

D. Diver 241

Chapter 241

"These are all from mutants... every last one of them. This break is completely out of control!"

Ember replies in a cheerful, satisfied tone.

"Indeed, it is."

At the moment of his reply, I can feel the ground tremble and sense 10 monsters all over level 470 running our way.

Without thinking much of it, I shovel the hundreds of shards off the rocky ground into my item storage, then air-step up onto Ember's back.

Without my perception skills right now, I'd be as good as blind in this environment. All I can sense are fuzzy mana outlines of the creatures that are coming our way.

If I concentrate harder, their inner bodies are easy to picture.

Although it wouldn't affect me in battle much at all, especially in a dungeon. It's still a little unnerving not being able to see properly. I have to rely solely on my mana senses.

Either a being is there, or not there. That is the only reading I can pick up. White blobs of varying mana intensities begin to fill my vision as Ember flies up in the air.

He speaks through the link.

"Is this not what you wanted? I can absorb the mana in the surrounding area if you'd like."

I take a deep breath in.

Even if the air is this dense with energy, the oxygen that fills my lungs is not affected in the slightest.

It just feels like there's a slight pressure on my temples.

However, I'm not sure if that is a natural mana density property or just a side effect from the incredibly loud headache-inducing buzz that fills my ears.

I reply through our link while clenching my jaw and both fists.

"No, this is exactly what I wanted. You did well."

A powerful flap of the black-scaled dragon's wings sends us gliding off towards the back of the dungeon now, headed straight towards the boss room.

The charging Ogre's earth-shaking footsteps are left behind in the blue fog.

I take out extra food and water to replenish my body after a long sleep as we glide through the ominous buzzing dungeon's open air.

Ember replies once we stop rising in altitude.

"That's good to hear master. While you rested, I had my fun, but the real challenge is still ahead. You're about to face your first Rank 3 Boss Fight."

I stare forward into the never-ending blue fog.

"I know. I'm ready."

Ember knows more about monsters and mana control than I do by a long shot. The hint of concern in his voice turns to my concern as well... I just still can't wrap my head around a monster being that much stronger than the mobs we've been facing in the dungeon.

A ranked-up Mutant Dungeon Boss... I guess time will reveal its true strength.

Eventually, we soar into uncharted territory, the last 500 meters of open dungeon before the break that I haven't ventured through just yet.

The boss room portal comes into my perception skills radar, and it feels much more powerful than it did before.

Almost, unimaginably more powerful actually.

More and more mutants show up on my radar below as we fly closer.

At first, it's just under a dozen, like the group that started to attack us at the top of the last peak. Then, it turns into much more as groups begin to merge together.

By the time we get within 200 meters of the portal, I can sense almost 40 mutants in total waiting around the energy-dense portal below.

I speak up, while taking in an accurate reading of our surroundings.

"What... is this...?"

Ember responds.

"Shall we head straight for the Boss?"

I nod, pulling out my sword and imbuing my armor with enough mana to keep it fully charged. This dungeon is so rich with mana, that it feels like it's about to burst.

"Yes, let's head straight for the portal. It's time to clear this break."

I begin to power up, activating my stat boosting skills, and making the blue fog around me reflect crimson-gold light as we make our descent.

Instead of just sensing the masses of mana below, I begin to hear the grunts and roars of Mutant Blue Ogres all fighting amongst themselves in the valley down below us.

We're less than 50 meters away, and the sensation of enemies nearby puts me on high alert but also excites me beyond belief.

We soar deeper in, closer to the ground, now hearing constant cracks in the rocky ground on both sides as Ogres run our way. At the same time, the blue fog in front of my vision quickly begins to get much darker.

"It's turning black..."

The dense dungeon mana in front of us starts to twist and swirl, making a whirlpool-like effect in front of us as we soar forward.

Instead of seeing all blue, streaks of dark black lines start to form in the air. They twist together in a massive circular pattern with the dark blue fog. It looks like an ocean Maelstrom, sucking everything up in sight.

The closer we get, the faster it spins, pulling in the air and energy around it. The swirling blue lines of magic in the air fade away and everything turns to black.

The sound of Ogres nearby fades away.

There's an ear-piercing buzz, making it impossible to think of anything but staring straight ahead and baring it.

The reality here is, the Boss Room portal has grown to over 3 times its normal size. The once 3-meter tall light grey slowly swirling mass of magic has now turned into a towering 10-meter wide violently vibrating black hole engulfing any and all dungeon mass that gets near it.

The closer we get, the harder it seems to turn away. Luckily, our goal is to fly straight through.

I point my sword forward, activate my mana manipulation skill to create a thin layer of shielding around my body, and then Ember flies us through.

My vision turns from black for a few seconds, then shifts to bright white...

We're transferred into the boss room moments later.

I was expecting to fight blind, having to rely on my perception skills to fight a massive mutant Ogre or something of that nature.

To my surprise, that's not exactly the case.

Once I enter the room, a crystal clear mountain sits in front of me with flowing waterfalls, green shrubbery, and beautiful white rock walls.

It looks just like the dungeon did when we first entered, but a more majestic version.

The mountain is tall, about a kilometer high. There's nearly 500 meters of flat ground before it with very little dirt or plant life in sight. Just a wide-open plain of flat stone. It's a clear shot, straight to the mountain at the Boss Room's back side.

This is one of the biggest Boss Rooms I've ever been in.

Other than the 20-Floor Boss, nothing compares.

I could have easily mistaken this for an entire dungeon itself. The only difference is the long stream of dense blue magic that trails from behind me, right where I entered.

Constantly being transported from the outer dungeon, I watch a trail of blue cloudy mana float up towards the top of the mountain.

It materializes out of thin air, coming through the Boss Room's transfer magic and slowly rising in a thick cylinder of blue magical fog up toward the top of the beautiful peak above.

I take in my surroundings in awe for over 10 seconds before finally being interrupted.

The ground rumbles and my moment of peace ceases. Dozens of Mutant Blue Ogres wielding heavy silver axes start charging down the mountainside. Clouds of dust and magic residue trail behind them as they lock onto us from over half a kilometer away...

This is the first wave before the boss fight. I open up my link with Ember.

"Let's climb the mountain, and face the Boss."

We soar forward without a hint of hesitation, staying low to the ground. We leave trails of red, black, and golden magic residue behind in our wake while heading straight for the Bright Blue Ogre's stampede

I scan them all as they cross over from the mountain onto the flat plain area, registering the mutants are all between levels 470 and 480.

As I expand my range further up the mountain. Then, sense where all the mana from the outside dungeon is consolidating into what seems to be a massive ball. There's a single reading in the center of it.

"The Boss."

[1200m]

[Lv. 559]

Active Items:

Heavy Armor Set of The Blue Ogre King [+95% Defense]

Dual Axes of The Blue Ogre King [+95% Strength]

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]

Active Skills:

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Bufs:

Ultimate Defense of The Blue Ogre King [Hidden Ability]

King's Summoning Call

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[1200m]

[Lv. 559]

Active Items:

Heavy Armor Set of The Blue Ogre King [+95% Defense]

Dual Axes of The Blue Ogre King [+95% Strength]

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]

Active Skills:

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Bufs:

Ultimate Defense of The Blue Ogre King [Hidden Ability]

King's Summoning Call

I finish scanning my surroundings and pause on the Boss' status that waits for us on top of the tower above.

"Level... 559..."

A sound similar to thunder cracks throughout the boss room, but there isn't a single dark cloud or flash of light in the sky.

Its source is the top of the mountain, but even with my perception skill, I can't make out the exact shape or cause of this odd phenomenon.

All of the mana that's being transported from the main dungeon is clouding the view. It's all consolidating to make a massive blue ball of energy. The orb is impossible to make sense of from this distance.

That isn't my primary concern at the moment, the hordes of Blue Ogres running towards us are.

I charge up MP into my blade and send a shot off in the direction of one of the approaching monsters while Ember breathes a wave of dark flames straight at another.

My recent level-ups, along with the nearly 25% increase in my overall mana control consumption has buffed my abilities a considerable amount.

My high power slash slices through the front side of a mutant armor, cutting the beast in half with a single strike while the plume of black fire desolates the Ogres Ember attacks. Earlier today, an attack like that would have taken 2 or 3 hits.

Although the opponent above is at a higher level than any monster I've faced before, I'm tingling with excitement at the opportunity to try out my new power.

Maybe it will drop some interesting loot too.

I decide to be as efficient as possible, taking off my griffin's talon necklace and throwing on the dark Red Salamander King's Cloak. It gives me an 80% boost in mental strength, rather than the talon's 40%. I have a feeling I'm going to need every advantage I can get.

With all these thoughts racing through my mind, Ember and I continue taking out mutants that stand in our path as we approach the mountain. Their shards are left behind for now. I'm focused on defeating the boss, nothing else.

I attempt to use my plunderer skill to absorb MP from the environment like I did back in the blue-clouded dungeon, but it doesn't work nearly as well.

Without the dense atmosphere of available mana, I'll have to rely on my remaining MP potions for now or the monsters I can directly drain mana from in a physical attack.

I manage just fine. It's just a minor inconvenience.

There are mutants that run down the mountain straight toward us from all directions. Most are very agile and powerful, but there's occasionally one or two in such a rush they fall or jump from unreasonably high ledges.

This injures them even before making their way towards us. It doesn't seem to matter much, the steady stream of them isn't showing any signs of stopping anytime soon.

Easily one-hitting each of them, but not flaming the rewards isn't doing anything very productive I decide to stop firing off shots. It's best to save my energy for the fight above.

Ember on the other hand keeps sending off his nearly endless supply of flames down at the roaring Blue creatures.

We start our ascent.

Flying past crystal clear water and rocky cliffs, the mountainside gets steeper and steeper. We fly further from the ground and my eyes are locked on the growing cloud of blue-tinted mana above the whole way up.

It seems to all be consolidating in a sphere at the monitions top.

Less than a minute later, I see with my own two eyes.

Over 30 more Ogres lose their lives while the trails of burning rocks and trees left behind from Ember's flames. Tell the full story of our joinery up the mountain. We finally make it to the peak.

It's a classic boss room style battlefield, with a 100-meter wide shallow bowl shape to the top of the mountain.

Possibly, the remnants of an old dormant volcano.

Near the far side, the massive glowing blue ball of mana can be seen. The orb is dark blue with lighter wisps of dust and pure white mana curling it. A loud ground-shaking buzz fills the air as hordes of Ogres run out from it.

My eyes open wide and I whisper under my breath.

"The King's Summoning Call."

This is one of the Boss' hidden abilities. Taking in the sight before me, it seems like it's able to summon endless waves of Ogres.

We fly forward, just over 20 meters above the battlefield. I stare deep into the glowing blue ball of mass, but can't see a thing. Just like before, the Boss Monster's status stats and level pop up, but I can't see its physical body.

I charge up a fairly high-powered strike and send it flying in the direction of the royal blue, slowly spinning, 10-meter-wide ball.

The moment my strike hits its outer wall, there's a light buzzing sound and a miniature white flash before the black blade of fire completely disappears into the spinning mass of energy.

Ember and I glide down, closer to the floor and begin taking out the mobs that are being spawned and sent our way.

Each and every one of them explodes into flames or gets decapitated on sight.

They fall to the arena floor behind us as we make our way toward the ominous orb that took one of my attacks without budging one bit.

Now that we're closer, I activate my All-Seeing Eye again and try to peer inside. It's still incredibly thick. Possibly almost 2 meters thick actually, made of pure swirling mana.

This time as I look deep into the barrier there's the faint outline of a monster sitting down with its legs crossed inside.

I almost do a double-take.

The ground beneath it has sunk in half a meter, and even while sitting it's much taller than the mutants that are continuously spawning out of its spinning dense mana.

It's at least 5 or 6 meters tall while sitting down, so whatever is inside there must be a 10-meter or taller monstrosity.

It's hard to make out exactly what it looks like, but the faint glimmer and mana output of its heavy metal armor can be sensed. Two massive silver axes lay on either side of it as well.

I grit my teeth, squint my eyes, and look closer.

I have to drink another MP potion just to burn through enough mana to see the creature in its entirety.

With eyes closed, legs crossed, a back straight, and the calm smile of a monk in meditation, the Mutant Blue Ogre King sits atop its mountain collecting mana and waiting for a worthy opponent to arrive.

My first attack was a complete failure so I'll have to try something different the second time around. To be honest, I'm not sure if the Boss even noticed.

Ember flies over the slowly spinning blue sphere and we begin circling it.

"Time to devise a plan."

Ember nods. We glide around in a circle 10 meters or so above the Dormant King of The Mountain.

More and more mutants attack as we circle the Boss. They're all dispatched in seconds by either dark red flames or a fiery black slash whenever they get too close.

The ball of energy doesn't move at all.

I'm almost at a loss for words. Usually, monsters are the first to make their move.

I open up my link with Ember.

"Is this Tier 2 mana control?"

"Yes."

There's a long pause as the wind passes by my face and long black wings flap on either side of me in a slow rhythmic fashion.

"...but that barrier may not be as impenetrable as it seems."

I squint at the loud buzzing sphere of mana below as Ember points his head toward the blue cylindrical cloud of mana that's still being sucked into the Boss' defenses.

"This ranked-up Ogre is definitely using Tier 2 mana control. It wouldn't be able to move mana around and use it for its own so freely without it."

I tighten the grip on my sword.

"So then where's its weakness? You must have found a break in its barrier, right?"

The black-scaled dragon lets out a thick dark crimson plume of flames down at the Boss in response without a second of doubt.

The eruption of flames engulfs the entire dome, creating the illusion of a 10-meter-wide fireball sitting on the mountain's peak as it flows off the sides onto the rocky floor.

We rise higher in the air to avoid the residue and debris.

Mutants are burned to ash in the process on all sides, but when the flames begin to clear the barrier is completely unharmed.

Well... almost...

The monster inside sits still. The outer layer of the blue sphere begins to melt away as the fire dissolves into it. The barrier itself is putting out the flames of Ember's advanced fire magic, but it's using its own mass to do so...

I let out a laugh, then begin to charge up my sword to its full power.

"You're right, the barrier has a weakness. It looks like we have an in."

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"You're right, it does have a weakness. It looks like we have an in."

Ember's dark flames that once engulfed the round blue sphere of mana begin to dissolve inwards. I watch the entire structure shrink. There are small explosions and it lets off white arcs of light similar to miniature sun flares.

It's not much, but it definitely shrinks... We can work this that.

"Again. Fire at it again."

My continuous mana output is nowhere near what Ember can produce, so I'll have to leave this part to him.

"Understood."

The glossy black-scaled majestic dragon flaps its wings slowly as we glide closer to the Boss again. A dense black and red plume of flames shoots down at the dormant monster to cover the entire structure once again.

Cries from newly spawned monsters can be heard while waiting for the sea of flames to clear.

The outer layer shrinks a minuscule amount yet again.

Blue mana residue takes in the flames, giving off a light buzz and flashes of light that sound like fireworks.

The blue and white magic residue disappears into thin air but the barrier's mass slowly grows back the moment it's destroyed.

I smirk as Ember lets another attack go.

"Again."

Over and over, we spawn-kill the mutant mobs that come running out from the orb. As they dissolve, dozens of shards begin to pile up on the arena floor. I pay little mind to this, solely focusing on the diameter of the orb that has now shrunk almost half a meter after just a dozen attacks.

Still, there's no movement coming from within, and the barrier itself is still being replenished by the cloud of blue mana-imbued fog that flows up the mountain from the original dungeon.

Ember glows bright red, slowly plundering MP from the environment around him to fuel his attacks.

If I'm seeing this right, the moment Ember lets up, this Ogre's entire defense will be restored in just a few seconds...

We continue to circle the Boss, 20-30 meters up in the air.

"Again."

I charge up my blade, harnessing the mana residue around me to charge my blade over a full MP bar. There's over 3000MP ready to fire off. At this density and newfound power from all my level-ups, it will be the most devastating attack I've ever thrown.

It takes nearly half a minute, but I'm waiting for the perfect time to strike.

Black flames continue to rain down, tampering with the Ogre's defenses as I take aim for the perfect shot.

I can sense that the shield has been weakened now to under half of its normal thickness, so I let my attack fly. With a powerful thrust, the black crescent of flames plummets down toward the mediating Mountain King.

There's a loud twang of dispersing mana in the air as my blade cuts a deep hole right through the already-damaged blue orb.

As the fiery blade enters the structure, one of the Ogre King's hands twitches and an eye opens wide staring through the clouds of mana to look directly at me. It shines a deep blue hue.

Time feels like it slows for a moment, then Ember swoops upwards avoiding the debris from my strike breaking the barrier.

In the blink of an eye, the mutant grabs both of his axes and swings them upwards to block my attack.

Its speed and instant readiness are astonishing. With reflexes like those, it may be faster than me.

A loud cracking sound echoes throughout the entire dungeon as my attack hits both of its axes. A loud grunt comes from below as it's deflected to the side, but still manages to land a hit on the Ogre's upper arm.

The fiery crescent then flies out the other side of the dome, trailing with a light drip of crimson blood.

It wasn't much, but I landed a hit...

"A good start."

We fly high into the air as the murderous roar of the awakened Mountain King shakes the entire Dungeon.

The bright blue mana swirling around this beast begins to compact, getting denser and denser until it covers the beast in a blue shimmering body suit.

The once massive orb of energy now covers a dual axe-wielding Giant Blue Ogre Boss.

Glistening blue and white, the entire body of the beast is covered head to toe with thick mana.

I may have been very lucky to get a shot in before it fully woke up...

Two dark blue lights shine from the monster's face, showing me where its eyes are located, but I can't see its actual body.

All that stands before us is a glowing blue and white outline of a monstrosity.

"So... much mana..."

I've never seen or felt so much energy all in one place since I fell into the Titan's Domain. This is completely different...

That mana was freely floating in an open void.

This mana is 100% in control of the monster before us.

The air wavers before my eyes and the buzzing from mana in the air is so loud that everything around me sounds silent...

The flaming rock from our previous attacks makes a wall of flames and half-dying mutants create the perfect contrast to show off the Dungeon Break's Boss in all its glory.

The silence ceases and it lets out another murderous roar, pointing its axes straight up at us in the air.

I yell out to Ember through our link.

"Again, fire! The real battle begins now!"

Thick flames engulf the 10-meter-tall Blue Ogre King, but it doesn't move a muscle. The monster stays in place and takes the attack.

Its outer layer of mana crackles and pops as it eats up the flames and lets white mana disperse into the air.

"Again!"

We circle the monster as it calmly stands still, following our flight path with its dark blue gaze taking attack after attack.

Meanwhile, I charge my blade up just like before. It takes well over half a minute to use the dungeon air, but just a few seconds with MP potions. I release another 3000 MP attack straight at the King.

"I wonder how it'll react this time...."

This is the same devastating strike that shattered its defenses just moments ago to draw blood.

Instead of standing its ground and taking the hit, the massive beast finally lifts its axes again.

This time around, they're covered in a thick layer of dense blue mana. On impact, there's a slight pause and reaction of light and twanging sound, but the strike I throw is deflected off deep into the boss room without much effort at all...

Then, the mutant finally makes its move.

It turns and begins running in our direction. The ground cracks and shakes, leaving high craters behind in its wake. Dense blue mana drips from beneath its feet leaving pools of blue residue all over the battlefield.

The monster gets closer and closer, but we're high in the sky.

Ember lets out another attack, covering the Ogre in a crimson wave of flames. Instantly, the monster retaliates and swings its axes as the flames dissolve into its armor of mana.

We're over 30 meters in the air, so there's no way it can reach us. Even with a jump in the air, I doubt it can leap this far...

While thinking this, my eyes open wide at the reality of the situation.

As it swings its two axes, dark royal blue mana comes shooting out of them, just like the attack I sent flying at it earlier.

In an instant, It spawns mana crescents far larger and denser than my own.

Amber senses the danger too and we dodge instantly. swooping lower to the battlefield.

The Ogre King swings its axes again, sending two blue crescents of murderous blue light our way.

A swerve to the right takes us out of its line of fire, just barely. The wind blows by me on both sides with vicious force as we speed up and the seriousness of this battle sets in.

I grit my teeth while charging my blade and we dodge another two attacks as it lets out a roar to shake the Boss room once again.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse... The pools of mana all around the dish-like battlefield begin to bubble and glow much brighter.

Rocks start to braking and more Ogre's roars start to fill my ears.

Dozens of mutants start spawning from the residue pools left behind by the Boss' footsteps.

We fly around the battlefield as more and more mutants spawn with seemingly no end in sight. Ember blows flames down on them as the Boss tracks our movements sending off more mana-filled attacks.

I let off attacks of my own, drinking mana potions to charge my sword as well as using some residue from the atmosphere to fuel my attacks.

Every one of them is blocked with incredible precision, and every step this beast takes spawns more obstacles for us to avoid and take out.

Ever since that first unguarded strike that made this Ogre bleed, I haven't even gotten past its blades. Not a single strike has hit its shielding yet.

The blue fog from above is feeding its defenses even more, nearly negating Ember's fiery attacks.

The shielding around its body is growing back at close to the same rate the fire is burning it down.

I have to do something.

"Dungeon Walker."

Out of frustration and curiosity, I blip to the monster's opposite side while Ember lets off one of his flaming attacks.

I let one of my own soar, right at its back.

It can't move in time, and I land a direct hit...

A red, black, blue, and white explosion follows and I see its bright blue armor open up for just a moment to expose its skin.

The time it takes for me to bring another mana potion to my lips is more than enough for it to heal the small hole in its barrier and turn my way...

I blip back to Ember's back and stare down at the monster as it turns its blue eyes to meet mine.

"We're completely outmatched... but I have an idea."

The rumbling of newly spawned mutants comes running our way, and the Boss holds both of its axes steady, covered head to toe in pure blue armor.

It charges its blades while I whisper under my breath and open my status screen.

"It's been a while, but it's time to upgrade another skill..."

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"It's been a while, but it's time to upgrade another skill..."

While looking down at my status I check the proficiency points available to me.

PP: 231

We continue to fly around in circles narrowly dodging the monster's bright blue energy attacks.

I need to make it through this monster's defenses and take in enough mana to continue battling at a steady rate. I'll either need to up my mana control drastically, or use the points available to me and upgrade a skill.

Leaving the dungeon right now isn't an option. I told my teammates I'd clear it, so that's what I'm doing...

I'm less than 20 points away from being able to upgrade my next legendary skill, Absorption.

That's the only reason I've been saving them up for so long.

It's the skill that has gotten me this far. All thanks to being able to take the powers from monsters I kill, I've been able to defy the odds and get stronger much faster than everyone around me.

Though... in a scenario like this, what's absorption good for if I can't defeat the monsters with the skills I'm trying to steal?

I scroll down my list and choose the logical decision.

If it's Tier 2 mana control I have to contend with, then I'll just make my own version of it.

Plunderer

Info: Plunderer allows the user to take mana from opponents once physical contact is made. Mana crystals and other magic items may be plundered.

The effectiveness of the user's ability to plunder decreases if the average mana control output of their opponent is higher than their own. It is much more efficient to plunder weaker enemies.

MP may be consumed in mana-rich dungeon environments, but effectiveness is severely lacking compared to direct contact plundering.

Grade: [No Grade]

[Upgrade]

I click Upgrade as two blue blades shoot by my head and the rumble of dozens more freshly spawned in mutants approach.

Upgrade: 50PP

[No Grade] -> [Special Grade]

The [Special Grade] Plunderer skill allows the user to plunder opponents up to 50% greater mana control than their own with equal proficiency to their own level.

The [Special Grade] Plunderer skill allows the user to absorb MP from dungeons with much higher proficiency. Even when mana is not visible to the naked eye, it may be plundered all the same. Contact with any dungeon mass is also considered a viable link to plunder MP.

The [Special Grade] Plunderer skill will not affect the dungeon's structural integrity. It will only limit the amount of monsters available to respawn from the source.

Without batting an eye, I click upgrade and immediately feel a difference.

I activate my plunderer skill, to charge up an attack, and feel every free-floating mana particle in the air begin to move in towards my body, down my arms, and into my sword.

It's like breathing in fresher air than I ever knew existed. No MP potions or strengthening fragments can beat the pure feeling of power that's just entered my veins.

With my All-Seeing Eye and Mana Manipulation simultaneously active, it feels like I can see, touch, move, and absorb everything atop this mountain.

No... in this whole dungeon.

A faint pink glow, similar to my mana manipulation adds itself to the mixture of blended colors in my dark red and golden aura.

"The real battle begins now."

I start launching off 3000 MP attacks at the monster one after another like it's nothing...

Every twist and turn through the air we make into new portions of mana-filled air allows me to charge up my blades almost instantly.

Sure, they'll take a toll on me once I hit my daily MP consumption limit, but I have a few hundred shots at this power level left in me. So, it's time to get to work.

The first shot I fire off is blocked by the mutant boss' blade. The second one right after hits its left side.

White and blue light appears followed by the explosion of flames as I watch its barrier crack over at the point of impact. Two more shots erupt from my blade one after another and fly off in its direction.

One heads straight for its outreached dual blades while the other curves around to slip right through the cracked opening in its blue mana barrier.

Another loud twang and cracking noise follows. A loud roar confirms I made a direct hit.

As the residue clears and its shielding starts to reform, the crimson glint of blood dripping from a small cut catches my eye.

I smirk as Ember dives downwards and we fly to its opposite side.

"Another hit."

To make things easier, I take out my dagger. It allows me to force the barrier open with one attack and send another strike in right after to do the actual damage.

I let out more shots of mana as Ember spins and dives to avoid the rage-filled attacks of the boss.

Fire begins to burn dark red on the ground below us. Every attack Ember and I send lets out large plumes of dark flames that spread from mutant to mutant slowly burning them alive.

Even if they're not hit head-on with a direct attack, they're killed moments after they spawn.

The only thing immune to the flames is the merciless boss. Its suit of blue armor wades through the thick flames and puts them out on contact. A line of untouched rock floor trails behind it.

We circle the beast as it lunges towards us again and again.

It may be fast and powerful, but our speed and agility in the air are far above the Boss monster's capabilities.

The fallen mobs leave shards behind. They're starting to pile up and give off a visible glimmer of white and blue light even from here.

Everything is going as planned.

The only problem is, as many shots as I fire off, it's getting harder and harder to hit this crafty creature.

I've landed 5 more successful blows, but the shielding in its place is getting harder to hit.

It's also predicting my attacks and dodging over half of them now. I'll have to try something else.

"Dungeon Walker."

I jump off of Ember's back, now having more than enough teleport points plotted in the air to handle myself.

With the element of surprise on my side, I can much more effectively send attacks into the monster's bright blue armor. It takes 1 wind slash to break it, and 1 fiery attack to damage the beast. I can send off 2 before narrowly blipping away to avoid its counterattacks.

There is some damage, but it's not nearly enough... If only I could land one more hit per time I attack. A wind and fire combo attack would complement each other and do much more damage.

Gritting my teeth, I land another 3 total hits while blipping around 7 more times. Small gashes appear on its arms, legs, and torso but all I've done is it angry.

Every time I break through its mana shielding, the blue barrier just grows back stronger.

I open my link with Ember as he continues to weaken the Boss' mana armor while eradicating the mutants in the crossfire.

"I need to you take out its source."

I look up at the dark blue stream of mana that's been continuously flowing down into the battlefield this entire time.

There's far too much mana for me to consume. I can sense millions of MP flowing out from the Dunegon and around the body of this monster.

Ember replies while sending off a final fireball to destroy a wave of approaching Ogres.

"Understood, I'll block it from the sky. To Absorb this much mana, I'll need to concentrate. I trust you'll finish the battle."

While gripping my sword I turn back to the Boss.

"If it can't regenerate its shielding any further. I can handle it."

With that, Ember takes to the sky and I air step downward to let out another attack before blipping away to its blind spot.

The monster is becoming frustrated but keeps its composure with dark blue eyes locked on me for the full time we fight.

The more attacks I land, the better it learns my movements too. Not only can the humming blue mass of mana dodge me more often than not, it's also letting out its own attacks faster and with more precision as well.

Sometimes, I even have to move out of the way before releasing an attack of my own. It's predicting my Dungeon Walker teleports.

Finally, Ember's voice echoes in my inner ear.

"It is done."

I feel a familiar feeling crawl over my skin and my vision is tinted red.

The ambient mana in the air drastically decreases for a fraction of a second while it feels like time slows down.

I turn my head to see Ember high in the sky above the mountain radiating a dark red crimson aura. The blue mana clouds are reacting and glowing bright white.

An incredible light fills the sky, and the flight path of appraising foreign dungeon mass is successfully blocked.

My perception of time speeds back up as a wide grin crosses my face. The Boss monster is distracted by the sight as well. Taking advantage of the moment, I release another two attacks to land a devastating blow on its left side.

I let out a laugh and blip away while watching the monster heal its broken shielding.

It's not by much, but the dense shield shrinks ever so slightly to mend the hole.

After a few more teleportation maneuvers, air-step dodges, and near misses, I land another strike to the monster's back.

With a loud cry, the Boss' dark blue eyes tighten, looking even more angry than before as it heals the shielding's hole.

It shrinks again.

I've gained the upper hand.

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I've gained the upper hand.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

To my surprise, the sound of level-up notifications rings in my ears as more and more mutants die in the burning fires below.

I'm not that much higher of a level than them, so it would make sense that killing this many would continue to raise my own.

With a bright red, white, and blue glow completely covering the sky overhead blocking the energy that once added to this Boss monster's barrier, I can face this beast on my own terms now.

Without its constant energy renewal, it seems more on edge... but also more willing to fight. Its eyes glow darker and look more alert, fully aware of its situation.

The last remaining visible wisps of blue swirling magical fog make their way into its buzzing armor made of blue light, then the boss glares at me to let out its loudest ground-shaking roar.

"Dungeon Walker."

I teleport to its opposite side and let off a dual attack straight into its back.

With a swing of right-handed axe, it blocks one of my blades and the other collides with its shielding.

Dungeon walking away, I let off another attack to strike the monster's wide-open exposed flash.

It predicts my movements, and I have to dodge an energy attack from its left blade.

"As expected. You won't be giving up easily."

A wide smile stays on my face as we fight to the death.

Another dozen shots each fly back and forth, and I've managed to hit the monster 4 more times. Each attack draws more blood and now shrinks its mana shielding more than twice as fast as before.

I've consumed nearly half a million MP to launch my attacks, but it keeps enduring my blows. Luckily, there's an end in sight.

Without the excess mana in the air, the shielding it's using as a defense forms back at a rate almost 5 times slower than before.

Each attack I start letting out does more damage to its energy supplies, sending off larger white explosions and releasing more ambient mana into the air.

Every shot that lands makes bigger breaks in its barrier opening up much larger targets for my second strikes to land.

Although the monster is adapting to my movements and becoming much more agile on the battlefield, the longer this fight lasts, the more hits damage the boss.

Its blue eyes glow darker and darker as the shielding grows thinner and thinner. I can hardly even be spotted while teleporting and air-stepping around it in circles.

With so much mana at my fingertips for use, the battle just gets more exhilarating every moment I'm in it.

Massive explosions of fire residue obliterate Mutants that spawn from existing pools of blue light.

[Level Up]

Easily another hundred are slaughtered as our battle continues on.

Due to my speed and agility in the air thanks to wind summoning and dungeon walking, I'm in no real danger of getting hit while focused on the battle.

Mana flies, attacks are thrown, and the mutant's eyes glow brighter and brighter as its shielding slowly fails.

Almost 15 minutes pass, and I've landed 3 dozen more attacks.

Sweating, breathing heavily, and nearing my limit, I stare down at the bloodied and beaten beast below.

If I had to guess... This massive barrier of mana it was using isn't just its Tier 2 mana control at play, it must be part of its hidden ability "Ultimate Defense of The Blue Ogre King".

Without the availability of excess mana, it's not able to be used. Or maybe there's another hidden metric to its buff...

Through my All-Seeing Eye skill, I can see it sucking in mana to create a base level of shielding, but the thick blue and white light that surrounds its body is so weak that I can see its torn-apart flesh even without my perception abilities now.

It lets out roars of anger and frustration. The mutants spawn less and less from its excess residue.

It desperately defends as I mercilessly attack, pushing most of its mana reserves into its axes to block my incoming strikes.

This allows it to block some, but the attacks that hit its wounded body just keep doing more and more damage.

Every time it begins to cover up an area in defenses I let out attacks with blinding speed to break the barriers down and eventually bring the monster to its knees.

With a loud clang of metal axes hitting the stone floor, followed by the thud of its tired body hitting the ground, the Mutant Ogre King Bows its head in defeat.

With Hundreds of shards laid out in piles beneath its battered body, the monster begins to let its shielding drop.

I tighten my gaze and whisper under my breath in a suspicious tone.

"Too easy..."

It doesn't seem like the type to give up, but It was clearly outmatched....

Not wanting to give it another second to re-think its decision, I send dual attacks of wind and fire straight at the monster's midsection.

Not making a sound, the blades glide through, and two half of the 10-meter-tall mutilated Ogre King fall to the Boss Room's floor.

I gulp, darting my eyes back and forth while waiting for the sweet sounds of even more level-ups to ring in my ears.

But they never come...

The crackle of black flames is all that fills my ears as the remainder of mutants perish all around me in the fire.

I air-step down to the floor, landing on a thin layer of white and blue shards. The two halves of the Mutant King lay dormant as I slowly approach...

Even the buzzing sound of mana ceases. The dungeon becomes eerily silent.

I open my link with Ember.

"It's done..."

The moment I do, the light buzz of mana in the air returns, but oddly enough it's coming from below me.

The shards that cover the ground begin to glow much brighter than before...

Then they all start vibrating at a similar frequency and move towards the mutant's body that lies lifeless on the stone floor...

It begins to glow blue and white as well, giving off the same dull hum.

"This... doesn't look like it's going to end well."

I grit my teeth and teleport as far up into the air as I can, calling out to Ember through our link.

"Enough, we have to get back... Now!"

The black-scaled dragon swoops down at my words and I manage to touch his glossy wing just in time to teleport us to the far side of the dungeon where we entered.

The glowing stones rattle more and more, coming together on the fallen corpse of the Mutant King.

The light animating from the top of the mountain grows until the buzzing can be heard from over a kilometer away at the far side of the Boss Room...

Finally, it hits its peak and there's an overwhelming white flash of light.

Second later I hear a loud crack and the entire dungeon shakes.

I watch the top half of the distant mountain explode, sending massive chunks of rock high into the air in all directions.

Millions and millions of MP from the fallen Ogres have consolidated and let out their energy all at once. A last-ditch effort by the Boss to protect its lair.

A shock wave of energy and debris comes flying our way, but all I can focus on is the constant ringing in my ears.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 495

Hp: 2480/2480

Mp: 2050/2480

Strength: 1311 [+1849][+1481][+656][+656][+656]

Speed: 1433 [+866][+717][+717]

Agility: 1538 [+692][+1692][+769][+769]

Defense: 1102 [+1223][+1014][+551]

Mental Strength: 1230 [+738][+554][+1341][+1316][+984][+615][+615][+615]

Skills:

Absorption [Special Grade]

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spatial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer [Special Grade]

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength

Dual Wielding [Special Grade]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Final Breath [Special Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Items Equipped:

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

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

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

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

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

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+141% Strength][+109% Mental Strength]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set:

[Wind Aspect][+112% Strength][+110% Agility][+107% Mental Strength]

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+92% Defense]

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

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

Bufs:

[Berserker] +50% Strength + Mental Strength

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

[Extreme Strength] +50% Strength

Chapter 246

"I just need another 5 levels..."

Although a shockwave of excess magic and debris is flying my way at an alarming speed, all I can do is stare down at my status and smile.

I've gained 4 levels from the hundreds of slain mutants and another 10 levels from defeating the boss itself. This brings me up to level 495.

There are only 5 more until I hit "B-Class" eligibility. I know there's an exam available to hunters that hit level 500... but it's not brought up in the news often. Not many make it this high.

Without upgrading my plunderer skill to special grade, taking out this boss would have been near-impossible. I have plenty of other skills, yes, but the only thing that mattered in the end was my ability to wield mana at an accelerated rate.

It seems this is the second large bottleneck in the hunter's natural rank-up process.

There's one that occurs on the level 300-350 range, the introduction to mana control that allows only those with rare element aptitudes to progress at a quicker pace. The ones that are funded enough, whether that be government or private aid can one day make it to the level of the Elite Status.

The next pause in progression has to be focused around Tier 2 mana control. Monsters that near level 500, becoming ranked-up beings, able to take in MP through advanced mana control seem to be unbeatable opponents for a magic user that can't keep up with their endless shielding.

Sure, not impossible to defeat, but very unlikely.

This is why there are so few B-Class Hunters in the world.

I wonder how much mana control would be necessary to achieve this rate of natural environmental mana absorption without a special skill like mine...

I let out a sigh, then turn my focus back to the white and blue energy wave coming my way.

Opening my link with Ember, I point to the sky.

"We'll fly above it. Before the Dungeon Collapses entirely, I'd like to see if the Boss drops any loot."

With a powerful flap of his wings, we soar up into the air. The body of this beast is gone, but it must have left something behind.

Ember replies.

"Very good. That was an impressive victory, Master. We're so close to ranking up. Maybe I'll finally get to evolve after our next big battle."

I smirk.

"Maybe... even before."

The shock wave of energy and flying rocks ripples beneath us as we travel higher into the air.

Weaker energy makes it up to our altitude, but I teleport us into the zone of the obliterated mountain that has already weathered the shockwave. We avoid the blast entirely.

Activating all my perception skills, two items pop up on my radar. One of them seems to be a ring the Ogre was wearing with an incredible mental strength buff, the other item is one I've never seen before...

The mana readings it's giving off are unbelievable.

Not just their mana residue stands out to me, but also their information on my appraisal skill.

"This changes everything..."

We glide forward as I point Ember in the right direction, then start digging through the piles of rubble and half-melted boulders.

Using mana manipulation, I easily part the stone and find exactly what I'm looking for, the first item drop.

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]

Silver in color, I toss the ring up and down in my palm a few times. It feels even heavier than gold....

I take off my desert troll's charm, only giving me a 45% metal strength boost, and put on this ring with 100%. Immediately, I feel a small shift in my power as the buffs are recalibrated.

Next, I turn toward the real treasure.

Peeking out of another large rock pile, the bright blue glow of another item calls to me. I move all the surrounding rock out of the way with ease revealing what's underneath in all its glory.

A palm-sized dark blue crystal gives off a loud low-frequency hum rests on the rocky floor.

Wisps of blue and white mana trail off of it as I pick the crystal up from a distance using telekinesis.

It floats in the air as I appraise it.

Blue Ogre King's Essence [Core]

Info: The Accumulated Essence of the Blue Ogre King. Excess mana from a Blue Ogre King's Dungeon Break has been contained in crystal form.

Class: B++

Type: Consumable

Durability[MP Output]: 101.4M/101.4M

"One hundred... Million...."

The crystal floats toward me as I grasp it between my fingertips sitting firmly on Ember's back.

The rings on my finger clink against the crystal's hard structure. The deeper I look inside this gem, the more endless the swirling mana within seems to become.

Before I can get out another thought, a flash of light engulfs me on all sides. The dungeon collapses, consuming both Ember and me in the blinding whiteness of transfer magic.

I feel Ember's feet thud against the sandy yet rocky floor where we entered this dungeon.

Opening my item storage I throw the blue vibrating gem inside and immediately open my link with Ember.

"To the sky!"

It's nearly pitch black out, and I can barely see a thing. A sliver of sunlight escapes the horizon telling me the approximate time, but I already knew that I slept all day before this raid began.

My only worry and reason for being so quick to the sky is the off chance that someone were to see me with a dragon come out of the break, it wouldn't be good... Thankfully, after a quick enemy detection scan finding not a single soul around, I'm put more at ease.

Ember flaps his wings and carries us high up into the fly above the cloud line.

To my surprise, the sunlight gets brighter the higher we travel upwards...

The sun has really just gone down, but I'll have the opportunity to see the sunset again.

I let out a laugh while opening my link with Ember as the cool air passes through my hair.

"We have to head north. About an 18-hour ride by camel, and my team should be over halfway there by now. It'd be best to slow time the flight speed down so we arrive just as they do. We're off to Solara."

"Understood."

The sun sets again, leaving us in the cool darkness of night.

As I begin to relax, the built-up battle fatigue hits me all at once.

The aching bones, tired muscles, and tingling skin start to take a toll on me making my eyes close yet again. I make sure to drink water, and eat enough to satisfy my hunger, but drift off to sleep within the hour.

A few questions race around in my mind as I fade away into dreamland on Ember's back.

How can I use this new item to my advantage... 100 million mana will surely do irreversible damage if I try to consume it all at once.

However, I could use Plunderer at its new special grade rank to absorb the mana while Abby constantly Restores my MP..

This is a possibility.

I also have almost 60 million MP worth of mutant fragments from Ember's farming escapades too... My teammates will most likely be able to handle 100k MP at a time if they push themselves.

That dungeon is gone, but we've made some serious gains in a short time. Once I meet back up with them after a long sleep, we'll have a final upgrade session before facing off against the Labyrinth in the capital.

I'm feeling a lot more confident in our abilities as a team than I did just a few days ago.

Chapter 247

Leaving the setting sun behind, I drift off to sleep as Ember gracefully glides above the desert.

The cool breeze and the dark night sky slowly calm the adrenaline pumping through my blood post-battle. All I can dream about are the new power-ups coming soon and the labyrinth break in Solara that's giving people so much trouble.

The only logical explanation is that the two Elites sent to take care of it were not strong enough to face off against a ranked-up boss alone.

Maybe they're facing a similar problem, they can't keep up with the higher levels of mana control.

With that being said...

One of them is Fisher. I'm at a higher overall level than him now, but in my current state, I believe our mana control is nearly even.

I'm going to have to make use of this Ogre's Core in order to make it to the next level.

"... Master"

Ember's voice wakes me from my thought-filled sleep.

My body feels exhausted still, and my head aches.

"I think I might have overdone it again...."

My skin tingles and my bones feel weak. This is exactly how I felt after using up too much mana in my Floor Boss fight. Just, nowhere near as bad.

Rubbing my eyes, I look out into the distance of the night sky. Still, there's only darkness in all directions. Ember speaks again to ease my confusion.

"I believe we're getting close."

In response, I scan the wide-open desert in all directions as far as my radars will let me.

A few things all begin to hit me all at once...

Below us, no more than 5 kilometers ahead, I sense 3 enemies all between levels 460 and 470. There's a very high chance these are my teammates. After a quick Appraisal, I confirm without a doubt it's them.

"How long was I out?"

"Another 6 hours Master."

I nod, sensing thousands of other data points off in the distance about 7-8 kilometers north.

There are too many to count... Hundreds of the are over level 200, and thousands under 100. It's the same leveling distribution as back in Vice City. It must be a very well-developed area, unlike the towns we've visited so far.

"This must be Solara."

There's a very odd reading coming from further out into the desert behind the city. Either my perception skill doesn't reach far enough in my fatigued state, or there is some interference in the readings. It's like there's an outer edge to how far I can sense... anything...

Maybe there are just no more mana readings to sense out in this barren wasteland of a desert. Well... I hope at least. This void in my perception skills bugs me a bit.

There isn't much I can do about it other than wait to see what the interference is myself. With all these questions racing through my head, I just shrug and focus on the more important data. My teammates are close.

"Ember, I'll be making my way down soon. Bring us right above the cloud line then leave the rest to me. I believe our next meeting will be in the Labyrinth, so get ready."

I see a toothy grin form on the dragon's face as its glossy black wings tilt downward to change our flight direction.

We soar toward the ground and I feel the presence of my teammates getting closer and closer. Once we approach a perceivable range I open up my item storage and hop off Ember's back.

"Thanks for the ride, we'll be back in battle soon."

As I fly ahead, the white Spatial magic appears behind me. Ember flies straight into my open white spinning portal and disappears.

The fast-moving air flies by me as I begin to plummet toward the ground. It's pitch black in the cool of night, but I can tell how far away my teammates are and know just how much wind magic I'll need to stop myself from hitting the ground too fast. So, in the meantime, I relax.

It's a calming sensation.

The weightlessness of falling. Moving so fast through the air, feeling the wind push against my skin, but still feel like I don't even compare in weight to a feather.

If I spin onto my back, and let the air push me up, it's like I'm resting on an invisible bed of clouds.

Close to a full minute of enjoying the moment of bliss passes, then I finally activate my wind magic and slow to a halt hovering just 100 meters over the desert floor.

I can see the dim glow of a white magic arrow illuminating 2 camels slowly moving across the flat sandy ground.

I approach with causation, igniting a small flame in my hand. After a few seconds, a wave of my telepathy skill is sent out to the online teammate awake right now.

"It's Jay. I've made it back. Glad to see you've made it so far."

Immediately, I watch the archer turn and draw his bow in my direction. The arrow glows much brighter as I drift down to the desert floor.

Once he sees my face, the arrow fades back to its dim glow and I see a sigh of relief wash over his face.

"Good to see you too. You're just in time."

Both Abby and Maria are asleep again. It seems like they took the day shift, and Arie is up again in the middle of the night.

I put out my flames and come down to sit back on the rightmost camel taking the reins from Arie with a firm nod. Maria turns in her sleep as I sit in front of her.

Arie speaks up.

"You flew all the way here in the dark?"

I let out a sigh.

"Yeah. Something like that."

Then, open up my item storage and let a handful of mutant shards fall out into my open palm.

"It was worth it. All 4 of us will be able to gain another 15 million in mana control. Minimum."

I let the gems clink around in my hands while the archer responds.

"How was the Boss? Did you get any good loot?"

I smirk and show him my ring.

"100% Mental Strength Buff. It's a nice once isn't it?"

He agrees, eyeing it curiously.

After that, we continue north as I update him on the break, details of Tier 2 mana control, and the power difference between the boss I fought and the ones we faced prior. Of course, without revealing Ember or any sensitive information that I wouldn't like to share.

Although I trust my team, I've run my mouth a bit too much about a few things lately... If I want something kept quiet, I better not speak of it at all. Information is no longer a secret once more than one person knows about its existence.

One thing I don't mind showing off is the rest of the loot. I take out the core from my storage, but Arie hasn't seen anything like it either in his life. It's agreed that any loot from the boss is mine to keep. Well, more like it's agreed that no one here can even make use of that core but me.

Finally, the topic of Arie's hometown comes up again. We're getting close to where he mentioned it was when we first entered the Dark Continent so I thought I'd bring it up. What he tells me is a bit off-putting, and not what I was expecting...

"We can visit my hometown after the break is cleared."

Arie points forward and off into the desert as the sun begins to rise.

"It's off that way, I'm positive. It's been quite a while since I left, but it may be nice to see some familiar faces."

I don't say a word, realizing when I scanned the desert earlier, that portion of desert was impossible to detect.

Not a single soul or mana reading came up in my mind's eye...

While thinking of an appropriate response, I hear Maria's voice from behind me and two hands hug me from behind.

"Jay! You made it back!"

At the same moment, Abby begins to wake up as well, murmuring something while rubbing her eyes.

The sunlight of day begins to flood in, ridding the desert of darkness.

Our conversation comes to a halt and all four of us stare forward at the sight before us...

Shining silver towers glistening in the morning sun.

I count 6 of them in total, each easily 30 stories tall. With long clear glass windows and the golden reflection of the rising sun showing the city in all its glory, I'm left speechless.

Hundreds of small buildings line the grid-like streets below. Workers from all walks of life are already starting their daily routines.

The 4 of us will be entering the city soon.

We made it to Solara.

Chapter 248

We approach the silver towers as the morning sun reflects golden light onto our approaching camels.

This city looks a lot more developed than any of the other smaller towns we've been through in the Dark Continent so far.

If I had to guess, it looks like tens of thousands of people could easily be housed here.

With high rises of apartments in residential areas, shops indoors and outdoors selling hunter's gear as well as basic necessities that un-leveled villagers can use.

Even this early in the morning people are beginning to line the streets.

Arie speaks up.

"This is it. Welcome to Solara."

It's huge... but honestly, with all the hype, this is about what I expected.

"Where is the Tower of Dreams? That's where we need to meet up with those two Elites right?"

Arie points to a slim curved silver tower between a ridged rectangular one and a very light-colored one on its other side, each roughly the same height.

"Right this way. We have two or three hours until the raid begins. How's everyone feeling?"

Maria replies, still staring up at the beautiful shimmering city.

"I feel great!"

Abby stares up while rubbing her eyes, not saying a word as we enter the city streets and off of the sandy desert sand.

They're made of tightly placed cobblestone, but in such a straight line and meticulously crafted it seems some heavy machinery or maybe magic kill was used to fit these streets together.

The buildings for as far as the eye can see are made of very modern and most definitely imported steel and bricks. Possibly from outside the walls. I don't see where all of this metal and building material could have come from otherwise.

Unless there are factories and power plants out here that I haven't seen, there must be more cooperation with the Association than it seems on the surface.

This reminds me...

"Hey, everyone, hoods up. We may have bounties in this city too..."

Immediately, everyone follows my advice and we cover our faces with the red hoods of our cloaks. It doesn't hurt to be cautious.

Arie leads us into the city.

The morning sun shines a yellow light on the street vendors setting up their shops while we walk further into town.

Merchants begin shouting at us as we walk by.

"E and D class gear, straight from the dungeons, get 'em while you still can!"

A woman's voice comes from behind us next.

"Potions! Potions and mana crystals, 50% off until noon!"

I look around curiously, then speak to Arie.

"Is there a dungeon system out here? I don't sense any active portals at all..."

He slowly nods.

"Yeah, they box each dungeon up like back in DryRock to make sure if one breaks it won't destroy the city. A lot of them are closer to the center of town."

I nod as the footsteps of camels echo against the street.

"Interesting..."

The 6 towers get closer and closer, and the shops that line the streets become more and more high-tech. It almost feels wrong to be walking through a city like this on two animals...

"Training rooms! Graded up to B-Class shielding! 60 minutes for a room, only 1 silver per hunter."

My head turns as I hear the sound of a young energetic man's voice speak up. I bring my ride to a halt and whisper under my breath.

"This could be perfect...."

Maria speaks up from behind me.

"What's all this about? Why are we stopping for a training room?"

I nod.

"I think it'd be a good idea. I farmed a lot more of the shards last night, we need a place to absorb them before our mission, right?"

"Hmm, I agree."

Abby speaks up next.

"I think this is a good idea too. We might as well use all the time we have left to get stronger."

All of us jump off and I take 8 silver coins out while speaking up to the tall blond-haired worker.

"We'd like a room. 2 full hours for all 4 of us."

The man accepts my silver as Arie ties up the camels to a post outside.

The store in front of us is about 3 stories high. Its first-floor walls to the entrance are made of glass to show the white walls of the elegant-looking shop inside.

It's a long rectangular storefront, possibly 7 meters wide and no more than 15 meters long. We all walk toward the stairs in the back that lead us up to a large metal door on the 2nd floor.

The man speaks up.

"Here you all are."

He's surprisingly easygoing. No ID needed, no name, nothing at all. I guess this is just how they do things out here.

With a swift motion, he taps on a small square black plate attached to the door.

It begins counting down from 121 minutes.

"I gave you an extra minute to get situated. The door will open if you push the handle or once the counter hits 0, so please don't continue your training after this time. The shielding won't be activated unless I enter the code."

The door clicks open to reveal a bright white room, similar to the flooring downstairs. It has stations of shielding fitted together that all seem to be carrying shades of white.

It hums and creates a perfect barrier all the same.

I step inside while replying.

"Sounds good. I appreciate it."

On the inside of the door, there's an identical timer, ticking down the minutes and seconds.

[120:49]

The moment we all walk inside and the door closes behind us with a loud click, I open up my item storage and begin dumping out the glowing blue shards.

"Let's get started."

The shards begin falling down onto the bussing white floor.

"There's over 500 of them. Every last one is from a mutant, so we'll have to be a lot more careful about absorbing them at first. I think we can all handle it just fine though."

I let out a laugh, but my 3 teammates stare down at the gems and then back up to me with wide eyes.

Maria is the first to speak up.

"Five.... Hundred... mutants?"

There's a glimmer in Abby's eye as she prematurely glows green.

Arie smirks and crosses his arms.

"Well, let's get to work."

I pick up one of the blue stones in each hand and reply.

"Let's."

Over the next hour, we all take turns burning through the white and blue shards.

As predicted, everyone manages to absorb them just fine. At first, Abby and Maria were in pretty bad condition after each run-through, but by the end of our session, everyone can handle them with ease.

In just under an hour, we manage to finish them all.

I can sense the differences in mana output from my teammates already. Their power has grown drastically.

Abby and Maria by almost 100% and Arie has grown nearly 40% stronger in just a short period of time.

I've grown too... but not nearly enough.

Looking at the clock on the door, I see 59:32 remaining.

"Just under an hour left."

Abby speaks up with sweat rolling down her forehead next to a pile of empty mana potions.

"Not bad right? We made it through all of them with time to spare."

I reach into my item storage and pull out the Ogre King's Core.

"Not all of them... There's one more. I'm going to need some extra help for this one."

I also pull out every last MP potion I have on me.

"I have a feeling you may need these. I'm going to need to be restored while simultaneously absorbing the MP from this final core to finish in time."

Abby walks over while Maria and Arie watch from afar.

She stares down at the vibrating gem for a moment, then looks back up at me.

"Let's do it."

Arie knows exactly what's about to happen, so he speaks up before we actually begin.

"It may be a good idea for us to leave. This... may get intense, won't it? Plus, it'd be best to let the Association know we're in town."

I think for a moment, then nod.

"Maybe it would be best if we meet you at the tower."

He looks over to Maria and she shrugs, replying.

"That works for me. I'd like to have some time to talk with my Elite trainer before the raid too. Maybe she has some helpful tips about my new mana control abilities."

I raise an eyebrow at this but know it's not the time to ask. Her statement confirms my suspicions about the white-haired Elite being Maria's Guide.

"I'd like to meet her too."

I turn to Abby, then back to Maria.

"We'll finish as fast as we can and meet you there."

The archer and Ice mage both open the heavy metal door and disappear with a click. They're leaving us with a camel and meeting in the lobby of the Tower of Dreams once we've finished.

It's best to think about that later and focus on the important things now.

I activate my plunderer skill while simultaneously turning on all of my stat-boosting buffs and perception abilities at once.

I won't be consuming this core like the other shards, I'll need to burn through the MP using active skills...

"This is going to be quite the challenge."

Glowing bright gold, red, black, and now a hint of blue from the Ogre King's mana residue, I push my mind and body to the limits.

As soon as I begin, the warm sensation of Abby's hands on my back tells me that her restore skill has been activated.

With just 1 hour remaining, I'll attempt to absorb this entire core.

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Black, red, pink, and golden aura fill the room.

The green restoration magic blends with the blue swirling residue to combine with my own aura and make a light purple glow resonate through the entire training room.

The entire facility shakes and trembles under the intense pressure of over 100 million MP flowing through it, but it holds together.

An hour passes...

I feel like the power coursing through my veins is on a level incomparable to my prior strength.

Click

The door of the training room opens and I walk out.

Visible light purple mana residue floods out from the white-walled room and fills the stairway. Some rises up to the 3rd floor, while most sinks down the steps to invade the lobby of the shop.

Abby and I make our way down through the dispersing purple-tinted mana fog and I hear every footstep echo throughout my mind.

The full outline of the man sitting in the lobby is so clear in my mind's eye. The minuscule vibrating particles of mana in his body are as clear as day...

My All-Seeing Eye isn't even activated.

I've started to develop a new understanding and control over my environment.

I lift my hands through the air letting the excess mana swirl around my fingertips. Then, without my plunderer skill, I'm able to feel small amounts of the particles enter my skin.

It's not nearly enough to use in combat. Only 3-5MP can be absorbed per minute at this rate... but still. It's a sensation I had no idea was impossible without my skills until now.

I'm on the cusp of Tier 2 mana control. This is an entirely new level.

A shaky voice rings out from the shop's lobby.

"H-Hello?"

The now much more nervous store clerk's voice rings out through the fog.

I can sense that the front door is open. Most of the residue is pouring out into the street and dispersing, but it's still very thick inside the room.

He continues in a quick manner as I slowly walk through the shop with Abby behind me.

"I hope your session went well. I- Uhm, please stop by again any time."

I smile, looking up at the outline of the city through the glass windows as we approach them.

"Sure, thanks."

We walk out the front door and the morning sun hits us in all in all its glory.

I take in a breath of fresh air and slowly move my eyes back and forth over the busy street.

It feels like everything and everyone is moving a lot slower. My ability to perceive reality has shifted immensely... In just a few hours, I've grown 3 times as strong...

Solara has become much more lively now too.

The streets are filled with more vendors as well as townspeople heading to and from their work. Just like in the Vice Region, 50% of the people walking around are covered in good-quality magic gear and look like hunters.

The laughter, constant chatter, and vendors shouting fills my ears.

Staring off into the endless streets, I'm finally interrupted by Abby's voice as she unties the camel and brings it over to me.

"Ready? We'll be late if we don't head out now."

Still staring out into the entire city. Lightly activating my perception skills, I can sense everything... and I mean everything.

Every single person's average mana controls reading, level, magic items, and even the locations of the closed-off dungeon breaks.

Everything becomes clear.

I reply promptly, but still distracted.

"Right. Let's go."

We hop on and head through the bustling city toward the Tower of Dreams. Both of us put our hoods up like before, but I can't help looking around at every new market square or unique we pass.

The world looks crystal clear.

It's like I've been missing out on all of this information in front of my face this whole time.

Nothing looks necessarily different... it just all has new meaning.

I slowly begin to adjust to my newfound sensory abilities as we approach the shining silver towers. The one we stop under is curved on all sides creating a long, yet thin point nearing the top. There must only be a single narrow penthouse up on the 30th floor.

As soon as we come to a Halt in front of the blindingly silver and white entrance, Abby speaks in my ear.

"You should probably use that disguise skill... Your eyes are glowing pretty bright."

She takes out her transmission tablet and flips the backside toward me. I see two glowing white reflections in it.

Immediately, I activate my special grade conceal perk and calm down their glow, reverting my appearance back to its darker dull state.

"Good call..."

Abby hands the camel to a vendor nearby with other similar rides. An old man is taking care of nearly a dozen of them for 20 bronze each a day. He smiles and thanks us, then we walk near the building's entrance.

Once close enough, the front sliding door opens and I immediately see a few familiar faces.

Arie, Maria, and....

Fisher.

He smirks and waves to me from behind my teammates, speaking up in a loud confident voice.

"Who would have guessed they sent you 4 after us? Good to see ya Jay."

Before I can respond, I'm distracted by a tall fair fair-skinned, white-haired woman who walks out with a light white and blue aura trailing behind her.

The woman's eyes are the same as her aura. She puts on a thin smile, only making her presence more alluring.

She wears black clothing with no armor. It contrasts with her skin and hair making them pop even more. On her side, she carries two curved swords in light blue sheaths.

From this distance, I can already sense her mana control is incredibly refined. Possibly nearing mine in my recently upgraded state.

I instantly appraise and inspect the woman to find her level and skills.

[Lv. 504]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]

Dual Wielding [Legendary Grade]

Then, my eyes shift to those swords.

Enchanted Katana Set [Ice Aspect][Agility +131%][Speed +106%][Strength +105%]

She's an Ice magic user, with a legendary sword-wielding skill... Interesting.

Also, with a level this high, she'd technically a B-Class hunter.

My eyes shift back to the blue-haired swordsman, Fisher. He's still waving to me with a smug yet happy look on his face.

I can sense his approximate mana control output too. As I assumed, it was just a bit higher than mine when I entered the training room.

Now, I'm at least 2 times more refined than him.

He speaks up again.

"These two told me you were getting in a little extra training before the raid? Ha, looks like you'll need it."

I let out a sigh, walking over to the 4 of them and replying.

"Good to see you too."

We all greet each other with smiles outside the tall silver building on the road's sidewalk.

I introduce Abby to Fisher, and it seems like the others have already been acquainted in the hour we were gone.

Maria is the first to introduce me to her trainer.

"Jay, meet Lydia. Lydia, meet Jay."

The dual-wielding Ice mage eyes me up and down for a solid 3 seconds. Her blue eyes pulse every so slightly, I doubt anyone else can pick up the mana readings.

She puts out a hand while speaking in a smooth and steady voice.

"You're much stronger than I was expecting, maybe the director hasn't lost it. It's nice to meet you, Jay."

I take her hand and shake it.

"You're much stronger than I was expecting too. This break must be much more difficult than I was led to believe."

Everyone else in the party doesn't say a word. We all watch as she turns to the center of the city, beginning to glow much brighter white and blue.

"Yes, there's a lot to explain. We have a difficult mission ahead of us. Now, I'm feeling much more confident about our odds of success."

Chapter 250

"Yes, there's a lot to explain. We have a difficult mission ahead of us. Now, I'm feeling much more confident about our odds of success."

The long white hair of the new mysterious Ice-Mage blows back and forth in the weak breeze as she looks off into the city.

It's in the exact same direction I've been probing out ever since I stepped out of that training chamber.

The exact direction where I can feel a dense area of dungeon portals all covered up by dense layers of mana shielding. It's less than a kilometer away and some readings are up to 30 meters underground.

Others are near or closer to the surface, but the majority of the energy readings are clearly coming from beneath the city.

With my All-Seeing Eye on full blast, it's as plain as day where they're located.

I'm the first to reply.

"Alright, let's head off then. I'm sure there's not much time to waste. Explain the details on the way."

She nods, and we're off.

We leave our camels behind and begin walking through the city streets. It's getting too crowded and cluttered in town with everything now in full motion. Bringing them along would be a hassle.

As we get further away from the towers, the streets open up even more into lively markets. Palm trees hand over the bright-colored shops and more towers can be seen off in the distance.

This seems to be a much more casual restaurant and shopping district for locals.

Both Fisher and Lydia walk with their faces fully uncovered, without a care in the world. I'm the first to ask about it.

"Hey- Aren't the people around here not too fond of Association Hunters? Especially Elites. I saw bounty posters with our faces on them, don't you two have prices on your heads too?"

Fisher smirks and turns around to comment on my claim.

"Yeah, yeah. We've had bounties out here for as long as I can remember. It's no big deal. No one's powerful enough to contain hunters like us. If they were, they'd have much better things to do than pick a fight with the Association."

I nod to myself as he continues.

"Most of the smaller towns and settlements deep in the desert tend to keep the anti-hunter traditions alive. There isn't much else to do out there, hating on a government is all they can really do to pass the time."

I open my mouth, but Lydia begins to speak from my left side so I listen.

"In short- don't worry about it. The people here are just people. Like you and me, they have their own lives to worry about. We have a much more important mission to concentrate on."

I nod, then take down my hood.

I'm not fully convinced we're in the clear here. There's always an exception to the rule, especially when money is involved.

It makes sense, but to be honest I'm a bit distracted by a whole lot of other things.

The bounties were never too much of a worry for me. The thought still at the forefront of my mind is the immense power difference between Fisher and Lydia.

More like, the power difference between Lydia and anyone I've ever met before.

Although this is the first time I've truly ever been able to sense mana control levels, hers seems off the charts.

Now that she's less than 3 meters away, and practically leaking out pure ice-imbued energy, it's clear her mana control is definitely at least on par with mine.

I'll have to see her in action to get a full idea of her abilities. Then again, I'll have to test myself in action to comprehend the full extent of my new power as well.

I'm itching to try them out, so, I speak up.

"Is there any important information about this break we need to know? We've all been in labyrinths before, is there something special about that one?"

The white-haired mage nods, replying to me without looking over at any of us.

Her cool blue eyes stare off into the city.

"Yes, this one is... a bit different than most."

Everyone listens, interested in what she has to say as we walk straight toward the mana readings I've been tracking.

"Well, the Labyrinth break has already begun. There are a few teams inside right now."

The moment she says this, a pulse of energy comes from the dungeon zone and ripples through the entire city.

With such a fine-tuned frequency, it's near impossible to see the wave move by, but with any level of mana perception, the grey shockwave is clear as day.

Lydia speaks right on schedule, with a smile.

"Speaking of the break, did you feel that?"

I give a firm nod, and to my surprise, my teammates do too.

Maria replies.

"Yeah, I feel all tingly."

Abby speaks next.

"Is that the break? Or just a coincidence...?"

Arie stares straight ahead, focused, but not saying a word. Fisher does the same. Lydia explains.

"That was another floor collapse. I believe... it's on floor 18 now."

I raise an eyebrow.

"A Floor collapse? So this break collapses floor by floor?"

We come into visible range of what I can only assume is the City of Solara's version of a Dungeon Hub.

Lydia points forward.

"Correct. The break was up to Floor 15 when Fisher and I arrived. Every floor from 1 to 14 has already completely collapsed and disappeared. This is the 3rd pulse I've felt since we explored the Labyrinth ourselves, so it must be the 18th. If we entered the Labyrinth now, that would be considered its 1st floor."

All 6 of us walk toward the far side of the hub. There are large metal contraptions similar to the one I was trapped in near DryRock all over the open cobblestone square.

I count 8 in total.

They each have a solid silver metal door on the front of them and using my perception skill, I can tell that half of them lead underground with the same level of mana shedding built into the walls and stairs.

One in particular, near the far side of the square goes the deepest, has the most armed guards standing by it, and is giving off the most intense mana radiation from the ground below.

I whisper under my breath eyes it.

"That one's the break."

Hunters crowd the square as we walk forward past the large metal crates with large black lettering hung on their front sides.

They're labeled not by class, but by level.

[0-100]

[100-200]

[200-300]

[300+]

It seems like they have safety regulations out here too. Guards are checking each hunter's status before entering any dungeon.

I watch as certain hunters cover-up information with their hands or gear, and the guards don't seem to mind. All they're looking for is the level, and they aren't asking for any ID or payment either.

As we approach the final break, the sign above it doesn't stay a level at all.

It just reads out [Restricted] in large black lettering, and 8 guards level 300-350 stand outside of it.

Fisher speaks up as we approach.

"Ya know, Lydia and I made it to Floor 19 no problem the other day. The Director just wanted us to stay back and not take on the Floor Bo-"

He almost chokes on his words, then looks over his shoulders to make sure no one's listening in.

The blue-haired swordsman leans in closer to us and talks in a much lower tone.

"He told us not to take on the final Labyrinth Boss alone. We reckon this one goes up over 25 floors. Maybe more! Once we take out the Floor Boss, we'll all be stuck in the Labyrinth until we finish the break."

Lydia interrupts.

"That's true. And the breaks will continue to happen out here even while we climb. Solaran hunters will have to keep the floors at bay, starting with the 18th while we climb and race against the clock to take out the final boss."

I nod.

"So... We have one try, and the Boss has to be defeated before the entire labyrinth collapses."

She responds while looking ahead as a guard waves us down with a friendly expression on his face, looking like he's been expecting us to come.

"That's right. The Final Boss could escape the confines of its prison if we don't defeat it in time. One shot, or else this entire City will succumb to a B-Class Level threat. If we can't stop it, no one here can."