

D. Diver 211

Chapter 211

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

I let the small dark red flame on my finger flicker out as the frail hunter replies.

"Really? You'll help us out? What's your price? I don't have much at all, but I could get together 100 silver- or- well 1 Gold coin's worth of silver and bronze that is. I'd have to collect it from everyone that's willing to pitch in."

I turn to my teammates.

"What do ya think? A small detour can't hurt as long as we're getting paid can it?"

Abby frowns, then takes out our map. She begins studying it carefully before turning to Danny.

"Where exactly is this cave filled with dungeons...?"

He scratches his chin, then replies while looking at the ceiling.

"Well, it's about half a day's walk, or a few hours by Camel to the northwest of here. I can show you the way. There's a tall mountain peak off in the same direction, if you stay headed straight towards it there's no way you'll miss the cave system on the way."

Abby's left eyebrow raises, then she looks over to me and nods.

"We'll take the quest, we're headed in that direction tomorrow anyways. I want a different reward though... we don't need the money."

I sit back and cross my arms, watching the green-haired hunter take the lead on our business dealings.

She definitely found something worthwhile on that map moments ago, and I trust her judgment. I'd like to face a new dungeon at any chance I can get, and helping out nearby villages is already a bonus on top of any money or resources we'll get paid.

If Abby can sweeten the deal, I'll leave her to it.

Danny replies to her semi-cryptic statement.

"Money isn't of value to you 4? I-I'm afraid I'm not sure what else there is to offer out here. We have food and water, but silver and gold are still the currency that's necessary for trade. It's the most I can really offer."

Abby nods, taking a sip of her drink before replying.

"You said we can make it over to the dungeons tomorrow morning by camel ride, correct? Are those easy to come by around these parts? We're in need of a new ride moving forward on our journey through the desert. Are there any you're willing to part with?"

He pauses for a moment, and all that's heard is the clanking of silverware in the room along with conversation from the hunters and villagers at the surrounding tables.

I take another bite of my food, enjoying the show.

There are no major stakes on the line for me here. I'm fine with walking across the desert on foot if we really have to. A camel or two sure would make traveling easier though.

He replies.

"I'm sure If I get the people from my home village to pitch in, they'll be able to spare some transportation in return for your kindness."

Abby and Danny go back and forth, negotiating for a few minutes while Arie, Maria, and I strike up a conversation of our own.

The food and drinks on our table disappear one by one until there's nothing but empty plates and dry mugs on the circular wooden table.

As our server comes to collect our finished dishes, Danny and Abby shake on a deal.

"If that's your final offer, I'll get it taken care of. Two camels in return for guaranteeing the Dungeon in question gets cleared. You sure are a confident one."

He stands up, bows, then turns to leave.

"As I said, I'll have to talk with the others before it gets too late to organize the arrangements tonight. I'll meet all 4 of you outside the mercenary guild tomorrow morning. Does that work for you?"

Abby turns to us.

"How about it? 2 camels to take care of their dungeon problem?"

Maria nods, Arie smirks, and I reply.

"Sounds good to me, we're happy to help."

Danny happily walks out the door in a half skip.

Our server finishes collecting the dishes, then Abby speaks up to the waitress in a cheerful tone.

"Another round of drinks, it's been a good day!"

She nods with a polite smile.

"Of course miss, 4 more drinks coming up."

As the server walks away, the green-haired hunter leans in with a grin across her face.

"That break we agreed to clear, we're not only heading in that direction anyways, it seems like our second break is in the same cave... Possibly, the same exact break."

Arie replies.

"I had a feeling but didn't want to step in on your first Dark Continent deal. It's fair game out here, no judgment."

He chuckles and shrugs.

Maria chimes in.

"Hey, so we were going to help him out anyways? That's no fair! I think we should do it for free! Or at least pay Danny for the camels!"

Abby starts to get defensive, but I step in before she can reply.

"Actually, I think it works out better for both parties if he helps us out for a fee."

I turn to Arie.

"How would the villagers out here feel about the Hunter's Association coming in and saving them from a break?"

He sighs, looking up at the ceiling, then back to me before replying.

"Not very kindly. There's a massive grudge against most Association Hunters out here... It... would probably not be in our best interest to tell them we're here on a mission ordered by the government that banished them to stay within the walls."

Maria gulps, then I nod slowly before replying.

"So, if we clear the break and Danny gets the credit for finding a team of traveling adventurers that did so, it's a win-win. We might as well get paid for it! I mean... come on, I'm not the only one a bit tired of walking through the desert."

Maria sits back in her chair while Abby smiles wide with a satisfied expression across her face.

"See, I knew exactly what I was doing."

I give her a firm nod, then our second round of drinks arrives.

I'm not sure if she really did think about the possibilities here, or if it was in her own self-interest, but I'm not too worried about any of this much now.

It's time to enjoy the night.

The 4 of us get a few more rounds of drinks, staying out for a couple hours until the bar closes and the sun fully sets.

I'm still unaffected by the alcohol, but my teammates are having a good time. Another night with a full stomach and a happy team around me comes to a close.

We make our way through the now quiet desert town back to the guild.

After opening the front doors and walking through the much less crowded lobby, the 4 of us make our way down the winding wooden hallway at the back left corner of the room.

With the turn of a key, the 4 of us collapse into our beds. The small rented room has a single window with a view of the starry night sky

It's been a long day, but a productive one.

I drift off to sleep.

Many hours of peaceful slumber pass.

The next morning, my eyes open and I see Arie leaning up against the wall from across the room.

"Come on, rise and shine. We'll be late soon. Abby and Maria already got ready half an hour ago."

I rub my eyes and hop out of the small bunk. Sunlight shines in from the window above my head and the small rented room looks even tinier than it was last night.

Arie lets out a laugh at the confused look on my face.

"Get what ya pay for."

I nod tightening my lips and standing to my feet.

"I guess you're right."

We both walk out to meet the girls standing ready in the hallway, then head off through the main guild room. The white-haired manager waves us goodbye.

"Have a safe trip you 4, come back any time! I still owe each of ya a drink!"

I reply as we make our way through the slowly growing crowd of hunters piling in to get out the new quests available on the pin board.

"Sounds good old man, until we meet again."

On our way out the door, I happen to see the tall hunter with slicked-back hair and a Fire Summoning skill that we saw yesterday. He's looking over the quest board. Many hunters are standing back behind him to wait their turn.

As we walk out the tavern-style doors, he snatches one of the quests down from the wall and lets out an excited laugh.

"Another one, my lucky day!"

After I hear him blurt this out, the noises of the guild leave my ears.

I'm nearly blinded by the sunlight from outside, but as my eyes adjust I see Danny standing no more than 10 meters away on the crowded village street.

Next to him, there are two golden brown camels with light red cloth over their backs.

The hunter turns to us as we walk over, I wave and call out.

"Morning! Hope you weren't waiting too long."

He smiles and waves back.

"Not at all, I sure am happy to see you too. How do you like your new rides?"

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Danny waves to us as we approach.

"Not at all, I sure am happy to see you too. How do you like your new rides?"

Today he's wearing a new long red robe with a light defense buff, just like the older man that greeted us on our way in here yesterday.

The two golden brown camels have a similar colored cloth over their humps with comfortable but lightweight-looking seating for two on each attached.

He speaks again.

"Hop on, I'll take you to the other side of town to fill up on water and gear. My ride is over there too."

Abby steps in.

"Your ride? What do you mean by that? Who said we'd be bringing you along?"

I let out a chuckle, then jump up onto the camel in front of me with an assist from some wind magic beneath my feet.

Danny replies.

"Well, hey... It's not that I don't trust ya. The village elder just said it would be a good idea for me to go along, you know, just to make sure the job gets done."

Arie smirks, then hops up onto the second camel next to me.

"Makes sense, I don't mind if you come."

Maria nods happily, then jumps up onto the camel that I'm riding, hugging me from behind.

"Works for me too!"

Abby lets out a long sigh, then nods.

"Well, then it's fine by me. Where's this water stock-up station you were talking about? I'm pretty sure we're set for supplies."

She turns to me.

I nod in agreement. I have more than enough food and water for all of us.

Then Danny points off down the same road we came back from last night.

"Just around this bend, and the supplies aren't for you. Come on, follow me."

He begins to skip happily down the street. Abby follows on foot as Arie and I get a hand of controlling the camels down the semi-crowded sandy backroads.

Less than 2 minutes later we make it to the edge of the village, finding ourselves in front of a few small square-shaped huts that seem to be very recently built.

There are a few children running inside and outside the huts playing while some women clean and craft items. An old man tends to a camel gulping down water at an alarmingly fast rate from a tub on the sandy floor.

Danny waves and speaks up.

"Elder! These are the hunters I was talking about. We're just about to head out. We'll be able to go back to our home village soon, maybe even tonight!"

The older man with a horribly slouched back and half-closed eyes looks up at us with a blank expression on his face. It turns into a rehearsed kind smile, then he gets back to refilling the camel's water tub.

Danny turns back to us, now walking backwards and looking up at me as we approach.

"The two you're riding on are already set for water, over a hundred liters each! You should give them more as much as possible, but if worst comes to worst, they'll be fine for a few days. Even a week or more in the worst circumstances. Best to keep 'em happy though!"

He smiles, turning around to pet the large camel behind him as it finishes the tub of water. The happy creature licks its lips and raises its head with a satisfied glimmer in its eyes.

I reply.

"I-uh- good to know."

I look down at the short elderly man, then he finally talks in a low tone.

"Best of luck on your travels young ones. I appreciate you helping out my grandson."

Abby hops up to sit behind Arie as Danny climbs up onto his ride.

I reply to the old village elder.

"You got it. The Dungeon will be cleared and Danny will be back in one piece before the sun goes down."

He smiles, giving me a nod of approval then speaking to one of the older women behind him in a language I'm not familiar with.

Danny puts up his red hood and turns his ride to the open desert, pointing to a large mountain peak off in the distance.

"Let's get moving! We should be able to make it there in under 3 hours if we hurry."

On that note, we leave the village without looking back.

It was a fun stay, but our mission onwards awaits. Not only this break, but all 5 of the remaining ones. The more I think about it, the more serious these situations become.

The last break we faced got stronger while we were facing it...

This one is supposedly drying up nearby water sources and forcing natives to move out of their home villages. I really wonder what other interesting dungeons this desert holds.

As soon as we leave the cover of the desert town, the morning sun begins to rise higher and higher into the sky. My skin starts to feel the burn of mother nature yet again.

Abby and I both activate our earth magic abilities to create sun cover overhead. Danny seems to be used to the heat and is also properly dressed for the occasion.

Maria holds onto my midsection as we ride, and she activates a small amount of ice magic. The cool sensation covers my body, making it feel like we're not in the desert at all.

I can hear Danny laughing up ahead of us.

"You 4 sure do travel in style."

I grin and call back.

"Yeah, yeah. We sure do."

After about an hour of desert travel, our first visitor shows its face.

A small dust cloud approaches. With my All-Seeing Eye, Inspect, and Appraisal skills active, I quickly deduce it's another one of those Salamanders. A level 257.

Before I can get a word out, I watch Arie charge his bow and release a thin white arrow into the approaching cloud.

The attack pierces the monster's head and it tumbles out of our way before we get anywhere near it. I call out to him, 5 meters or so to my left side.

"I guess you're on Salamander duty!"

He shrugs.

"Sure, for now."

Over the next hour, another half a dozen slimy red-skinned creatures come running toward us. They're all between levels 250 and 270. Arie takes them out with no problems at all.

Another hour passes, and the base-level mobs just keep coming. Over 20 more have come crawling our way.

Danny speaks up as Aire shoots down another just 10 meters in front of us.

"I had no idea it had gotten this bad.... The break is really getting out of hand..."

He gulps, then points ahead to a small rock structure about 500 meters ahead.

It's barely visible, but I can see it.

"That's it, the cave entrance. We made it!"

I squint, looking forward, turning on my All-Seeing Eye.

I'm hit with a blast of intense mana readings, then speak up to my group.

"There's at least a hundred of them down there, no, maybe more!"

The corners of my lips start to curl up as I activate my Inspect skill to scout out any potential mutants. To my delight, there are a few, but unfortunately, none are strong enough to put up a real fight.

One of them even approaches us now. A level 312.

This one is nearly 5 meters long, and I can see flames from its tails catch its whole back on fire. The monster's red skin glows with a yellow tint and its Black beady eyes stare us down without a hint of remorse.

Arie stretches his bow back, taking aim, then Danny yells out in a terrified tone the archer releases an arrow.

"No it's a mutant, wait!-"

The wide-eyed expression across the scrawny hunter's face as he turns back at us waving his hands puts me into battle mode immediately.

I know Arie is more than capable enough to take out this monster, and Danny knows that too.

Why would he warn him to stop...?

I turn to Abby, to see she's already turned toward me. Both of us jump off the backs of our rides.

I hand the reins to Maria in mid-air as I air-step over Danny in front of us.

Abby follows on a floating staircase of stone.

We both activate our earth magic and make a floating wall of desert sand mixed with summoned rock 5 meters in front of us.

This allows Arie's arrow to pass, but blocks us from whatever danger Danny is warning us about.

It's just a hunch, but the growing skin and intense flames of the mutant melt rock and sand beneath its feet. Combined that fact with the horrid expression on Danny's face as the archer let his shot loose, it makes me think we just ran over a land mine...

Maybe we did.

As Arie's arrow glides through the monster's head, a bright red flash of light fills the air. I feel an explosion of extreme heat, then rubble hit the opposite side of the summoned wall.

Arie, Maria, and Danny come to a halt on the camels behind us.

A few seconds pass and the white and red lights fade. Dust in the air begins to settle and we let down the wall to reveal a massive 8-meter-wide crater in the desert floor. It's full of molten rock and sand.

I let out a laugh, but Danny looks at it with widen eyes and a hunched posture.

"T-This is what happens every time one of those mutants is taken down. They... destroy everything."

My laugh quickly fades as I realize the seriousness of his tone, then reply.

"We can handle the heat. Don't worry."

Maria points a finger down at the bubbling pit of molten rock and a stream of ice comes forth, consolidating the lava to stone instantly.

She grins as I hop back on our ride.

Maria whispers to me.

"Yeah. They're hot, but their mana control is non-existent. These monsters won't be much trouble."

Carefully, we make our way around the now ice and rock-filled crater. Then, head to the rock structure we set out to find.

My only readings of any mutant-level monsters are underground now. There are none coming towards us on the surface. Only base-level mobs.

Arie takes care of them.

After a few more minutes, we finally make it.

A jagged light orange-brown rock structure juts out of the desert sand. It doesn't look like it's supposed to be here at all...

Over 20 meters wide, and about 7 meters tall, a mound of rock sits in the center of the desert.

The buzz of mana emanates from it very strongly.

We all stop a safe distance away and hop off our rides. I begin to walk forward mesmerized by the circular 3-meter wide cave entrance.

Rubble lines the inner walls, but the main path looks flat enough to safely walk through. Many hunters must have traveled down here before us.

I walk closer, staring in awe. A wave of heat hits me, but I keep moving forward. As far as I can see from the outside, this tunnel in the desert is most definitely not a normal one...

Instead of getting darker further in, the cave seems to have a light source at the end of it. There's a bright yellow glow coming from deep inside. The orange stone walls reflect it off each other, causing the entrance to hum and shine with a warm hue, beckoning us to enter.

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I stare into the cave in front of me, and it stares back...

The buzz of mana fills the air, even audible for those that don't have advanced mana detection abilities like myself.

The yellow light from within the cave reflects off its orange walls, shining out with a warm inviting hue.

I take out my sword, and Maria follows behind me.

Arie and Abby start to walk close behind.

I peer into the open cave's mouth. Rubble lines the walls and steam fills the air, pushing out hot waves of energy even more uncomfortable than the desert sun.

The bright light from the back of the cave gives off a denser mana signature than anything we've seen all day.

As I begin to stretch my perception skill out even more, one of the base-level red-skinned creatures comes sprinting out toward me.

I reflexively charge my blade up and slice it in half before it can even take a step out of the cave.

I hear Danny's quivering voice speak up from behind me.

"H-Hey ya know.. if you all go in there, I'm not so sure I can fend for myself. And- uhm. I told you all this before, but the only hunters that are even able to enter the dungeon break so far have been ones with the fire aptitude skills. Apparently, it's not a matter of how strong you are, just the heat can only be withstood by those that can wield it themselves."

I think to myself for a moment, doubting that these creatures could produce enough molten rock or flames to actually defeat a hunter with higher mana control...

Then again, the whole concept of mana control was alien to me until very recently. Most people never find out about it their entire lives. Danny is most likely clueless when it comes to the higher-ranking hunter's abilities.

It's better I don't make too much of a big deal here, ignorance is bliss.

I speak up.

"Well, I have a Fire Summoning Skill. So I'll be able to withstand their heat, no problem."

Then turn to Maria, then back to Danny.

"She has an Ice Summoning skill, It's a fairly effective counter to lower-powered Fire magic. Especially with the extreme level gap."

Maria nods proudly, putting both hands on her waist and responding.

"Yeah, I can handle it."

Danny turns to Arie and Abby.

The archer is the first to reply to his worried gaze.

"I don't mind staying back."

He turns to me.

"Jay, you and Maria can handle this one. I don't think it'll be too tough anyways."

I give him a firm nod.

Abby wipes sweat from her forehead, backing up from the steam-spewing cave.

"I'll... agree with Arie on this one. If you want to handle it, by all means, this dungeon is yours."

I chuckle, then reply.

"Great. You two take care of Danny outside, Maria and I will clear this break before you know it."

I turn to Maria, watching her start to glow light blue while taking out her long silver sword.

"Ready?"

She nods, turning to the cave opening while the ground beneath her feet starts to become covered in ice.

"Let's do this."

We wave the 3 others off and walk towards the opening of the cave. The light from inside shines bright, but seems to be inching further away every step forward we take.

It's almost like the cave itself is begging for us to walk deeper into it. Or maybe there's a creature inside controlling the light.

I happily do as it wants, drinking an MP potion and expanding the range of my perception and detection skills.

Once Maria and I cross the border and enter the mouth of the rocky tunnel, a lot becomes much more clear to me...

At the same time, there's so much more that becomes unknown.

My mind's eye starts to fill up with a mapped-out version of the cave system we've just entered. It's like the inside of a scattered and broken ant hill.

Twists and turns of narrow tunnels fill my vision. Some lead to dead ends, while others go dark before I can make out where they even lead. Portions of the twisting mazes are blinding me with dense mana readings while others are dead and cold.

Out here in the real world, my All-Seeing Eye and Detection skills have a much harder time mapping out my environment.

They're efficient at detecting mana. In dungeons, everything is made from mana so it's easy to see all of my surroundings.

Out here in these caves, areas that are lacking mana all seem the same. Dark and undetectable.

I whisper under my breath.

"This... may be a bit harder than I initially thought."

There are 3 main large sources of energy that I'm sensing. These must be dungeon entrances. There are over 100 smaller slow-moving readings. They're most likely monsters that have escaped from the break.

There's one, deepest in the cave, that is giving off an incredible amount of energy. This is most likely the heat source and epicenter of the break.

I smirk as we come to a crossroads. One path is light while the other is as dark as night.

"Let's head this way."

Maria and I head off to the right, following the yellow-orange glow.

Level 250-270 Salamander mobs line the walls the further in we travel. Easily being able to cut them down with a single slice from our blades, this doesn't slow us down in the slightest.

The only problem is, the small amount of light that comes off the base mobs tails is definitely not enough to make the large yellow glow that we're following. The denser mana that is creating it keeps moving further away the closer we get.

Maria and I speed up, running through the cave and cutting down mobs at double the pace.

The glow we've been following becomes brighter and brighter.

Finally, we take a turn and find what we're looking for.

"Another mutant."

Standing before us, glowing yellow and orange, reflecting light off the cave walls, another mutant Salamander stares us down. This one is level 314.

Before I even have time to think, it lunges at us and I watch its back begin to glow a much deeper orange hue while dripping molten rock.

Maria acts fast and creates a massive wall of ice.

The moment the monster makes contact with the blue magic it quickly encapsulates the entire mutant and smothers out its flame in a matter of seconds.

The light that had been illuminating the cave dies down and we're left in near darkness. The only thing lighting the way is the dim glow of another yellow light at the far end of the tunnel before us.

With a loud thud, the body of a frozen solid 4.5-meter-long Salamander falls to the floor, blocking our path. Maria hits it with the tip of her sword and it fractures into hundreds of tiny pieces.

To my surprise, there's no fiery explosion.

We're also outside of a dungeon, so there's no hope of any rare drops just yet...

I speak up while igniting my sword into flames for a but of light.

"Huh, well that makes things a lot easier."

We continue forward, following the dim glow of the next mutant salamander.

My mind begins to wander.

One thing that troubles me as we walk and farm lower-level mobs is the fact that the fire user at the guild yesterday brought in an element stone to sell...

I assume he went diving here, but none of the mutants we've faced dropped a thing. Maybe he's strong enough to enter the dungeon, that would be the only explanation.

It's the one I'm most hoping for, actually.

If that grunt can pull off farming a Firestone, then we've struck gold. I wouldn't mind taking home a few stones home myself before we clear the whole break.

A grin creeps across my face as we near the first hyper-dense energy source on my radar.

The tunnels are getting hotter, the light is getting dimmer, and the air is getting denser and denser with mana.

Before we turn the next dark corner to see what it is, I turn my head back and call out.

"Hey, Maria. How ya holding up?"

Glowing bright with her magic, she gives me a bright smile.

"Fine so far, I can tell it's getting hotter, but my Ice is blocking it out fine."

"Good. I think we're about a third of the way there. If I'm not mistaken, there's a dungeon around this bend... It's not the break, but It wouldn't hurt to check it out."

We both step around a large pile of hot rubble and defeat 3 lower-level base mobs as we round the bend.

My prediction was spot on.

We both stop and stare, mesmerized by the sight of a large light blue twisting dungeon entrance portal...

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The light blue spinning mass of energy shines bright against the rock wall of the cave.

It lets off a barely audible hum.

Maria shrugs when she sees it, letting out a sigh then begins to walk off to where we were initially headed.

"Not the break. Let's keep going."

I throw a hand in the air.

"Hey, hey! Wait a second, don't you want to at least check it out? Ya never know what's in there. And- well. I'd like to set a teleport point in this dungeon too, it's always good to have a backup plan."

Maria turns, replying.

"Yeah... I guess you're right, I didn't even think about that!"

After this simple agreement, we both jump through the portal. White transport magic brings us to a forest-like dungeon. The grass beneath our feet is thick and lush green.

Maria deactivates her intense Ice magic, as it's not necessary anymore. I do the same, turning off my flames and looking around curiously.

I feel like I've seen a dungeon like this before... but it's been a while. The levels of mana my perception skill picks up tell me this is definitely a low-level dungeon. A mid-level E-class at best.

Using enemy detection and Inspect, I locate a few monsters between levels 30 and 40. This confirms my E-Class suspicions.

Before I can let out another word, a group of 4 large wolves comes running straight at us from a heavily wooded area.

Maria takes care of them with ease, and I look up to the sky, taking in the beautiful view of trees and rocky hills raised off in the distance.

It's so peaceful here.

After recollecting our thoughts and cooling off, we exit back into the steamy cave.

It was a nice little break, and I now have my Dungeon Walker spawn points fixed. So even if we destroy the break, I'll still be able to come back here if need be in the future.

Maria re-activates her Ice magic and I burst into a light flicker of dark flames.

We walk forth into the twisting maze of tunnels, taking out another 20 base-level mobs before facing another mutant.

Again, Maria freezes it solid before the creature can explode like our incident outside. The level 317 breaks into a thousand tiny pieces as we continue on our way to the next glowing blue portal.

The air has already gotten significantly thicker with both hot steam and pure mana.

It becomes much more difficult to see the yellow-orange light at the end of the tunnel, but I still have my perception skills to guide the way.

After a few more slain mutants and about 5 minutes of walking, the next glowing blue portal comes into full view.

We jump through, just to take another rest and get out of the heat.

Once we do, I recognize this landscape too.

Rolling hills of maroon-colored turned-up dirt. Plus, the disgusting smell of rotten flesh. The sky is grey, and the air is still. It's silent.

"A rat dungeon...."

We both deactivate our elemental magic and take a breather.

Maria is red in the face and breathing heavily. We both drink a bottle of water along with MP potions.

I speak up after a few seconds.

"We're almost there. The only dungeon left after this one is the break. No more rest stops, it'll be a lot hotter in there than in the caves we've been trudging through. So be prepared."

Maria nods, beginning to glow blue again and turning toward the exit portal.

"I'm ready. No point in wasting any more time."

I pause, finishing a water bottle and throwing it into my item box.

"You're right."

I begin to hear the scratching and clawing sound of teeth and nails digging into the up-turned soil.

A hoard of a few dozen rat mobs, all between levels 120 and 140 approach. The massive disgusting creatures peek their heads over a nearby dirt mound and the two of us take it as our cue to leave.

We fully activate our elemental magic and hop out of the exit portal nearby before the fight even starts.

I whisper under my breath as we leave.

"Two successful dungeon detours before the main event."

My transport points are set, and we're fully prepared to face the boss.

There aren't any crossroads moving forward, it's a single tunnel down to the final point. Light from mutant monsters leads the way as we continue into the twisting underground tunnel.

The cave floor has a slight descent, bringing us deeper and deeper underground the further we go.

After 5 more mutants and about 100 meters of elevation change further down into the rocky desert cavern, the heat starts to get even more intense.

I'm wiping sweat from my arms and face every few seconds. Maria is blasting her Ice magic with much more intensity as well.

White steam makes it hard to see even 5 meters ahead and my lungs feel like they're being cooked from the inside out with every breath.

I'm able to regenerate my minor injuries with ease, and there have been no complaints from the ice mage behind me yet, so we continue moving forward.

Finally, the distant glow of yellow light from the mutants we slaughter one by one begins to turn red. The mana density also spikes drastically as we round another narrow bend.

"Finally, we found it."

The cave walls around us start to vibrate the closer we get.

The floor beneath my feet rumbles, sending vibrations through my whole body at the same frequency as the now pulsing red light that gets brighter and brighter with every step.

The hot steam filling the air gets thicker, making full breaths close to impossible without breathing in fragments of burning cave matter.

We continue forward until the anomaly I've been searching for comes into full view.

A full-fledged dungeon break.

I've never seen one quite like this...

The cave floor rattles and shakes. I can physically see hot white steam pouring out of the blood-red mass of energy spinning in front of us.

It's over 4 meters in diameter, and the edges flicker and pulse.

The sour smell of sulfur fills the air and I hear Maria cough behind me while I stare into the twisting red void.

My skin feels just like it did burning out in the hot desert sun, but all I feel is the excitement of a new adventure ahead.

I turn back to the Ice user as she tightens the grip on her sword, giving me a nod.

Flickering with dark red flames I jump through and Maria follows.

White transfer magic fills my vision, and I instantly feel the heat around me multiply many times over...

What felt like an intense sunburn moments ago now turns into the distinct feeling of sizzling flesh.

I immediately activate my self regeneration skill while increasing the output of my mana to fuel my flames, combating the invasive heat.

As my vision attempts to come back into full focus, all I see is red...

The hard rock floor below me shakes and rumbles much more violently while the buzz of mana in the air has not left my ears.

Blinking a few times, the landscape eventually makes itself very clear. I raise my head to see a massive volcano before my eyes.

Over 2 kilometers high, it's the only thing visible in this entire dungeon.

The monstrous structure is made of jet-black rock, and behind it is an even darker ominous sky.

The rock beneath my feet slopes upwards at a slight incline. The slope increases the further up the mountain I look, making it easy to stand here, but rather steep when taking into account the entire peak.

The further up I look, the more outlandish the sight before me becomes. Portions of the sloped rock walls are cracked with magma flowing out.

Huge clouds of white steam fill the air and the dungeon crawls with flaming salamanders eyeing us from the crevices of molten stone.

Crimson lava trickles down from the top of the high volcanic structure and tunnels are being carved out by the hot molten material flowing down.

I sense a massive increase in mana output behind me, then turn to watch Maria putting out a new intense royal blue aura.

I've never seen her use this level of magic before.

Steam is coming off the ice she summons at an astounding rate, but the look of determination on her face tells me she's dead set on following me into this battlefield.

As I look back up at the volcano above, 3 mutants come charging down at us. They're levels 322, 317, and 315.

Their flaming tails and backs match the color of the lava flowing down from behind them. All 6 beady eyes, dark as night are locked onto us with intent to kill.

We respond by jumping into action as well.

With a flash of white, blue, and red light, it's all over in an instant.

Maria takes the two monsters that attack up front while I swerve off to the left side, to take care of an irregular mutant that stays about 30 meters behind.

Even in this extreme sweltering heat, Maria can still freeze the approaching monster solid before they're able to even think about a counter.

Satisfied, knowing Maria can fend for herself, I focus on the mutant I've run off to face. From a safe distance, about 25 meters away now, I let a mana-imbued fire strike fly.

On impact just like before, the mutant explodes into a display of molten rock and flames.

I use my Earth Summoning skill on the floor below me to create a black stone just in case, but the aftermath of its self-destruct feature doesn't reach me.

It looks like 15 meters or so is its total blast radius.

I walk over to the crater of molten rock leftover by this mutant's defeat and my eyes light up at item drop floating on the surface of the lava pool by my feet.

"A Firestone."

Chapter 215

I use my telekinesis skill to lift the Firestone from the bubbling pit of molten rock.

Its crackling and flaming with intense heat, but not nearly as powerful as the two stones I've encountered in the past.

There's also a bright pink mana crystal floating by its side. I've never tried melting one since I was a much lower level, but it appears they're heat-resistant even to molten rock. I chuckle and lift it out of the small lava pool with my skill as well.

I place the flaming stone along with the pink gem into my item storage then turn to see Maria running my way. Her royal blue tint is giving on an intense low-pitched hum and she drinks another MP potion on the run over.

The Ice Mage is definitely exerting a lot of energy to combat this heat.

I'm profusely sweating and the air burns my skin and lungs, but it's only mildly irritating. I'm used to the heat and have been through much worse.

My mana-imbued flames ward off the natural heat in the air, pushing outside and fire magic residue away. The minor burns I'm receiving are healed with self regeneration magic.

I can handle this all day. Maria's mana-imbued protective layer of Ice magic seems to be holding up fine in the meantime as well.

We continue to climb the volcano, passing wide gaps in the stone floor that leads down to bubbling pits of lava and fire below.

Many base-level and mutant mobs come at us, spewing flames and throwing hot and melted rocks from their bodies. Some even use the dungeon's surroundings as natural weapons.

The level gap between us is too great, they're all taken down in an instant.

We make our way upwards for about 30 minutes straight, winding through portions of the fiery mountain that aren't covered in lava.

I air-step over larger pools that can't be avoided, while Maria freezes solid pathways to walk across when necessary. Her ice melts quickly, but it stays in a crystal state for long enough that she can make it across with ease.

The air up here is thicker with hot steam, forcing me to use more of my fire magic to block out the heat. I even activate mana manipulation to imbue my own makeshift mana shielding.

It's been something that's been itching at the back of my head for a while, and now is the perfect time to try it out.

I let pure mana seep from my body, similar to the way I've watched monsters activate their shielding.

In doing so, it creates a thin, yet dense layer of pink magic underneath my blanket of dark red flames.

Instantly, the hot pressure from the outside world vanishes. I almost feel cool... The heat hardly makes it through.

With a clearer mind, I activate my All-Seeing Eye to scope out the environment in much greater detail.

Dense magic fills the entire dungeon, and it all seems to be coming from the top of the mountain.

We continue towards the source of the power.

Mobs aren't the problem at all, they're quite easy to fend off actually. I've collected 4 Firestones in total so far.

Every 20 seconds or so, I see Maria drinking another MP potion. Her ice is sizzling away into steam seconds after its summoned.

She doesn't have the advanced mana control and extra abilities that I do. This isn't sustainable long-term, but she isn't complaining.

The tunnels of from downward-flowing lava streams have carved out tube-like paths down the mountainside making oddly shaped winding trails down the volcanic rock face.

Steam from above has a harder time settling in these crevices, but monsters love them.

There are more item drops and less heat, it's the best of both worlds. We travel through these tunnels for the last portion of our trek.

After another 30 minutes of climbing and farming monsters pass I collect 3 more element stones and a large pile of mana crystals.

We finally break through the thick layer of steam-filled clouds to reach the flaming mountain's peak.

The sounds of crackling fire and bubbling molten rock pits are no more. The crumbling stones and slithering monsters are completely out of sight and mind.

I step onto a narrow flat surface, then gaze down into a deep pit below... It looks as if it falls all the way to the Dungeon floor.

An incredibly large pool of liquid dungeon mass glows dark red below. Hot air flows up, making it hard to look over the edge for too long.

We stand on a thin ring of black stone that stretches all the way around the mouth of a silent volcano.

From edge to edge, the mouth of this volcanic mountain looks to be about 50 meters wide. On the far side, I can see exactly what we came for.

"The Boss Room Portal...."

Spinning slowly on the far side of the massive gaping hole, I see a jet-black portal."

When my eyes meet with it, and my perception skill examines its contents. The mana density rating is much higher than it should be...

Most boss rooms tend to be tinted light grey, and some breaks or mutant bosses have been darker grey in the past, but this one is as dark as night...

"It's Black."

The monster behind that portal is going to be a lot stronger than the monster out here.

I was confused as to why this break was rated a higher danger level than the first, now it's starting to make much more sense.

I grip my blade and turn to the right, starting to carefully make my way along the narrow edge of the volcanic rim.

Maria follows close behind.

No steam or visible magic comes up from the hot pit of molten rock below. It just sits in silence.

Every time I peer down into it, the entire dungeon feels like it's staring back at me.

Magic fills the air, but I hardly hear a buzz.

All I can really seem to focus on is the twisting Black mass of mana at the other side of the volcano's mouth.

We inch closer.

The only sound that reaches my ears is Maria's footsteps a few paces behind me.

We completely circle the entire volcano's pit without speaking a word and make it to the other side.

The portal ominously spins, letting out waves of invisible, non-detectable magic by any normal sense. It's only perceivable to me.

It doesn't let out a sound, and there's no Dungeon matter being spewed from it like the entrance to this break. It's just a dense black hole of mass, waiting for us to step through.

The closer we approach, the more I expect to feel extreme heat come off of the portal, but it never does. It just slowly spins and waits for us to enter.

We come to a full stop 5 meters away.

I speak up while strengthening my makeshift mana manipulation-fueled shielding and gripping my sword.

"You ready?"

The Ice mage gulps behind me, responding in a low tone.

"I think so.... There's only one way to find out."

On that note, we both jump through.

The eerie silence put us both on high alert, but there's no reason not to enter. We came here to face the mutant boss and clear the break, so that's what we'll do.

The moment my hand touches the dark black portal I feel the temperatures rise to an alarming degree, even through my shielding.

Out of instinct, I instantly increase the output of my mana manipulation to nearly full blast but continue to jump all the way through and let the white transfer magic light take me in without hesitating.

The pressure of incredibly hot and dense fire magic fills all of my senses.

I have to concentrate with a large portion of my mana control to keep this thin pink layer of mana around me beneath my flames.

Heat seeps through, burning the skin on my arms and legs, but I adjust the thickness of the mana that seeps out to counteract the breaking points.

The Boss room finally comes into view as I get better control of my defenses.

I look around and confirm it's just like most other boss rooms. A flat rocky surface with walls around the far edges a few hundred meters out in all directions.

The only difference here is that it seems we're on a melting island of rock. The center is made of the same black stone material as the volcano we just left.

The further out that I look onto our new battlefield the lighter and lighter the rock's color becomes. It turns from black stone to red, then orange, and eventually melts completely yellow and white.

All of the outer edges are melting away, slowly dissolving the platform we stand on.

The floor rumbles, then I see half a dozen 7-meter-long Mutant Salamanders crawl out from the bubbling pools of magma from all sides.

Our Boss Room battle has begun.

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I slowly turn around, taking in my surroundings from all directions.

The air ripples and bends from the incredible heat, making it near impossible to see without the aid of my perception skills. The intense royal blue glow by my side from Maria shines brighter than I've ever seen before.

Waves of fire-imbued magic force their way through her defenses, constantly inching closer to burn her skin, but the ice mage pushes onwards digging deep into mana stores unused in any past battles.

Even without the level of mana control I possess, or the mana manipulation skill, Maria manages to withstand the heat.

She does have nearly double the natural mental strength attitude of a normal hunter, and she's about the same level as me. Considering her stat-boosting gear as well, her magic power may be stronger than mine right now...

Although Maria is burning through a full MP potion every 10 seconds, it looks like she'll stand this boss room just fine.

That's the least of our worries though.

Coming up from the bubbling pit of lava on all sides, I watch half a dozen 7-meter-long mutant Salamanders emerge all around us.

I turn, now standing back to back with Maria.

There's no exit portal in Boss Rooms like this, so we're all alone, standing on a black circle battlefield of stone. The two of us are about to face the final wave of mutants, then take on the master of this dungeon.

The hard ground beneath my feet shakes as the group of flaming Salamanders walks onto my side of the ring. There are 3 more that approach on the opposite end, eyeing Maria down with the same amount of pure killing intent.

I scan the trio in front of me to see what exactly I'll be facing. I only let my gaze shift across their levels and skills.

[Lv. 395]

[Lv. 391]

[Lv. 389]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

I grip my sword, holding the mana control output of my makeshift shield steady, and increase the intensity of the dark flames that surround my body.

Then, speak to Maria as the ground starts to shift and crack as the mutants approach.

"Whatever you do, do not get hit by their flames. It's an advanced version of the fire magic. It... doesn't go out easily. One hit could be fatal."

She nods.

"Understood, I wasn't planning on getting hit anyways."

We both run forward, separating from each other, charging our blades, and getting ready to face the mutants that crawl towards us from nearly 70 meters away on both sides.

This plan quickly turns sour...

After taking just a few steps away from the center of the battlefield, my heart skips a beat....

"This... can't be real..."

I swallow hard, gasping for air as the temperature drastically rises. I stop running forward at once. I've barely made it 10 meters and this heat has tripled its intensity.

I feel the burning hot pressure on my forearms and shins where my mana shielding is the weakest.

After a moment of hesitation, I take another step forward. The intense heat that's closing in on me breaks through my shielding, searing the top layer of my skin instantly.

I let out a grunt and jump backward, meeting Maria breathing heavily while kneeling down on one knee. For a moment we stare at each other with the same concerned and disoriented look on our faces.

My gaze immediately shifts to analyze our surroundings, there's no time for concern.

She gulps.

"I-Impossible. It's too hot."

I nod, looking around and healing my minor burns while Salamanders continue to approach slowly.

The hard black rock beneath their feet cracks and breaks away, so that every time they take a step more fragments of the small island we stand on fall into the molten pit of rock we float on.

I close my eyes and think... then speak.

"Stand up, and get ready. We may not be able to make it far out into the dungeons, but we can still fight them once they come into our territory."

Maria nods, replying.

"I can withstand the heat until about 10 meters out from the center, any further and I can't combat the heat."

I nod.

"Same, 10 meters is my comfort point. I could make it further out if I push myself, but we haven't even seen the Boss yet. It's best not to put ourselves at risk until necessary. We'll let them come to us."

The mutants waste no time in crawling across the hard rock, making their move.

At nearly 50 meters away, I charge up my blade to roughly 1000 MP. An attack at nearly half my entire MP bar.

The mutants outside weren't proficient in mana control in the slightest. These creatures are nearing level 400, so I wouldn't be surprised if they summon some kind of shielding.

As my attack flies through the air, my prediction becomes a reality. I watch the first mutant up front activate a layer of shielding, but my thin blade of mana-imbued fire slices right through without a hint of resistance.

A thin red line appears across the monster's neck as its decapitated on the spot. Its entire body begins to glow yellow and orange while molten rock leaks from its back. The mana blade continues to fly, missing the 2nd Salamander entirely, but slicing an arm off the 3rd without a sound.

The blade is not disrupted at all, it just soars off into the distance. Before I can watch it make contact with the dungeon wall, the first mutant I beheaded explodes into a fiery molten display.

It's much more impressive than the others outside, making a blast radius of nearly 30 meters. It covers its counterparts in hot molten rock.

They don't seem to be affected, and continue to charge forward. Even the monster missing a limb runs at me like nothing happened.

Dripping with yellow and orange rock, and staining the jet-black battlefield with their trails of liquid stone, the two monsters stare ahead at me and charge.

I let out another attack, with the same amount of power, slicing the closet monster in two. It explodes just like the last, glowing bright yellow for a fraction of a second before its demise.

Once the flames and molten debris clear, I let out another, defeating the final mutant before it gets any closer.

It erupts into a display that shows my victory is final.

With a grin, I turn to watch Maria.

The approaching mutants aren't injured at all yet, she just stares ahead, with her eyes locked on the monsters.

I think about asking if I should step in, but the determination on her face tells me otherwise. I watch intently, staying on high alert, ready to defend myself if necessary.

She whispers under her breath.

"Stand back, and shield yourself. I can handle them."

I do as she wishes and take a few steps backward until the heat from the Dungeon becomes uncomfortable. I'm at the outer edge of our miniature safe zone.

The 3 massive mutant mobs come charging at her in an erratic fashion while Maria stands completely still watching them crack the ground, flooding more and more lava onto the slowly sinking battlefield.

Only 5 seconds pass, but it feels like minutes in my eyes.

The Ice mage glows darker and darker in the royal blue tone from before. Her sword glows and hums with mana-imbued ice magic.

Finally, the 3 beasts come within the 10-meter radius that we can handle moving around in. Maria makes her move.

The ground beneath the Mage's feet starts to turn white and blue. The flames of the Dungeon aren't strong enough to fend off the cold at the rate of her ice magic being summoned.

The monsters come closer, all coming together with open mouths and heavy limbs reaching forward.

Then, Maria lets out her full-powered attack.

A massive thick crescent of white, baby blue, and dark royal blue energy all twist together to make a buzzing high-powered attack.

It's not refined magic by any means, but it's more than enough power to get the job done. That's for sure...

It impacts the first monster's head fractions of a second later, exploding into a massive ball of mana, fire, rock, and ice.

I activate my earth summoning skill to create a barrier imbued with mana to block out the incoming debris. Maria created a dome of ice around herself.

I hear massive chunks of monster parts and molten rocks fall from the sky as I shield myself from the gore-filled mess above.

After the distant cries of dying monsters fade, and the room falls silent again, I lift my cover.

The ground is covered in flesh and red hot rocks. Maria's dome of Ice slowly melts away and she reveals herself to be unharmed.

We both stare off into the burning abyss of black and red flames with smiles across our faces. I lean over to her with a whisper.

"Not bad, not bad at all..."

Immediately after these words leave my lips, I feel the floor beneath our feet rumble again.

The edge of the island we stand on begins to crack and crumble away at an alarming rate. I watch one side of it begin to raise. It looks like an enormous ball is lifting out of the lava pool.

Then, the rock fragments fall away to reveal what is really underneath.

I see it...

The head of an enormous beast peaks out of the lava pit below. Covered in jet-black skin matching the color of the rock we stand on. With fiery red eyes leaking dense mana, it locks its gaze onto me from across the entire room.

I feel a shock wave of energy hit me at once.

It's a familiar feeling. I grit my teeth and bare the intrusive sensation while Inspecting and Appraising the monster that lurks deep beneath us.

Active Items:

[Skin of the Volcanic Salamander] +80% Mental Strength +80% Fire Magic Resistance

Active Skills:

Intimidation

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Chapter 217

The mutant boss peeks out from the bubbling lava pit that surrounds us. All that's visible are its bright red eyes, jagged white teeth, and scaly black skin.

The island we stand on rumbles and shifts.

Portions of the rocky floor begin to fracture and flood the island with even more molten rock. The cracks are inching closer, threatening to collapse the entire area we stand on at any given moment.

As I stare into the lurking monster's deep red eyes, I feel the intense waves of its intimidation skill running through my body.

Unlike its underlings, this Boss monster has what seems like hard-scaled skin. It's shiny and as black as the rocks we stand on.

I don't back down.

With a steady grip on my sword, I keep my mana shielding activated on full blast, with a veil of dark flames around my full body. I stare back at the beast, sending a wave of intimidation back at it.

The Boss lifts its head completely out from the lava. Molten rock drips from its mouth and rolls off its scales.

The monster looks terrifying. It wouldn't hesitate for a moment to end us if it gets the chance.

I haven't been this excited in a while...

The head of the beast keeps rising out from the pool of molten rock. Over 5 meters and still moving upward before it places its first front leg on the island with an earth-shaking stomp.

A long fracturing line of broken stone moves straight at us, it looks like it'll crack the entire island in two.

Thankfully, it stops about 20 meters from the monster's front leg, but another fracture appears once the monster lifts its second limb onto the island.

Glowing hot molten mass spews off in all directions and the massive Mutant Salamander lets out a roar. The deep bellowing sound it lets out followed by an ear-shattering shriek fills the air, echoing off the edges of the boss room and seemingly getting louder and louder.

It fully climbs onto the arena we stand to show off its full form. A 12-meter-long dark-as-night creature from hell, glowing with a murderous red aura. Its mouth leaks with hot molten rock and I can feel every step it takes as it sends shockwaves through the island floor.

Without a second to waste, the monster opens its mouth and spews an attack full of flames... or at least, what I thought were flames.

A long 3-meter wide beam of glowing dark red and orange light comes flying directly at us. As the wave of blood-red magic rockets toward us, I realize it's pure mana-imbued molten stone.

Also, it's very fast.

I turn, locking eyes with Maria and following her to my left side to jump out of the way and dodge.

Overwhelming heat fills my senses and my mana shielding is fried straight through the moment the massive beam of red-orange mass comes whizzing by.

The attack misses me by about 3 meters.

It was only for a fraction of a second, but my entire right arm, side, and back are covered in severe burns... Maria was much further from the blast, but her arm and leg are severely injured too.

Both of us fall to the floor, but quickly stand to get our footing again. We face the monster with no fear, about 60 meters away from us. Maria drinks an MP and HP potion while I heal my side and think of a plan.

I try to take a few steps forward, but the heat is too much.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, I feel the ground shake... On the other side of the island, 6 more mutants between levels 385 and 400 appear.

I reach into my item storage to grab a Strengthening Fragment out of instinct. I need more power, and I need it now.

I grit my teeth and murmur under my breath.

"But... there has to be another way."

Although It may get the job done, there's a potential that I'll be out of commission for a few days if I try anything too rash here.

Boosting my power once usually leads to doing it many times over without thinking about the consequences once I get started.

"If only..."

As the underlings of the boss step onto the platform behind me, I watch the boss charge up another one of its attacks.

An idea clicks in my head.

I let go of the shiny black Fragment and grab the clear crystal core of the Golem Boss I defeated yesterday.

"This will work..."

I put my sword away into the item box around my waist, betting it all on my new plan.

The crystal-clear round orb glistens in the fiery light of the Boss Room Dungeon as I hold it up between my line of sight and the mutant boss before me.

I drink an MP potion and speak.

"Mana Manipulation."

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-423

[YES][NO]

"Level 423."

"Yes."

Pink strings of energy come off of my fingertips and begin to pour into the clear ball. I let go of it and stand back.

Maria yells out.

"W-What's that, can we take this boss on? I-"

I concentrate, cutting her off with a stern look while focusing on the intense amount of mana leaving my body to merge with the floating crystal ball.

Still, I mutter out a reply.

"Take out the approaching mutants and cover me from behind. I'll finish this boss and cover your back as well. Trust me."

Not another word needs to be spoken, I let my flames die down and solely focus mana on a thin layer of shielding around my body. The rest is channeled into the now brightly pink glowing orb.

I grin as I feel the temporary minion perk fully activate.

My mind's eye connects to the orb.

"I'm in full control..."

The rocky ground below begins to crack and mold into liquid stone, to come up and meet the floating pink orb in the air.

It forms into a ball of rock that looks like a large black boulder levitating above the Dungeon Floor.

Then, two arms and two legs form. The massive boulder grows and grows while the shape of a humanoid Stone Golem forms in its place.

With two loud thuds, its feet hit the ground. A 6-meter tall Golem Boss made of hot black stone stands in front of me like an ominous impenetrable barrier.

Its eyes glow pink, and I control its every move. I make the marionette of a Golem let out a battle cry and begin to charge forward. It effortlessly moves through the portion of Boss Room too hot for me to handle.

The Salamander Boss reacts by releasing its charged-up attack of flames. I intend to take the brutal blow head-on.

Concentrating on creating a dense layer of shielding similar to the one on my actual body, I drink another MP potion to fuel my power.

It's done with ease. The body of this Golem was able to summon shielding when I fought it, meaning, so can its manipulated clone.

Just, with my own personal twist.

A buzzing pink layer of makeshift shielding appears over the entire front half of the Golem as the spiraling molten rock attack comes rocketing at it.

The Golem and the fire collide. My minion doesn't budge. It keeps moving forward.

The loud twang of mana on mana colliding rings out and lava spews off to both sides of the jet-black Golem.

A magnificent sight follows, I watch molten stone splash off to both sides and settle into pools on the island floor.

Portions of my rock Golem are melted away where the shielding was weakest, but only 10% of its mass at most.

I just concentrate harder and summon more rock from beneath its feet to heal the minor wounds.

The Golem took on its full-powered attack head-on and didn't back down for a second.

The Salamander Boss lets out an angry roar and finally makes its move. The beast takes a step toward us.

I can hear the first clash of Maria and the mutants from behind me. I'm putting my full trust in her, as she's put her trust in me.

The clash between my Minion of Stone and the Dungeon's Mutant Boss has begun.

Chapter 218

As the Golem trudges forward, it takes hit after hit from the Salamander's molten attacks. Hot lava spews out after every impact staining the battlefield with hot red-orange mass. I continue to drink MP potions and heal its wounds.

Losing parts of an arm or a leg after every blow, the Golem moves forward without flinching. It only costs me minor MP stores that can be restored with ease, while the salamander that's attacking is becoming more irritated by the second.

The ground beneath the Golem's feet is getting much hotter and more unstable with every new attack thrown. As it nears the outer edge of the island, more large cracks and lava pools become common in its path.

Its feet land into hot molten mass with almost every step. This slows it down but also heats up the average temperature of the rock that forms its body.

As my jet-black minion takes in more mass from its environment, it starts to glow red hot the closer it gets to the Mutant Boss.

Every hit the minion takes from the fiery blast, the less effective it becomes. Once over 40 meters away from me, and less than 30 meters from the Boss, the Golem is made almost entirely of molten stone.

It's highly malleable and even easier to imbue mana into. This isn't what I planned for, but has turned out even better than I'd hoped.

I see the eyes of the Salamander Boss widen as the Molten Golem approaches. It's visibly surprised, having never encountered lava that fights back...

I smirk, shifting both of the golem's arms into bladed edges mimicking the form of a very fierce Floor Boss opponent I faced in the past.

The glowing red-orange arms of the Golem shine with a glossy finish as I cover them in the densest layer of mana shielding I can muster from this distance.

Less than 15 meters away now, I launch the Golem into the air with both blades poised at the Salamander's neck.

Another blast of molten rock comes flying out to hit my minion head-on at full power.

With dense pink mana shielding focused solely on the Minion's bladed arms, this is enough to slice clean through the incoming attack without a problem.

The golem's unguarded lower half is stripped away by hot debris and destroyed in the blast. It doesn't matter right now.

I keep my eyes on the prize.

Not slowing down for a moment, the top half of my Golem flies through the air, upwards, and lands two devastating hits on the monster's tough black-scaled neck.

A white flash of light blinds me momentarily and is followed by the murderous roar of the heavily injured beast. It evolves into a loud shriek and the entire island shakes and rumbles.

Two deep slashes can be seen in its neck, cutting almost all the way through.

If I just had a little more power, I would have killed it right then and there. It knows this too...

Ignoring the top half of the molten golem as it falls to the floor, the mutant shifts its glowing red gaze toward me. I feel another wave of intimidation, but it only makes me focus on the fight more.

I'll end this here and now.

Its mouth begins to glow red, orange, and yellow as it prepares to send a final desperate attack at me, its actual enemy.

"I can't let that happen."

As the injured Golem touches the floor, my strands of mana manipulation glow and hum. I channel all of my remaining MP into the body of stone as it rebuilds its lower half making its full form able to fight again.

Forming a layer around its arms of blades again, I have the minion run forward, just like before.

The boss lets out its attack.

Well, it tries to....

The dual gashes in its throat from earlier gush out with molten rock. Its attempts to shoot at me backfires, covering its black-scaled body in man-imbued lava.

Simultaneously, my Golem jumps for its neck, ignoring the flying debris of flaming stone and finishing the cut from its last attack. The monster's head is sliced clean off.

It flies up in the air, spinning a few times before falling into the pit of lava behind it.

The body of the mutant boss collapses to the cracked fiery floor with a loud thud, then I start to see it glow bright yellow. The black scales, now growing brighter and brighter, expand outwards and my eyes open with shock.

I know exactly what is about to happen next.

While summoning a wall of rock to block the incoming blast, I hear Maria finishing off a final attack on the mutant mobs behind me.

I hear explosions of fire and molten stone. They're followed by the wall of ice that protects me from the aftermath of her finishing blow. Then, the ear-shattering eruption of flames follows on my side of the battlefield.

Our magic stone and ice combine together to form a dome. We both kneel on the floor, focusing on keeping our magic steady as the world around us explodes into chaos.

Then, moments later, it all stops...

We... won....

The room falls silent. The violent shaking beneath our feet and against the walls protecting us stops.

I let out a long sigh, and a grin creeps across my face as a familiar ringing tone fills my ears.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I check my status to see I've hit level 425, then simultaneously hear Maria's cheerful voice behind me yell out.

"Alright! Level 400, finally!"

We release our magic and the dome around us fades and crumbles.

Before I can turn around to congratulate her, something else catches my eye. The fragments of black scales and molten mass that remain from the Boss' body start to dissolve away.

Wanting to pick up the loot I reflexively try to walk forward, but the air is still too thick and hot.

My Golem was torn to pieces in the blast, but I quickly re-form it from the charged core. It picks through the hot rubble and I watch through its vision in my mind's eye until I see two items on the floor.

There's a large pink stone and a dark red fabric. I reach down and pick them both up with the golem's hands and bring them over to us quickly, knowing the transfer magic could trigger at any moment.

Seconds later, my Golem approaches and drops the items to my feet. I deactivate the Minion perk and the hot stone collapses to the floor. I grab the empty crystal core along with the mana crystal and the odd fabric, then white magic fills my vision.

Just in time.

The entire Dunegon fades away. Both Maria and I are left in a dark cave.

Instantly, the walls and floor are covered with ice, and I activate my flames to counteract the extreme cold.

Maria shouts out.

"Sorry- Sorry!"

I laugh while she deactivates her magic and I keep a small flicker of flames activated to light up the cave.

"No problem. We made. Another break cleared. 2 down, 4 to go."

I nod as Maria stares at me, then down to the fabric in my hands.

"Ohhh, a mutant drop? What is it? What is it?"

I lift up the heavy fabric, then activate Appraisal.

[Salamander King's Cloak] +80% Mental Strength +80% Fire Magic Resistance

I grin and reply.

"80% added Mental Strength and Fire Resistance. Pretty good drop. Along with the 7 FireStones from mutants we farmed, that's one of the best loot dungeons we faced... probably ever."

On that note, we begin walking back up the dark cave tunnels.

It's much cooler now.

Some residue heat remains, but neither of us has to use any magic skills to block it out. We're back into the normal non-magical temperature range.

We agree to divide the loot later, but I hold onto it for now.

The walk back up to the surface takes about half an hour. After passing the two remaining stable dungeons, we finally make it to the surface.

As we start to walk out from the mouth of the cave, I hear an oddly familiar voice arguing with my teammates.

The fire-wielding hunter from the mercenary guild that we happened to pass by last night yells out in a stern tone.

"What are you outsiders doing messing with my dungeon?! I don't want to see your kind around here anymore. Get lost before something bad happens to ya!"

As soon as I hear him, I step out of the cave with Maria by my side.

I see Arie standing in front of Danny and the camels with his arms crossed and a bored look on his face.

Abby is butting heads with the arrogant grunt.

She's grinning ear to ear, having a great time watching the fire user get red in the face. She's been antagonizing him for fun while waiting for us to return.

The hunter notices our arrival and faces us as we step out of the cave.

"Oh great. There's more! Look's like I'm going to have to teach all of ya a lesson!"

Chapter 219

"Oh great. There's more! Look's like I'm going to have to teach all of ya a lesson!"

The hunter with a fire aptitude that I saw earlier in the mercenary guild is out here in the desert, most likely looking to get his hands on another Firestone to sell.

I walk closer to see him turn to me with a snide grin.

His slicked-back dark hair glimmers in the sunlight and muscles budge from his tight black shirt. He's taller than me by a few centimeters.

This hunter may look strong, but all 4 of us out-level him by a large amount... He has no idea what he's getting himself into.

The man scoffs, rudely pushing Abby to the side and puffing out his chest to walk over, making steady eye contact and beginning to ignite his right hand on fire.

"Aghh it's you, from the guild! I remember you. Ya know what? I'll beat all of you so bad you'll never show your faces in town again, how would ya like-"

Before he can finish his sentence, the fire user stops in place and bites his bottom lip.

"H-Hey, what the-"

The rocky sand around his ankles begins to twist and mold up his legs, making him unable to step any closer to me.

I grin, as I see the angry Earth Magic wielder with bright green hair standing behind him. She has a stern expression across her face.

The rock she's controlling slides up the man's legs and starts to cover his torso as well. His expression turns grim and sweat falls from his forehead as he bursts into flames while trying to escape.

Abby walks over to the wide-eyed hunter, standing in front of the now half-petrified body of rock.

The man yells out again, with a shakier, but still confident tone.

"What is all this? You're an element wielder? You-"

He pauses, gulps, then rolls his eyes while the corner of his lips begin to curl upwards.

"You all must be from the Association, that's it. Right? Oh, you're in for it now!"

He squirms, trying to break free, but the stone keeps rising up his body. It's now covering half of his torso.

Abby now stands in front of the man, looking him straight in the face.

"I don't like being pushed around. What was that you said earlier? You were... going to teach us a lesson?"

She smirks, stopping the rising stone just before his neckline.

He lets out an audible sigh of relief but also looks pale in the face.

Abby steps forward.

"Come on, at least start with your name. Who are you? What are you doing farming these dungeons without even trying to clear the breaks? The villages around here are clearly suffering from your actions."

He gulps.

"Hey... It's Issac. This... is just how it is around here. I didn't start the breaks, I'm just taking advantage of an opportunity given to me. N- No harm done."

He stutters at the last line, looking up in the air as Abby summons a thin spear of rock in her right hand.

"Also, what was that you said about the Association? How'd you know we were from outside the walls?"

He smirks, then makes a facial expression like he's about to spit.

Abby doesn't flinch for a second and kicks his left leg at the knee.

I hear a loud crack and don't have to look down to realize it's not only the stone that broke.

The fire user lets out a grunt, ignoring the pain and looking forward with the same dumb smirk on his face.

"I've got nothing to lose girl. I either live another day out in these flats, or I meet my demise just like everyone else that was abandoned by your leaders."

Abby squints, unhappy with his reaction. The grunt continues.

"Ha! The four of you are heading north aren't ya? You'll never make it into DryRock looking like that... and without a guide to get you in? Who do you think you are?"

Abby tightens her lips, then looks down at the cracks in the stone around his left leg that gushes blood. She replies while reaching her hand into the item box around her waist, taking out our map.

She shoves the paper in Issac's face, pointing to the middle section.

In between the next two breaks, there's a small town noted down with 3 black question marks scribbled around it.

"Is this where you're talking about? This... is this DryRock?"

He goes quiet for a moment, then responds.

"It is..."

After, he lets out a laugh. Danny walks over, waving at the Green Haired mage.

"I- uh- if you're really going to DryRock, and- if you're really Association Hunters- I- Well- He's right. You'll never make it inside those walls. Or- you may never even find the walls."

I start to walk over now, curious to know what exactly is going on here. Maria follows and Arie takes a few steps forward as well.

We all crowd around the captured fire hunter and he lets out another bellowing laugh.

"Oh you four crack me up, the Association has lower standards than I imagined. Sending out clueless uniformed scouts like yourselves to fix the problems they caused."

I raise an eyebrow, then walk closer to stand face to face with the grunt.

"Well... if we can't get in without a guide, I guess you'll have to show us the way."

He rolls his eyes and throws his head back.

"What's in it for me, I-"

He's cut off by Abby kicking his leg again.

He grunts, gritting his teeth the staring straight ahead at me to continue after a slow inhale and exhale.

"There's no worse fate than being outed as an Association's ally out here you know. They have bounties on the heads of those who are known supporters of the Association. It's even worse if you're an actual partner of the Association like all of you. If you're big shots, they might even have your face on the most wanted lists. The further into the wall, the worse it gets."

I tighten my gaze, then respond.

"Sure. There are risks. But... you'll do it for a price."

His arrogant grin gets wider as he nods.

"I like you."

I nod, not wasting a second.

"So, name it. What do you want?"

He pauses, looking up at the desert sky, then back down to me.

"Those two X's on the map around DryRock. They're breaks aren't they?"

I don't respond, but he continues.

"Let me collect the bounties on each of them. I heard one of the breaks is in the middle of the town, the other is further northeast. In return, I'll get you into the city. I'm well acquainted with one of the guards at the west gate. We... do business."

I give him a firm nod, then turn to the rest of my team. I shrug, letting out a sigh.

"I believe him. No reason for the guy to lie about something like this."

While my teammates think of their responses, I turn to Danny.

"You won't say a word will ya?"

I see the small hunter visibly gulp, then reply.

"Of course not- I- had my suspicions that you were from the Association, but you all seem to be fine people. I have no qualms with the government outside the wall. I'm... not one to judge."

He looks over to Issac, then back to me.

"As he said, many of us further from Solara are very open to the idea of Association help. Or, well, not entirely opposed to it I guess. Once you make it to DryRock and beyond... this desert turns into a much different place."

Arie chimes in.

"It's a good idea."

He walks closer.

"I was hoping the breaks were outside of the town, so we could camp out away from the sight. It seems we'll need a guide if one of the breaks is really in the center of town.... I vote yes."

Maria nods.

"Seems this is the only way. It's a yes from me."

I turn to Abby. She doesn't say a word, so I speak.

"I vote yes, and you can keep him in line if you'd like. Just... heal that leg. There's no need to torture him. He was just doing what he felt was right. The way of the desert I suppose."

She rolls her eyes, but agrees, turning to Issac.

"It's a yes from me. No funny business though, you're under my watch."

He gives her a look of fear for a split second, then reverts to his toughened care-free state.

"Fine by me. Now get me out of this damn earth magic. I'll take the 4 of you to DryRock so I can get paid."

Chapter 220

"Fine by me. Now get me out of this damn earth magic. I'll take the 4 of you to DryRock so I can get paid."

Abby nods at me, then turns to Issac as the stone around his neck starts to melt away, revealing his torso, then flowing off his legs back into the sandy earth.

The green-haired mage heals his leg, making it as good as new.

I get a weird sensation as she activates her healing magic. It tingles throughout my body even from over 5 meters away and buzzes with an extremely high-pitched tone. It's definitely much different in its upgraded form.

It is a legendary skill, after all, there must be something very special about it now.

I think for a moment, but shrug it off as my thoughts are interrupted by the excited cry of the fire wielder.

"Hohoo, It feels good to move again!"

He moves his arms and legs around while turning off his fire magic.

"You 4 really are Association uh- what do they call 'em again? The special squads that are chosen every year... I forgot the name. Those are you guys right?"

Maria proudly nods.

"Mmmhmp. That's us. The New Elites."

I flinch, as she just outed and confirmed exactly who we are... but the ice wielder crosses her arms and beams with delight as the fire user looks down at his fully restored leg in awe.

He's not paying much attention to Maria right now.

"I thought I'd be limping for weeks."

He lets out a chuckle, but it turns into more of a nervous laugh as all 4 of us walk forward to surround him.

I look the man in the eyes, then let out a sigh.

"Alright, let's keep this all business. I know we may have started off on the wrong foot, but there's no hard feelings from me. You get us into DryRock, we take out the breaks, you collect the bounties and we never speak of this again."

I nod.

"It's that simple. You don't want to be associated with us, and we don't want to be associated with you."

He looks up at me.

"Perfect, just how I like it."

We shake hands, then I turn to my teammates.

"Got it? I want to fight some monsters, get stronger, and find rare loot. That's it. There's no need for any unnecessary attention from locals in this next town. Let's keep our heads down and get the mission done."

I get a unanimous agreement, then turn to Danny, putting out my right hand.

"Pleasure doing business with you too. I hope your people can return to the village unharmed."

He smiles, shaking my hand.

"Most certainly. With this break gone, the water sources should come back within a few days. It-uhm, may have just been a mission for you, but I'm very grateful. Please, come back to visit anytime. Your secret is safe with me."

I give him a kind smile and the others bid him well as the scrawny hunter gets back on his camel with a cheerful skip in his step then rides away into the desert sun back to the village to share the good news.

I turn back to our group, now realizing there is a third camel tied to a portion of rock on the far side of the cave we just left. I point to it and turn to Issac.

"That your ride?"

He nods, slowly walking over to it as the 4 of us get on our two camels behind Arie.

He makes his way over to us. Both Abby and I activate our Earth magic to create shields for the sun over our heads, preparing for the long walk.

I see his eyes go wide as he moves his camel through the middle of both of ours, but he doesn't say a word. The grunt knows to keep his mouth shut now.

He may have sounded arrogant and hardheaded moments ago when we first met, but the second a business deal came up his true colors came out. Issac seems to be a pretty smart guy, just down on his luck.

He speaks up, waving a hand and pointing off to the north.

"Alright, If we leave now we may be able to make it there before the sunsets. It's.... A long trek. You're all ready?"

I check my storage to make sure I'm stocked up on food and water, then give him the go-ahead.

"All set. We'll take your lead!"

I turn to Abby as we get moving, now less than 3 meters to my left, and mutter under my breath.

"Watch the map. Make sure we're going in the right direction at all times. He knows better than to mess with us, but it never hurts to be cautious."

She gives me a firm nod.

We leave the rocky cave system just like that and head off to our next city. I hand out food and water to everyone and we share small talk on the way.

Hours pass, but the desert terrain hardly changes at all...

Rolling hills pass by on our sides with small yellow shrubbery begging for moisture. Rock structures occasionally peek out of the desert sand and white clouds float by through the blue sky.

It's a beautiful day.

We keep following Issac straight into the blazing sun-scorched flats. It gets much hotter, but Maria's Ice and my shade make it so this doesn't affect us at all.

The small talk we share starts to become less frequent until we all settle into silence, just enjoying the rhythmic footsteps of the camels' feet on the hard sandy ground under the hot dry sun.

I have a lot of time to think about my position in the world.

To be honest...

I think back to a few days ago before leaving on this new mission.

Even after days have passed, I'm still a bit shaken up by the Floor Boss fight in the Vice City Labyrinth.

We've fought some strong monsters here, but none of them have come anywhere close to the immense levels of power that beast possessed.

It showed me what was possible. It forced me to push my limits and become much stronger myself.

Battles like those are what give me the drive to keep pushing forward and create goals for myself to surpass.

Although this mission to the Dark Continent is just getting started, and I've barely just recovered from another intense battle, I can't help but wonder what the toughest Dungeon in this mysterious unofficial section 4 capital "Solara" will be like.

I grin, staring off into the rising and falling hills before me for hours on end, daydreaming of what adventurers are to come in the near future.

Hours and hours pass, but the sun still shines bright in the sky...

A range of red rocky mountains comes into view as I squint out into the horizon.

Issac speaks up.

"We've made it, in record time as well!"

I sit up straight, straining my eyes to look ahead, but I'm missing what the fire user is pointing to...

All I can see are a few medium-sized mountains off in the distance, and a small tight-colored tent about 500 meters away that we're approaching on our left side.

There's at least a kilometer worth of flat open sand between the tent and the mountain bases.

Issac points over to the small structure.

"That's our way in. The Western gate."

His eyes go wide for a moment as he turns back at us, then begins digging through an item box around his waist.

He pulls out handfuls of red-colored fabric, then throws it at us without a second thought.

"Put these on, all of you! Quick!"

I use Appraisal to see they're red robes similar to what the villagers were wearing back in the small town we left. The skin of the base-level salamander mobs is made into protective gear.

It must have been a common drop before the break.

Each of us catches one and does as he says, then the grunt yells out again.

"And put away that earth magic! We need to blend in, not stand out!"

Sensing the seriousness of his tone, I nod and do as he says while turning to Abby to watch her do the same. We let the blazing sun shine down on us and walk forward on camelback.

We get closer and closer to the small tent and I begin to see supplies underneath. There's a large green metal crate and a small wooden table along with a short old man walking over and waving us down.

Issac speaks up, hopping off his camel to shake the old man's hand, slipping him a few silver coins.

"I have another order to bring through, not the usual time of the month. I'm on special business this week."

The old man smiles, accepting the bribe and throwing it behind his back while muttering words in a language I'm not familiar with.

Then, Issac nods, pointing off into the open desert before the mountains.

"Here we are! Welcome to DryRock!"

I feel the air shift as he says this, and the once-barren desert changes in front of my eyes into a sight beyond what I ever expected to see...