveled into this dungeon so far. Between us and the mutants, there are about 40 more golems coming our way.

I kick a rock down into the empty pit below.

After waiting a few seconds, and hearing no impact with any ground, I speak up.

"There's two mutants about a kilometer away. If I had to guess, they're in front of the boss room."

We continue our short break and take out the golems that block our path. Not a single one of them drops an item.

The 4 of us are definitely over-leveled for this break, but it's a good warm-up for what's to come. Finally, after nearly two hours in this mid-grade C-Class dungeon, the action finally begins.

[100m]

[Lv. 409]

[Lv. 408]

The flat ground we're been trekking on for over a kilometer makes a steep drop off and a cliff falls down below us.

We peer over the edge, and the mutants I've been waiting for show their faces nearly 50 meters below.

As we walk to the edge of the cliff, two sets of bright orange eyes lock onto us.

These beasts are over 7 meters tall each and are made from much darker-looking stone. It seems to be stained orange from the energy coming out of its core.

The small cracks and gaps in their bodies of stone shine bright with mana-imbued energy.

Their faces look even more gruesome than their minions, and I can hear the light buzz of mana in the air from here.

Their shielding is already activated even though we haven't thrown a single attack.

Right behind them is a dark grey swirling boss room portal.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye, and everything begins to make a lot more sense....

The reason my readings showed 2 enemies per mutant is because they each have two cores.

Clear as day, with my perception skill active I can see a glowing orange core in each monster's forehead and chest.

"How interesting...."

Arie smirks and charges up an arrow, releasing it with great precision down at one of the golems below.

I watch as it collides with the shielding in front of this golem's chest. There's a flash of white light and an explosion of stone that obliterates the core. Rock fragments are sent flying in all directions and a cloud of dust hides the two figures from view.

He crosses his arms, but I watch attentively through the debris with my All-Seeing Eye on full blast.

As the rock and dust clear from the air, the scattered stone begins to reform and the golem stands up to its feet without a scratch on its exterior.

The monster is completely healed, despite its core being shattered to bits.

I take a closer look to see the energy in its forehead's core pulse brightly. My gaze drops down to its chest and the pieces of dead black core fragments come back together.

Its chest starts to glow orange again. Seconds later, both cores are as good as new.

It lets out a murderous roar, taunting us to come down and face it.

I let out a laugh, then turn to the archer.

"Good shot, but it looks like it's going to take a bit more than that to take out these Mutants."

As soon as I finish my sentence, the swirling mass of mana behind the two monsters pulses to let out an eerie wave of energy. It can only be picked up by my All-Seeing Eye.

Soon after, the Boss Room portal turns a slightly darker shade of grey.

Chapter 206

I watch the Boss Room portal turn a darker shade of grey after the eerie energy pulses out from it. I can't feel it, but my All-Seeing Eye picks up a reading of a nearly invisible mana shoot out in all directions.

More importantly, there are two Mutant Golems guarding the boss room portal with dual cores.

The landscape below is less dry and flat than up here. Small green and yellow shrubs grow out from the bases of high orange rock structures scattered along the desert floor. A bright blue sky shines bright behind them in all directions.

Arie's last shot just confirmed that if both cores in the mutants aren't broken, these monsters can regenerate back up to their full unaltered forms using just one.

That's my best guess.

I look over to my teammates, then ignite my sword into flames. The rest of them all activate their active battle skills and we all jump from the high ledge down into action.

Both of the vicious-looking monsters watch us fall, and they let out roars that vibrate through the air.

Abby activates her earth magic for Maria and Arie to use as stepping stones while I free-fall with my eyes locked on the two now-approaching Golems.

Less than 5 meters from the ground, I decide to activate some of my un-tested combat magic.

If necessary, I can use my wind magic to slow my descent, but I know it won't be a problem. Although I haven't used these skills much yet, I can feel what they're capable of.

Activating my Earth magic, along with Mana Manipulation I easily liquefy the ground below me.

In my perception, with my All-Seeing Eye skill active, the ground below me looks like a bright white and pink glowing malleable form of pure mana to shape into whatever my heart desires.

To anyone looking from the outside, the orange rock below me rises up in the shape of two thin pillars to touch the soles of my boots. The mana-imbued stone collides with my feet and instantly begins to climb up my legs as I fall to the floor.

Instead of a loud thud and the cracking of stone, my impact is silent.

The energy from the fall disperses across the stone floor and it ripples as the orange rock melts off my legs back into the ground below.

I deactivate my two combat skills, stomping on the ground with my right foot to make sure it's really solid. The dust and sand that flies up confirm my answer.

I turn toward the two mutants to see they've already shortened the distance between us considerably.

I use Appraisal on the closest one.

Active Items:

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +91% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +91% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Earth Summoning]

Above, Arie jumps in to join as I run at the monster charging in.

Both of its cores glow brightly.

The layer of shielding over its head and chest thickens as it makes the ground shake with every step.

The glowing orange eyes match its core. Fragments of rock float in the air around it shifting and reforming into its arms and legs as it gains more and more speed.

I charge my sword and let out a 500MP attack aimed at its chest. Arie charges this bow up for a few seconds, then lets a white arrow fly, shooting at the monster's forehead.

The moment we release our shots, the mana shielding around the beast's weak points gets denser. The orange energy all throughout its body retracts to protect its power sources.

The massive body of stone shrinks. Its arms and legs get shorter and chunks of rock fall away as it focuses its energy elsewhere.

Both attacks make contact with its newly improved shielding. Mine glides through, being much too dense and thin to be bothered by the increased power of its defense.

Arie's arrow collides just like before letting off a bright white light and throwing stone chunks off in all directions before destroying the core.

The golem's lifeless body crumbles to the floor and shatters into hundreds of smaller pieces by our feet. Two black shattered orbs roll to the ground as well.

Behind the monster we just defeated, Abby and Maria take on the second Mutant. I'm curious to see how their attacks will hold up against this slightly stronger shielding.

They run in glowing bright, but don't go in straight for the offensive at first.

Maria runs around the slow-moving golem's feet, summoning thick layers of cold magic to hold it in place. Large blue walls of ice grow larger and larger as the orange glow coming off the monster's head gets increasingly brighter.

While holding the golem in place, she charges an attack up in her sword, glowing darker blue and preparing for the best moment to strike.

Abby runs in, jumping from summoned stone to stone, gracefully making her way through the air toward the beast. She activates her Earth magic. I watch the face of the Mutant Totem begin to bend and shift.

The shoulders and neck of the beast start to liquefy as Abby temporarily takes control of the monster made of stone.

The dark orange creature made from stone strains its body to move, focusing its energy on the affected areas of Abby's Magic. It's struggling to gain back control while the green-haired hunter exposes its weak points.

Maria takes her opportunity to let out a dark blue crescent of ice-imbued mana straight at both of the glowing cores.

Both of them jump backward to avoid the white and blue flash of light that follows. I cover my face with my left arm to shield myself from the incoming debris.

Fragments of stone and shattered cores rain from the sky, while Abby and Maria walk out from the settling dust without a single scratch on them.

The Ice Wielder speaks up while powering down her sword.

"Those Mutants were pretty strong, I almost had to use my full power!"

Abby twirls her Daggers and agrees.

"Yeah, I can tell they didn't have Advanced Earth Magic from the start. Even so, their mana control compensates for it."

I raise an eyebrow and the green-haired healer continues.

"A higher level of mana control can overpower any skill if it's strong enough, even if it's an upgraded version of it."

I nod slowly, as this makes sense, but I never really gave it much thought...

Abby turns to the portal, then it pulses again.... Another wave of mana comes out and runs through all of our bodies.

It doesn't feel like anything, just like last time. It can't be perceived with any normal senses. The portal behind the approaching girls gets slightly darker.

The 4 of us regroup and try to collect the fallen fragments of cores left behind by the two mutants. Unfortunately, they dissolve into the rocky dungeon floor.

"Still... no drops..."

I turn to the twisting grey boss room portal in the middle of the rocky desert, then back to my team.

"Ready to clear our first dungeon break?"

With a resounding yes from all of my teammates, we waste no more time and jump through.

The 4 of us activate our active combat skills and charge our weapons, ready to fight.

Once transported through the boss room portal, anything can happen.

We'll be facing a Mutant Boss.

Once through, a dry heat wave hits me and I activate my Enemy Detection, Inspect, and Appraisal skills while squinting to try and take in the view.

The sky is bright white and the ground beneath my feet feels like it hasn't felt rain in years.

My eyes adjust to the light, and I see the readings my skills have picked up in my mind's eye.

[100m]

[Lv. 443]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +105% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +105% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core] +105% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Sand Golem's Core][Bonded] +120% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Earth Summoning]

"It has, four cores...."

Chapter 207

"It has, four cores...."

My eyes adjust to the overly bright Boss Room light and see the readings my data collection skills have gathered.

The final boss is 100m meters away. It's level 443 and it has 4 cores, one of which is [Bonded].

I'm not entirely sure what this additional detail means, but I do know is we have a monster to defeat. This is our first of many Boss rooms that I'm looking forward to this week.

The 4 of us run forward into the blinding light ahead.

I speak up as the landscape comes into view.

"The boss is straight ahead, it has 4 cores! Let's split up and take each one of them out together from all sides!"

Abby and Maria run off to my left and right while Arie trails behind me to take the rear.

Even after my eyes adjust, the sky above is blindingly white, and the ground below my feet is made of dark orange rock and sand. There isn't a plant in sight. There are rolling hills and a few rock structures in the distance, but overall the room seems pretty plain.

This makes finding the Golem much easier.

The Boss Monster in question shows its face Immediately, growing up from the orange stone glow below I watch a towering 8-meter-tall beast materialize from the Dunegon floor.

The sound of rocks scraping together fills my ears and its lifeless eyes stare us down filled with a desire to kill.

I feel the air pressure shift all around us and the buzzing sensation of mana tickles my bones as an ear-shattering roar fills the room.

The massive humanoid creature, made entirely of stone charges forward leaving mountains of stone in its wake. With every step it takes, the monster absorbs more dungeon material and leaves excess behind.

I can clearly make out the 4 cores, even without my All Seeing eye activated.

There's one it is forehead glowing bright orange, and two on the back of each hand matching its hue.

The 4th one in its chest is much different than the others... It pulses light pink, emanating pure mana rather than the orange-imbued energy from the other 3.

This must be the [Bonded] core.

Seconds later, the monster is less than 20 meters away and readying its first attack. The Golem casts a dark shadow over us even from this distance.

I charge up my sword with a 1000MP strike. There's no reason to go easy on this beast, overkill is the best option.

With a swift swing of my sword, the black flaming crescent flies straight for its chest.

My teammates let out their mana-imbued strikes as well. Abby and Maria aim for the monster's palms while Arie takes a clear shot at its forehead.

As the monster takes its first right-handed swing at the 4 of us, our strikes make an impact with its body of stone.

Bright flashes of blue and green light expand quickly, and the sound of mana shielding being ripped to shreds fills my ears.

I watch my attack slice the main core straight in two without a problem, and Arie's arrow pierces its forehead too.

The massive beast crumbles to bits. Chunks of orange stone fly all over and I track its shattered cores with my All-Seeing Eye.

Each one of them is broken into hundreds of tiny pieces and the once-powerful Desert Golem Boss is no more.

It didn't even get a chance to follow through on its first swing...

The dust clears and the 4 of us get a good look at the rubble. This monster was a much higher level than all of us, so I'm patiently waiting for some kind of level-up notification, but one never comes.

"Something isn't right...."

We all slowly walk over to the pile of stone cautiously. Maria speaks up from 5 meters to my left time.

"We hit all of its cores right....?"

I nod, creeping closer and scanning the area with my perception skill. It isn't picking up a single reading, but there's definitely something wrong here.

"We did..."

Abby starts moving stones around with her earth magic, finding pieces of some of the shattered black cores on the ground.

"They're definitely broken, what are we missing?"

I tighten my gaze, then begin to hear a light hum from a rock pile on my right side.

I turn around and pick up a dense mana reading right before a massive stone arm forms from the ground and comes flying toward me with a dense white and pink mana shield surrounding it.

Immediately, I raise my sword to block it.

A loud twang of mana on mana echoes from our clash as I'm pushed backward by the sheer force of its blow.

I plant my feet and hold it off as I watch the entire Stone Golem reform from the ground before my eyes.

I burst back into flames and air step backward to face the beast again. I mutter under my breath as I focus on getting a safe distance away.

"I knew this wasn't going to be that easy..."

The white and pink core in its chest is sucking energy up from the dungeon floor, recharging and healing it back to its original form.

Just like the mutants we faced earlier, the shattered cores nearby all begin to shift back to their sphere shapes and roll toward the body of the newly formed stone golem.

The Boss is as good as new and lets out another roar to prove it.

Its eyes shine pink, tinted orange by the energy from its other reforming cores while swinging both of its arms around in a wide circle covered in a thin layer of mana shielding.

All of my teammates go back into full attack mode again.

I yell out.

"We'll take it out again! I'll isolate its main core, that's its weak point. You all go for the other 3! I have an idea..."

Without a word of response, my teammates attack the rapidly growing golem.

Its broken cores have all been entirely mended themselves and positioned back onto the monster's hands of stone and the center of its forehead above the glowing eyes filled with a murderous glare.

I land on the rocky floor about 15 meters away and plant my feet while keeping my eyes locked on its main pink glowing core.

While watching the blue, green, and white shots of energy collide with its body I propelled myself forward using wind magic to gain more and more speed aiming straight for the monster's chest.

Instead of releasing an attack to destroy its final core, I replicate the style of magic Abby used on the Mutants outside the Boss Room portal.

Activating my Advanced Earth Summoning, and focusing on the stone around the remaining pink core, separating the surrounding dark orange stone.

The closer I get, the easier it is to control the rock surrounding it. I can feel a pull from the monster, trying to regain its dominance, but its mana control is far too weak to compete with my own.

Especially with its other 3 cores destroyed.

A 2-meter-wide hole in its now-liquefied chest allows me to fly through to grab the pink glowing sphere, tearing it from the enormous stone body.

It buzzes violently as I hit the ground and activate my plundering skill.

Dense pink and white mana seeps out for the palm-sized crystal and fills my MP bar to full as the creature made from stone collapses to the ground.

[Level Up]

The familiar ringing sound in my head notifies me that it's staying down for good this time around.

The Golems core is still in my left hand.

It's mostly clear now, but is tinted orange and pink from the residual mana and artificial sunlight from above.

Blue text floats above it.

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-423

[YES][NO]

My eyes open wide for a moment, then I look up to see my teammates running over to me. Abby is the first to call out.

"Looks like you've picked up a few new tricks during your training too."

I toss the clear crystal core up and down in my hand a few times, then decide using my Temporary Minion perk right now is not the best plan...

I look up to the green-haired healer and reply.

"Yeah, looks like we have a skill in common."

Abby was the first hunter to ever learn about my unique skill. We haven't talked about it much since... It's kind of refreshing to hear someone say something about it out loud without accusing me of something.

She gives me a firm nod and a light smile as both Maria and Arie come walking over.

Fragments of the other 3 black and dead cores begin to dissolve into the dungeon floor, but the crystal ball in my hand remains.

Bright white transfer magic light blinds us, and before we can react, the 4 of us are back in the middle of the open desert.

Arie is the first to speak up.

"We've cleared the first break. That was... easy enough... If I'm not mistaken our next one is off in that direction."

The dark-haired archer points deeper into the desert while Abby takes out the small map and tries to look for landmarks to pinpoint our location.

She nods.

"Yeah, it's pretty far out! This trek could take us all day..."

He responds, crossing his arms.

"Perfect. It's not on that map, but there's a small village on our way if we take a quick detour. I recommend we stop there for the night."

Chapter 208

"Perfect. It's not on that map, but there's a small village on our way if we take a quick detour. I recommend we stop there for the night."

While Arie speaks about this mysterious village, I stare down at the clear crystal ball in my left hand.

The blue text from earlier still glows over it in my mind's eye...

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-423

[YES][NO]

Maria looks over at me while my gaze stays glued to the palm-sized sphere gem. I finally raise my head as she speaks up.

"Looks like there was at least one item drop from the boss!"

The blond-haired ice user reaches into her item box, pulling out the black fragments of broken core from our earlier defeated golems.

The moment they touch the air, the black crystal fragments begin dissolving into nothingness. I activate my perception skill to watch the tiny mana particles disperse into the air.

I drop my sword into the sand and do the same, while my other teammates check their item boxes too. All of the black fragments of cores dissolve before our eyes.

All that remains is the empty clear crystal core from the boss. I turn it over in my hand a few times, then look up to my teammates.

"Well, at least we got something out of the first break. Mind if I hold onto this core?"

I get a reply of 3 simultaneous nods, then Arie starts looking out into the desert again.

"1 down, 5 to go. Let's start moving before it gets too late."

I throw the core into my item storage while putting my sword and armor back into the item box around my waist. Later, I'll have to take a closer look at this new item.

We venture further into the open desert wasteland.

The mountains far off in the distance seem to get larger with every step we take. The further in we get, the farther away they seem.

All of the abandoned twisting roads and remains of human-made structures are now non-existent this far out in the desert.

They were much more common closer to the wall.

We travel straight ahead for 2 full hours.

Maria and I follow Abby and the archer as they take the lead up front. All of us continuously drink from my water supply, but with the heavy sun above forcing sweat from our pores, each new bottle never seems like enough.

It's a good thing I have over a 60-day supply of food and water on me. For the 4 of us, it should be more than enough to last the week.

Arie speaks up as we take another break under one of the few light brown rock structures left in the rapidly flattening desert plane we walk across.

"I know it's far, but we're almost a quarter of the way through."

I choke on my water, looking up at him while sitting on the sandy ground under a shady portion of cover.

"A quarter of the way through?? We've been walking for hours-"

He smiles.

"They don't call these the sun-scorched flats for nothing. It'll get even hotter once we get to the center. Don't worry though, it'll be worth it."

Once we continue, Abby and I take turns creating barriers of stone above the four of our heads to block out the incredibly hot sun.

The MP used is minimal compared to the energy exertion it'd take to handle this heat.

Even with my fire aptitude, natural heat from the sun still takes a toll on my skin and bodily systems. Even for awakened hunters like us, some things are still a challenge.

We continue onward.

As Arie warned us, the sand beneath our feet and the sun overhead does get much hotter. Drinking MP potions and chugging water we make it through. The archer doesn't seem to be phased by the heat one bit.

Abby is toughing it out, and I am too. Maria starts to glow blue nearby, giving off a cool refreshing aura.

About 4 more hours pass and we've hit the hottest portion of the desert.

The sun beats down on us from above, and it feels like the sky is on fire. Every time the blazing sun touches my skin I swear I can feel it sizzle.

Thankfully, by now we have our system all worked out. With shade from the rock above and the cool melting ice below from Maria's magic, our traveling situation has actually become quite comfortable.

"Just a few hours left, this is the hottest it'll get! The village is nearby, I'm sure of it! Although, the landscape has changed out here a bit..."

I look ahead, seeing the rippling waves of heat distort my view of the desert ahead, so I activate my All-Seeing Eye to get an unaltered view.

As soon as I do, I sense an approaching mass of pure mana coming our way.

It isn't very close, but it's not what I expected to pick up on my radar.

I activate my Enemy Detection skill along with Inspect and Appraisal, reaching them as far out as they can all go.

The abilities pick up a reading that puzzles me at first glance.

[1100m]

[Lv. 256]

Active items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Something or someone is approaching fast. From what I can tell, it seems like this is a monster... all the way out here...

I speak up in a serious tone.

"Hey. There's a monster approaching, and it has fire magic... Level 250 or so. There's nothing else in sight, it's just one."

The archer nods while Abby holds our cover of stone magic overhead and Maria silently takes the rear.

Arie responds.

"Well, it's coming from where we're headed. So we'll have to take it out either way. Maybe the break has already gotten worse."

We continue forward for a few minutes, and the reading I picked up comes closer and closer until I can see it with my un-aided eyes.

The creature kicks up dust as it charges toward us. With light red skin and beady black eyes, waving its long flaming tail back and forth, I watch a 3-meter-long salamander run straight at us with a look of determination on its face.

I go to grab my sword but stop as I hear Arie laugh.

"This far out? One of these... Really?"

The archer pulls back his bow and lets a barely charged thin white arrow fly out at the fast-approaching beast.

It glides directly through its head and the monster collapses skidding to a halt at our feet. The flame on its tail flickers out and the lifeless body of a unique-looking monster sits still in the middle of the open desert.

We wait for a few minutes, confirming that the monster isn't going to dissolve anytime soon. We leave it on the desert floor.

Once this next break is taken care of, it'll disappear anyways.

We continue to walk deeper and deeper into the hot wavering air of the desert for 2 more hours.

Until finally, I see green...

I rub my eyes a few times to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Through the wavering heat waves of the desert.

I really do see green....

Every time I blink, and re-focus my vision it's still there.

Activating my Enemy detection and expanding its range, I'm in for another surprise as I pick up on over 100 readings. They range from single-digit levels to triple digits rivaling my own.

"This must be it. There's... a village ahead, and a lot of people too..."

Maria peaks out from behind me to squint and take a look too.

"Ohh! I see trees! And- is that? People! And buildings! We made it!"

Arie smirks while Abby takes in the view ahead, making a comment as well.

"I guess it was worth the wait. You were right..."

As we walk forward, a small desert town comes into full view. With kids playing on the sandy roads and vendors with tents and tables set up leading all the way to the center of the village.

There's a whole community of people living out here in the desert.

High dome-shaped buildings can be seen in the background, maybe 2-3 stories tall with orange and blue painted markings on their roofs.

Most of the houses that surround these larger buildings are small and made from desert stone with minimal wood and orange fabrics.

There aren't more than 3 dozen buildings in total.

Off to the back side of the town, there's a small stone well with shrubbery and trees nearby. It has a crowd of villagers and children around it patiently waiting their turn for water.

No one has noticed us approaching just yet.

Arie turns to us.

"First impressions are everything in places like this. Follow me, and don't do or say anything stupid."

Chapter 209

We approach the desert village and my eyes widen as I take in the view.

This place looks so alive...

There are kids playing and villagers buying and selling goods in the streets.

Mana crystals, potions, food, handmade clothing, and all kinds of other magical items fill the tables and tents that line the streets.

As soon as we approach, an older man greets us. He's no more than 160cm tall, wearing a pale red robe, and sporting a wide smile across his wrinkled face.

I use Inspect and Appraisal as he gets closer.

[Lv. 271]

Active Items:

[Robe of Protection] +100 Defense

[Enchanted Silver Ring] +40% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Salamander Leather Boots] +30% Speed +50% Fire Resistance

Active Skills:

Appraisal

Once I see his Appraisal skill, I activate conceal to hide the majority of my abilities and rare items.

The man speaks up.

"Welcome outsiders. Please, do state your business."

With a kind look remaining on his face after the initial greeting, the old man's gaze scans over each of us. I watch his left eye twitch, but he keeps a cool and collected expression even after seeing some of my teammate's gear.

The man doesn't seem overly impressed. He is a pretty high level, after all, maybe he was a hunter in his younger years.

Arie speaks up.

"I'm a native, from a village right outside Solara. Just a few days from here by foot. These 3 are from outside the walls, but they're with me. We're just stopping by for the night on our way to visit my hometown. If you'll allow it, of course."

The dark-haired archer bows slightly, and the old man nods while clasping his hands together.

"Very well. If you're from inside the walls, you know the rules. Whatever trouble you make is on you."

He points off to one of the larger buildings in the town and continues to speak.

"I'm sure the mercenary guild has a few rooms available for you if need be. A hot meal too. If you can't afford it, there's work available for hunters of your caliber."

Arie raises his head and thanks the old man. Maria, Abby, and I walk by giving him polite nods, but not saying a word.

I whisper under my breath as we get further away.

"That went well..."

I look to my left and right, seeing the vendors at closer range.

There are all kinds of E and D class gear lining the tables and shelves of the wooden, fabric, and stone stalls. It looks like excellent quality.

There are large mana crystals glimmering bright pink out on wooden tables, and the rings, potions, and unique-looking artifacts are polished to look as good as new. It doesn't exactly match the rugged handmade quality of the town around us.

What's even more concerning is the lack of people buying this premium gear. The sellers all eye us as we walk by.

I speak up louder, so Arie can hear.

"Hey- where do all these items come from? Are there dungeons out here? Or special trade routes...? All this gear looks brand new, it's nicer than some of the stuff in the capital!"

The archer looks back at me, with a puzzled look on his face.

"Honestly, I have no idea. There are dungeons and some traveling merchants, sure... but the last time I stopped by this village was on my way to take the C-Class exams. There weren't nearly as many people, and that was only a few weeks ago... It's more crowded than I've ever seen it."

He looks to both sides, matching the friendly expressions of the villagers.

The further in we approach the center of town, the more crowded it gets. More and more people, dressed in all different kinds of clothing, selling very different styles of gear and items.

Something is definitely out of place, Arie's assessment of the village seems to be spot on. I'm not sure how or when, but recently there's been a large influx of new villagers.

I wonder why...

We make it to the front of the dome-shaped mercenary guide to see a large man standing out in front of wooden tavern-style doors.

He wears a full set of lightweight leather armor and carries a large silver axe. The man has dark sun-baked skin and short dirty blond hair. He's muscular and easily 190cm tall.

Arie and I stand up front while Maria and Abby follow.

He speaks.

"You 4 new to town? What brings ya by the guild? If you're looking for some decent work around here, you better be strong. Competition is tough."

The archer nods and answers.

"That's fine, we're not looking for work anyways. Just hoping to buy a few rooms for the night, that's all."

The brute grins.

"Outsiders with deep pockets, huh? How could I refuse."

He steps aside from the front door, and we walk inside. There are rows of crowded tables with rougher-looking hunters making a ruckus.

The clean, well-dressed vendors and children lining the streets are nothing like the men and women inside here.

Laughter, conversation, and the occasional sound of metal on metal from armor and weapons clinking fill my ears. This is where rogues and traveling hunters congregate to make their money.

We walk in and I feel the gaze of a few too many eyes on me.

Over 2 dozen roughians turn to see who came in the front door from their tables filled with drinks, food, silver, and stacks of paper.

There's a massive pinboard to my left side. It's one of the first things I notice when entering the room. Some of the quests posted immediately catch my eye. They're made of the same tough paper material that is resting on many of the tables in the bar.

[Salamander Skin] x60 : 4 Silver

[Mana Crystals] 5000MU : 6 Silver

[Escort: 50km Travel] : 8 Silver

[Element Stone: Fire] x1 : 27 Silver

[Mana Crystals] 10000MU : 11 Silver

[Escort: 120km Travel] : 15 Silver

[Salamander Skin] x100 : 10 Silver

On it, there are dozens of quests and jobs with payment details.

At the top of the list, there seem to only be items relating to pure mana crystals, escort protection through the desert, and some drops from Salamanders.

Coincidentally, that's the same mob that came running at us in the desert before we got here.

The payment offers seem very low... I can get almost 10x the same rate for mana crystals back in the capital. Plus, I've never even seen an element stone for sale, I'd assume they're worth many gold.... Not 27 silver...

It is a bidding system, so the only offers are from people in town that need certain items or services. There's no set price, it just depends on what people are willing to pay.

Many other quests are buried below the current ones with lower bounties and more obscure items.

My gaze finally leaves the pile of papers pinned to the wall when the bright flaming magic enters my field of view.

I swiftly turn my body around and hear the raspy voice of an arrogant-sounding desert rogue.

"How about this old man! Another one in the books, hand over the 27 silver haha! It only took me a few hours to take that beast down. A good day's work indeed."

A tall hunter with black slicked-back hair, a tight white shirt, golden jewelry, and very tan skin turns to show the room a toothy grin while he holds up a flickering Firestone in his right hand.

I use Inspect and Appraisal on him and the item in his hand.

[Lv. 326]

Active Items:

[Element Stone][Fire Aspect]

[Enchanted Boots] +35% Speed

[Enchanted Gold Ring] +50% Mental Strength

[Gold Necklace of Protection] +45% Defense

[Enchanted Gold Bracelet] +45% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

An old white-haired man at the long wooden counter in the back of the guild room quickly rummages through items on the floor until he takes out a small humming containment tray.

The rugged hunter drops the flaming stone into the tray and it rattles, throwing sparks up in the air. The tray is clearly an old one and isn't doing a perfect job of keeping all the element-imbued mana contained.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye to watch large amounts of blood-red magic seep out.

The man at the back table begins to count out silver coins with his head down, not making eye contact with the rude hunter.

The moment he stops counting, the fire user grabs the coins and turns around to leave.

"Thanks, I'll be back to clear the highest bounty tomorrow too. Hopefully, there's another request for those fire stones, they're easy pickings. A great workout too!"

With a confident look across his face, the man puffs out his chest and starts walking through the crowd of wondering eyes.

A thin, younger looking light blond-haired man speaks up.

I can feel the tension in the room as he raises a hand and jumps in front of the large fire-wielding rogue's path.

"H-Hey sir, how much would it cost for you to clear the break? Y-You seem to be strong enough to do so, our village, a small one off to the east about 1km has been-"

He cuts off the frail man.

"Not for sale. This break is a cash cow! Haha!"

He smirks, pushing the scrawny man out of the way as he passes paying him no mind.

"I have 50, no 100 silver. Everything I have, think of the children in-"

The fire user swings open the guild's wooden doors and leaves without hearing another word.

There's an awkward silence in the air for a moment.

The blond-haired man looks down at the ground with a frown across his face. I feel bad for the guy for a moment, but the mood in the room quickly changes.

The chatter and laughter of other rogues and mercenaries starts to pick up again. I watch the older white-haired man at the front of the room wiping his forehead of sweat, then he puts on a smile.

The 4 of us take advantage of the situation and continue our walk through the guild. Now, with much less attention on us after that debacle.

Chapter 210

All 4 of us walk toward the back of the crowded mercenary guild through the tables full of people, sloshing drinks, various colored coins, and magical items being traded.

The situation with a presumably well-known fire-using grunt has distracted the crowd's attention from our entrance enough that we make it to the front counter without any trouble.

The old white-haired guild manager shows us a professional smile as we approach and gives a nod before speaking up in a much more confident voice than earlier.

"Some new faces around here. Are you looking to fill a request? What difficulty level are you all looking for, we have plenty available but for outsiders, the pricing may be rather low. Competition has been tough lately with all the new hunters coming through. People are willing to jump at lower and lower offers every day."

Arie steps up and places a hand on the counter, leaning in and matching the gaze of the old man.

"We're looking to buy today, not get paid. Do you have a few rooms available? Just for the night, we'll be leaving to go further north in the morning."

The old man raises an eyebrow at Arie's last comment. He begins to shuffle paper and small items under the desk, then speaks.

"For the 4 of ya? The best I can do is a quad-bunk room. There isn't enough space for single rooms in this town anymore I'm afraid."

He pulls out a small partially rusted key and places it on the counter.

Arie turns back to us with both hands raised slightly to his sides.

I shrug and reply while stepping up to the old man.

"If that's all ya got, then we'll take it."

I reach into my item box to grab a few silver coins.

"How much is it gonna run me?"

He nods.

"That'll be 40 bronze for the night."

As the manager replies promptly, the grip on the coins in my item box loosens and my mouth hangs wide open. I swallow my next words before they come out.

Sifting through my item box, but not able to find any coins lower in value than the silver and gold I brought along, I gulp and place one of the shiny silver coins on the table.

"Maybe we could get a few drinks and some hot meals with that too."

He quickly takes the silver coin, throwing it under the long table between us while I take the small key and put it in my item box.

He replies.

"Room 117. You're right down the hall."

The white-haired man points to a hallway off on our left side that twists out of sight from the main guild's main room.

He continues to speak.

"Drinks? We can fill ya up, for the extra coin ya gave me. Even if it's not for now, I never forget a face, don't you worry."

He winks.

"Food on the other hand, you'll need to go find a restaurant in town. This isn't a bed and breakfast."

He lets out a chuckle. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, the scrawny man that stood up to the fire user earlier approaches.

The guild manager takes notice.

"It was a good try earlier, Danny. Maybe the next crew of adventurers that roll in can help ya out. It could even be these fellas."

The manager points over to us.

"You 4 are hunters, right? Just looking at the way you handle your money and wave that high-class gear around like it's nothing, I can tell you're probably pretty good ones too."

As we confirm his suspicions with slight nods and momentary silence, the white-haired man turns to the younger thin blond.

"It's always free to ask, might as well show them around town. They're in need of some good food."

The stick-thin villager looks over to me and puts out a hand.

"H-Hi, sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to cause a scene on your entrance. The name's Daniel, o-or Danny, whichever you prefer."

He gives off a nervous laugh as I shake his hand.

"Nice to meet you too... The name's Jay."

I pause, remembering back to what the man in front of me said to the arrogant grunt before he left.

He wanted him to clear a dungeon of some sort to help people from his village...? Or at least something along those lines.

I put a kind smile on my face and speak again.

"Whatever it is, we'll hear ya out. Just find us a place a good place to eat and we'll happily listen to your problems"

His eyes light up and his posture straightens.

"Amazing- I- I mean certainly, please, come this way. I'll bring you to the best hot meal in town."

He turns to the exit of the guild, with a whole new attitude about him.

I shrug, and my teammates do the same. Maria chimes in as we begin to walk towards the door.

"Works for me, I'm starving."

Abby rolls her eyes but politely follows, and Arie crosses his arms, not saying much just moving his gaze across the room.

Most people ignore us as we thank the old manager and leave with the thin hunter back outside into the desert town's streets.

The sun is starting to set now, and it's beginning to cool off. Lantern lights pop up in the various shops as the small man, Danny, leads us to the far edge of the village.

We pass a dozen small square-shaped one-story huts and smaller dome-style buildings on our way. Behind me, the light yellow glow of lanterns disappears as I peer out into the open desert.

On this side of town, the sun sets far off in the distance and the starry night sky comes into full view.

The world around me seems to fade away for a moment as a streak of light zips across the sky for a fraction of a second.

A shooting star.

The light echoes from the chatter of trade, children playing, and random villagers' laughter fills my ears.

I let out a sigh, thinking about how simple life must be ...out here...

After a brief moment of silence, the thin hunter's voice interrupts my thoughts as he points to one of the dome structures ahead. A steady flow of cooking smoke comes from a hole in the roof.

There's a crowd outside, but not nearly as packed at the guild center we just left.

Danny excitedly walks over.

"Here it is, the best food in the whole village. Come on, let's grab a table!"

We walk over, and the smell of rich fatty meats and spices takes over my senses. Peering into the hut, there are circular tables and many cheerful villagers eating steaming hot meals.

The 5 of us sit down in a well-lit, cozy room with a view of the desert through an open window to my right side. We order our food from a kind woman and Danny begins to tell us his dilemma.

"Thanks again for hearing me out, I hope your travels through the sun-scorched flats so far have been... uneventful."

Arie nods and replies.

"Since you already know what direction we came from, I'll tell ya more. There's no harm in it. We made it from the Section 4 entrance wall in under a day. No bandits, no sand storms, or any signs of trouble yet."

Maria speaks up.

"Hey that's not true, we ran into one of those weird-looking salamanders on the way here! Isn't that what all of this is about anyways?"

Daniel's eyes widen.

"You fought one of them on the way here? How terrifying! I- I mean, you must be pretty strong?"

I raise an eyebrow while using Inspect and Appraisal on the man to see he's level 134 with a Dagger Mastery skill. He's not exactly the creme of the crop, but still higher than expected.

I interject.

"Yeah, we handled it fine. I'm assuming all of this is about a dungeon break? Relating to those monsters?"

He nods.

Then, the woman that took our orders earlier brings out trays of steaming hot food and drinks. We begin to eat as Danny tells us his problems.

"Well, it all started about a week ago... There's a large cave system in the center of the surrounding villages that has many of the dungeons we all mine resources from to survive out here."

He pauses and takes a bite, chews, then continues.

"Last week, the most difficult dungeon in that cave system changed... The portal turned bright red and monsters started to pour out. The Volcanic Salamanders. Usually, our most proficient fighters are able to handle the heat, and farm materials without a problem. Recently, those that have Fire aptitudes are the only hunters able to get into that dungeon due to the extreme temperatures. Mutants that roam those caves are getting stronger and stronger by the day. We're not able to safely live in any of the nearby villages or even think about farming loot in the other dungeons."

Danny lets out a sigh.

"I'd offer you everything I have, really! These creatures are drying up our last remaining water sources and forcing all of the surrounding villages to move out here. That's why it's so crowded. We don't have many options left. Is it possible that you 4 are strong enough to handle it?"

I look at all of my teammates and they reply with shrugs and nods. After placing my fork down on the half-finished plat in front of me, I point one finger in the air, and the tip ignites into a small dark flame.

"Sure, I think we can make a deal."