

D. Diver 271

Chapter 271

My Demonic Energy Manipulation skill activates and I feel all the tension and mana fatigue soreness in my body completely disappear.

Actually, all feeling in my body dissipates completely. My perception of reality shifts, making the world around me move much slower than the thoughts in my brain race to piece together this new puzzle.

The blue ice turns white from my point of view, and all the color is sapped from my vision.

The furious mutilated Arch Demon is running my way with its silver sword outstretched, but I can't see the shielding or aura surrounding it like earlier. The ground cracks beneath its feet with every step, but the calmness of the air around me is both ominous and soothing.

There's no loud buzzing, no constant strain on my muscles and bones, and most importantly no.... mana.

My eyes shift back and forth, then down to my sword and dagger in my hands. They're both dull, not glowing, and after what Ember warned me of, I don't dare channel any magic into them. Now that I think about it, I don't think I'd be able to channel mana into them if I tried. Not while this skill is activated at least.

Both of the golem cores I was manipulating moments ago fall to the floor and the matter surrounding them crumbles as well.

The Arch Demon still approaches fast, now half the distance away from when I first activated my skill. A shiver runs down my spine, then I feel an instant shift in my perception again. My mind is being thrown for a loop over and over as I try to comprehend what's happening.

The long black line on my arm pulses with a black outer glow and a veil of brighter light filters my vision. The Greater Demon's core that bonded with me after defeating a Labyrinth Guardian activates fully for the first time and I see the world around me in a new light.

Or.. well, a new shade of darkness.

In the air of this Boss Room, tiny particles of black energy float in thin nearly imperceivable wisps of smoke-like waves. Less than 1% of the air contains what I can only guess is Demonic Energy.

Not only can I see it, I can feel it. The moment I focus on pulling the matter in, silently drifting clouds of dark matter swirl toward me.

I hold both my dull lifeless weapons, and let the skill take over.

The streams of black matter that hit my back feel like someone dumped boiling water on me. I tighten the grip on my sword and dagger while clenching my jaw and baring the pain.

It flows through my veins and gives the sensation of searing my body from the inside out. The hot flames in my veins make their way toward my chest. It's heading to the source that draws them in. It all collides at one point, my core.

As this energy filters through my Greater Demon's Core, it comes out the other side as a cool and refreshing counterpart to the violent burns of the raw energy. It's almost like crystal clear chilled water from a faucet flows through me now.

It glides down my arms and into both blades as I swing them across my body to collide with the Arch Demon that makes its final attack.

Its glowing white eyes meet mine as our blades clash. Mine are cloaked in dense black energy without any trace of magic and undetectable by any means except a refined Demon Monster's hyper-focused senses.

We collide.

The expression on the overly confident Arch Demon's face changes from pure joy to absolute terror as yellow and white sparks begin to fly.

I hardly feel any pressure from the impact, cool streams of energy leave my fingertips and become amplified by the swing of my sword.

I'm not controlling it at all, merely letting waves of it flow from the air through my body and out my sword and dagger in a more condensed form.

The moment it leaves my blades and touches the Demon's Silver sword, the energy completely closes its form and splashes out onto my incoming target.

This is what activates an incredible light show.

The violent crackling and popping expands exponentially reacting with what I can only assume is its mana-imbued aura and shielding. I'm unable to sense any of it in this state, but I jump to the side and run as fast as my base stats can take me.

A monstrous roar comes out of the Demons's mouth. It's one that sounds more like a dying monster than the intelligent creature I was talking to moments ago.

It turns to follow me.

I grit my teeth, and deactivate my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill. Simultaneously, the creature speaks through the link in an urgent and malicious tone.

"Demonic Energy. A human wielding the pinnacle achievement of Demonic Power. You've just ranked up, t-this is impossible."

The furious voice in my head turns to a tone of confusion and fear as the world around me begins to become much more vibrant and colorful again. The hot and cold sensations of Demonic energy entering and leaving my body have simply vanished and the buzzing of mana returns to my ears.

As I start to reactivate my buffs to outpace the Demon, it becomes clear this won't be entirely necessary.

The chain reaction of jet-black energy covering its full body and eruption of sparks explodes outward over 5 meters on all sides.

The loud crackles almost drown out the violent hums in the rest of the Boss Room.

Its two body doubles turn toward me. One of them raises its sword while the other stands silently with its eyes closed. The main body still screams in agony.

A purple Dungeon Walker portal opens next to one of the doubles while the second lunges at me with alarming speed.

I grit my teeth and channel mana into my sword and dagger to block the incoming attack.

Following a loud clang, the Demon speaks up again. Its main body falls to its knees a distance away and its other clone disappears through the portal it created.

The Arch Demon's voice is slower but still steady. It's coming to terms with the reality of this situation.

"I've Lost. I've lost to a human. A message has been sent across the abyss to the superior Arch Demons. They will know your battle style and all of your skills. You've bested me with your filthy imitation of Demonic Energy Control, but this is as far as you'll go."

I power through the body doubles defenses and slice it in two.

The main Demon's body begins to fizzle out and the crackles of sparks cease. It leaves me with a final remark.

"You cannot stop what's already in motion. In time, your world will be ours."

The sparks stop, and the arena falls silent.

All that remains is a melted silver sword and a pile of black ash.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Body Double [Special Grade]

[YES][NO]

[Bonded Familiar Skill Link]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]

[YES][NO]

Multiple lines of text hover over the Arch Demon's remains as I eye my status screen reading out Level 514. I choose yes on both options and two new skills enter my skill slots.

The Frost Dragon dies once its master ceases to exist. Bonded Demons and Dragons seem to share an essence upon death.

I whisper under my breath in confusion, sporting a wide grin.

"It's... over...?"

Usually, battles like this end with me critically injured or unconscious when I try out a new skill or last-resort option to defeat a truly superior opponent.

I assumed today would be no different...

The body of the enormous ice dragon falls from the sky and Ember hovers above the mountain flapping his wings.

I gulp, taking a step forward as the remains of the Final Boss begin to dissolve.

Before they do, a small yellow glimmer of sparks glisten from the tips of my sword and dagger.

I feel a sharp pain in my chest, then my vision pulses to black and white. I gasp for a breath of air and fall to my knees.

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After what feels like a hot sword thrust through my chest and an electric shock rippling through my body, I hit the ground struggling to breathe.

Shock and confusion fill my mind as the room's colors fade to black and white again.

"W-What's going on...?"

The last few seconds of this battle are mostly a blur, but I'm positive I won.

I defeated the Arch Demon, and it told me everything I wanted to know. This doesn't make any sense.

Actually, now that I have a moment to think... nothing that demon said makes any sense.

It's sending a message across the abyss? Demonic Energy being the pinnacle of Demon's power? The King is trying to take over this world?

Also... the fact that I wasn't able to sense any mana while wielding this new skill and defeated a Labyrinth Guardian with a single attack is mind-boggling.

With so many unanswered questions swirling around in my head, it makes it difficult to focus on the real problem at hand.

The grip on both of my blades loosens, and my knees rest on the cold hard floor of the Boss Room.

Yellow and white lights still crackle from the tips of the two weapons. My eyes widen as the reactions slowly start to grow. It looks exactly like the result of mana and demonic energy canceling each other out.

Clink

In the same moment, a palm-sized black sphere falls to the floor in front of me out of a dissolving pile of ash. Blue text hovers above it.

[Arch Demon's Core] +100% All Stats

Letting go of my weapons, I grab the orb and it instantly sinks into my palm just like the previous one I bonded with. The stat boosts are immediate, and the natural perception additions are very noticeable.

Before I can enjoy this moment in my dazed state, the sharp pain in my chest comes back. This time around it's even more intense. I can feel a headache coming on too.

I rest both hands on the floor and watch another dark black line appear on my other forearm. It winds up to my shoulder and curves to my chest. I can only assume my eyes have grown much lighter after this core absorption too.

My gaze darts back and forth as I try to catch my breath and stand to my feet. The sword and dagger I left on the ground are crackling and popping with sparks. The reactions are only growing, so all I can think to do is open my item storage system and put them inside.

The white spatial magic portal opens and a voice enters my ears as Ember flies down from the sky with a shiny silver amulet hanging from his mouth.

"Stop."

I look up and appraise the item he's holding on instinct.

[Platinum Amulet of Frost] +137% Mental Strength +90% Ice Magic

The sharp pain in my chest returns, but bare it without falling over. It keeps coming back every time I use magic.

Ember keeps speaking.

"That was horribly reckless, but I believe it may have been one of the best options to secure a guaranteed victory."

I grit my teeth while nodding and look up at the enormous ranked-up dragon that lands in front of me on the hard ground. He's excited about this new upgrade, but the worried expression tells me now isn't the time to celebrate.

I use self regeneration on my full body and dump out an HP potion from my item box to attempt to heal whatever is making this horrible pain.

Once all the shimmering green liquid from the bottle disappears, I feel as good as new...

Sporting a grin I let out a sigh and use telekinesis to grab the swords on the ground, as well as the golem cores I disconnected from during my match earlier.

"I'm alright."

I open up my storage portal wide.

"Come on, the transfer magic will activate soon. It's best to-"

Again, the world around me pulses back and white and I fall to the dungeon floor.

Ember speaks.

"Demonic Energy Poisoning."

"..."

"You've given yourself Demonic Energy Poisoning."

I slowly struggle to stand to my feet, then see the black lines that run down my wrists start to glimmer with the same yellow and white glow as my swords.

My heart skips a beat as I piece together what's happening. I whisper under my breath.

"There's... no way to stop this is there...?"

All I get in silence in return. Ember nods slowly as my mind runs wild. I quickly open my status and scroll through my new skills.

"Ice magic is great... but it can't help me right now. Self-regeneration and HP potions won't help so life steal is a dud too... Body Double-"

Body Double

Info: The Body Double skill allows the caster to create an exact copy of their being up to 75% of the mana control and 90% of the level and natural stat capacity of the original form. This double will obtain every skill the original body possesses, but none of the active buffs.

Magic items will also receive a doubled form, but cannot be transferred to any other being. Once a double is killed, all items and the essence of the doubled being will dissolve into pure mana. No experience points can be earned from killing a body double.

The [Special Grade] perk allows the caster to control doubles while asleep, unconscious, or in suspended animation indefinitely. Up to two body doubles may be controlled at once.

Grade: [Special Grade]

[Upgrade]

I scan this new skill, and ideas start churning.

Ember's voice echoes in my mind as my wrists begin to crackle and spark with very visible light now.

"That's right. There's no known cure. I've heard of skills that dull its effects, and certain monsters that can cut off their magic supplies to pause the reaction, but the process has already begun. At this rate. You'll be completely consumed in less than 5 minutes... I will too."

I grit my teeth and respond.

"I'll find a way..."

Ember smiles and gives me a slow nod while closing his eyes.

I keep scrolling through my status, then come across a skill I didn't think would be useful.

Ember's words repeat in my mind so many times, that I speak them out loud.

"A cure..."

Hibernation

Info: Hibernation allows the user to fall into a deep slumber and cure any curse, disease, or illness given enough time.

Hibernation costs a set amount of MP upfront and the user will not require food, water, or excess mana until the process is complete.

If awoken before Hibernation is complete, progress will be 100% negated.

The effectiveness of Hibernation is greatly decreased if a curse or disease inflicted on the user comes from a being of significantly greater mana control or level. It may take significantly more MP to complete a difficult request.

The user's defenses will decrease by 99% during Hibernation.

The user's defenses will decrease by 50% for 12 hours following Hibernation.

[These De-buffs may not be completely removed by any skill below the Mythic Rank]

[Special Grade] Perk: Hibernation time is decreased by 50% and upfront MP cost is reduced by 35%. Post Hibernation De-buffs may be reduced by up to 50% with specified MP cost depending on the severity of the ailment cured.

Grade: [Special Grade]

[Upgrade]

My eyes open wide as another blue text box shines in front of my eyes

[Use Hibernation]

Cure: Mana Fatigue[Jay Soju], Demonic Energy Poisoning [Jay Soju, Flame Emperor's Sword, Wind Tyrant's Dagger]

Cost: 523.06k MP

Time: 9.2 Days

[YES][NO]

"I got it."

If I accept right now, odds are I'll be incapacitated before being transported back to Solara. This doesn't seem like a good option to me. It's not that I don't trust my team, it's just that I'd rather not bet on chance when there's a much better option in front of me.

I walk over to Ember, making contact with him, and my two blades

"Dungeon Walker."

Using the minimum amount of MP possible, I teleport us back to a dungeon that I conveniently made a transport point to not so long ago.

A wolf dungeon in the cave system where the Lava Salamander creatures lived. It was either this or the rat dungeon. Teleporting back to the capital may be too risky in more ways than one. I think about the Titan's domain. Using a time dilation would make this a lot quicker, but I'm not quite sure how that much mana would react to Demonic Energy. Today isn't the day to find out.

Rocky and grass-covered ground spreads throughout a mountainous forest-like E-Class Dungeon I've teleported to instead.

Ember speaks as the lush trees and warm air contrast the Labyrinth's freezing cold Boss Room we just left to the most extreme degree.

He raises his head.

"Master, what's the plan?"

I fall to the ground as the mana usage blinds me.

The sparks on my forearms are only growing in size. I need to finish this now before I pass out or worse.

I reply through a clenched jaw.

"Body Double."

Just like the Arch Demon, a flash of white light and sparks create a second copy of my being. It hurts, but this needs to be done. Now I have two simultaneous perspectives.

I gulp, then fall to the floor with my main body and activate Hibernation. More and more sparks climb up my arms every second.

[Use Hibernation]

Cure: Mana Fatigue [Jay Soju], Demonic Energy Poisoning [Jay Soju, Flame Emperor's Sword, Wind Tyrant's Dagger]

Cost: 752.89k MP

Time: 14.4 Days

[YES][NO]

I choose yes and activate my plunderer skill to feed it every last drop of mana it requires without a moment's hesitation. The MP needed and time required has risen since the last time I checked. The reaction has become worse, this all makes sense.

A few seconds pass as I take in mana in the surrounding dungeon. Then, my main body's vision fades to black.

From my double's perspective, I watch my body fall limp and the violent sparks cease to climb my arms. I'm surrounded by a very light green aura and blue text hovers above my body.

[Hibernation Activated]

Time Remaining: 14.4 Days

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It's a very odd feeling... Looking at my own body lying asleep on the rocky floor.

I peer down at my wrists and see that the sparks have completely stopped for this body too. However, I feel completely normal.

I open my item storage, and all of my items are there. Including the exact sword and dagger on the floor by my feet. I'm level 462... and my mana control is much lower than it was moments ago. Even so, it's still much higher than it was before I ranked up.

These items are just mana-imbued copies and will disappear once my cloned body fades and this temporary power debuff will leave soon too. They look and feel exactly the same as real items, even with my perception skill activated, I can't tell a difference.

It doesn't matter at all what happens to this body. Even if I'm killed, I'll still wake up in my original form in 2 weeks.

After letting out a long sigh, I look up at Ember and he's already speaking through our link.

"A new trick saves the day again. How interesting..."

We make eye contact, then both stare at my body on the floor for a few seconds.

The realization that the Labyrinth is collapsing as we speak comes across my mind. I need to teleport back there, or my teammate will think I've died... I open the link with Ember.

"This is urgent. I have to leave. Just 14 days... I need my body kept safe for 2 weeks in this dungeon while it's being healed. Absorb all the mana you want, and take out monsters too. Just no killing humans or being seen by anyone, and don't collapse this dungeon."

He nods.

"Understood. Be safe."

I grin, nodding back.

"I will. See you soon."

I Dunegon Walk back to the Boss Room, and just in time.

A celebration with Ember would have been nice, but there's no time for that. I tested a new dangerous ability and my gamble paid off. There are consequences to playing with the odds. Sometimes not everything falls in my favor. Then again, maybe it does.

My feet hit the cold ground. The Boss Room is empty and silent. There isn't even a hint of a breeze to push the remaining snow back onto the naked mountains or rock-covered battlefield.

I do a quick scan of my surroundings and confirm all my senses and skills work fine...

I reach into my item storage and even pull out a copy of my sword to check it again too. Its buffs have dropped down to the equivalent that they were when I was at level 462 before.

With my conceal skill's special grade perk I hide my new black tattoos and glowing white eyes, reverting my appearance back to the normal human state. Even my Demon's cores were replicated.

Almost 50 seconds pass before the world around me fades to white.

"Just in time. It's over..."

The entire Labyrinth fades into nothingness and transports all its participants back to the small mana-shielded room where the entrance portal stood spinning just a few hours ago.

The hunters that were guarding the 18th and 19th floors must have left. I don't sense their presence, and there's no way they could have managed to climb any higher to help us out.

Once the bright flash of light clears and the buzzing sound of shielding fills my ears, I see all 5 of my teammates in front of me.

They're all breathing heavily. Some covered in sweat, and all of them exhausted. My main body was on the brink of collapse before I used every last bit of strength to activate my hibernation skill. My double's body that I'm currently using is seemingly fine...

The first excited laughing voice I hear from my left side is Maria's.

Her wide smile, blond hair, and bright blue eyes are the first thing I see once my feet hit the solid floor.

"We did it! In record time too! Haha, good job guys!"

She jumps around glowing light blue as Abby starts to make her rounds healing everyone up from mana fatigue and checking for any extra injuries.

Both Arie and Fisher are practically leaking with new power. My eyes widen as I start to speak up to ask a question, but I get my answer as the water wielder speaks first.

"I finally Ranked Up!"

He smirks, looking down at his body then back up at all of us with a confident stare.

"I got an awesome new water defense buff too, nothing can get past me now. I'm on a whole new level. I'm easily on par with you now Lydia."

He turns to the white-haired mage with his arms crossed.

She gives him a thin smile and replies in a sarcastic tone.

"Yeah, maybe."

She practically ignores the blue-haired hunter and eyes me up and down curiously. She starts to walk over.

"You defeated the Boss Room quickly... in less than 10 minutes by my calculations. That's... very impressive. I can't say I wasn't doubting you..."

She gulps, still struggling to understand something as her eyes scan my body up and down faster and faster.

The mage tightens her lips, unable to piece something together, then speaks up again.

"You seem stronger too. Congrats on the Rank Up."

I nod, understanding there's something more she's trying to say, but now isn't the time.

"Thanks."

Then look to Arie. He seems completely distracted by his open status, so I don't bother. We'll have plenty of time to show off our new skills later.

I speak up.

"Let's get out of here. Our mission in the Dark Continent is finally over. The City of Solara is safe."

A round of smiles and laughter follows and we start to climb the mana-imbued stairs up to the surface.

The closer we get, the darker the mana shielding around us becomes. I don't remember it being this color on our way down...

I activate my perception skills and am shocked to find I can't sense anything outside of this structure.

At first, I just push through thinking it's a side effect of my weakened state, but the harder I try the thicker the walls seem to be.

"Hey... this shielding is a lot different than when we entered isn't it?"

The smiles and cheerful conversation stop as everyone else begins to notice too.

Lydia speaks.

"You're right."

Her expression darkens.

"This looks like A-Rank graded shielding. I didn't know they even had this kind of supplies out here in the desert."

I clench my jaw, assuming the worst.

Fisher rolls his eyes.

"They thought we would fail. That's it, isn't it? There's nothing to worry about guys. The Solarans just wanted a failsafe for their city if we all died."

He lets out a sigh, then yells up the last flight of stairs as we continue forward.

"Real nice of you all! Appriactae the faith you put in your saviors."

He smirks.

I don't buy it, continuing to expand my perception range, but an impossibly dense wall of pure magic blocks me. The particles are so thinly locked together that it'd take me hours to see through.

Then, I feel a crack in the shielding just 15 meters ahead. The entrance door opens for a split second, allowing me to feel the entire city outside, then slams shut with a loud thud. I'm cut off again.

A loud bang shakes the floor, and a strange cloud of invisible mana-imbued energy shoots out of it. I can only barely sense it with my skills, and utter out a few words before the wave of bizarre matter hits us.

"Watch out for- the- a...."

My thoughts go blank as soon as I'm enveloped in the invisible silent cloud. My vision goes blurry and all of my skills automatically deactivate as I fall to the floor. It feels like electricity is shooting through my veins.

The 5 teammates around me falling in a similar fashion to my sides is the last thing I see before everything goes black.

Is this the Solaran government? The Association? A team of rogues?

I can't figure out what's happening, and for some reason, my poison resistance nor any of my other active skills are activating.

I manage to swing in and out of consciousness as a team of men in jet-black hazmat suits open the locked door of the special shielding and take our bodies away.

The light outside is bright, but it's impossible to make out where we're headed before I pass out again.

My head hurts and my body is numb. I desperately attempt to move my limbs or activate my telekinesis, but something is interrupting my ability to cast magic. None of my skills work at all. There's a horrible ringing in my ears that makes it impossible to keep my thoughts straight and the rhythmic pounding of my heartbeat is only getting louder.

As I wake up again, it's unclear how much time has passed. I know one thing for sure, I'm being carried down a flight of steps. It's dark and the ringing in my ears has only gotten worse. This time, unbearable.

I pass out again.

Everything goes dark.

I wake up a final time and the ringing in my ears and pain in my temples has finally subsided.

I'm sat in a chair and my wrists are both cuffed to a table. The space around me is dark, and my mouth is dry.

All I hear is a woman's voice echo from the darkness at the back of the ominous underground cement-walled room.

"Congratulations on clearing the Labyrinth. Welcome to your debriefing."

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A tall woman in dark clothing walks out from the shadows in the back of the room. Her voice echos as she gets closer and my eyes slowly adjust to the dim yellow-tinted lighting coming from a single flickering bulb.

Short blond hair hardly reaches her shoulders but covers her face enough so that shadows hide all of her defining features.

The woman wears a tight black combat suit with silver daggers, and assorted magical items on her midsection and tied around both thighs.

I gulp and squint my eyes, attempting to activate inspect and appraisal, but they won't turn on... My cuffs tighten around my wrists even more and I feel a wave of fatigue pass over me.

My eyes widen more as her footsteps get louder and she continues to walk forward at me.

Her face is becoming visible now and isn't familiar at all.

The woman has mature and stern features, but they're symmetric and devoid of any imperfections. Her hazel eyes glimmer in the dim light as she speaks up again, now across from me at the opposite edge of the table less than 2 meters away.

"Good to see you're finally awake."

She crosses her arms and a silver badge on her chest shimmers. It's 3 numbers on a small pin labeled "005". My gaze tightens as I attempt to activate my skills and tear my hands from the black metal cuffs holding me to the grey metal table.

Again, nothing activates and my muscles become extremely tired after attempting to brute force my way out. Just a fraction of a second worth of exertion feels like I just finished an hour-long battle. The fatigue hits me instantly, and I let my head droop.

I should be able to break through metal like this easily, but it gives off the same odd feeling as the gas-like substance that was used to knock us out.

I let out a sigh, raise my head, and reply.

"What do you want with me?"

She tightens her own gaze in response and a corner of her lip turns up.

"You're cool-headed now, aren't you? No where am I? Who are you?"

She leans in over the table and her grin widens.

"Most of your friends had a much more aggressive response when waking up. Especially that green-haired girl, she was a nightmare."

The woman chuckles.

I clench my jaw and scan the room as my eyes adjust more and it gets much clearer than moments ago.

There's a heavy metal door at the back, no more than 5 meters behind the blond. The walls are made of pure cement with no decorations or even windows. The floor matches the dull grey coloring and it's damp covered in dirt and shallow pools of water.

I'm sitting on a small wooden stool and my hands are attached to a cold metal table by a pair of cuffs that must be a magic dampening item of some sort. Dark lines come out from under the cuffs and move up my forearms...

My conceal skill is deactivated, she can see my true form.

I want to curse her out and break the walls down, but I swallow my words, not wanting to provoke this woman in this weakened state. There's not much I can do other than hear what she has to say for the time being.

"I'll say it again. What do you want from me...?"

She continues to grin, looking down at my wrists, then up to stare directly into my white eyes.

"I want to know what you saw up there. It appears you're the only member of your squad that made it to the final Boss Room. I need a full report."

I gulp again, staring back at her unwavering expression.

The woman's outfit looks like a uniform but has no branding or special marks to signify she's from the Association. This could be a special unit I've never heard of that deals with higher-level matters, or possibly a Solaran-exclusive organization.

My last guess would be rogues, but to pull off a heist to this degree without fail, it's highly unlikely.

I reply.

"I defeated the final floor. A flash of white light brought me back and the Labyrinth collapsed just like a dungeon."

She rolls her eyes, then leans in even further less than half a meter from my face.

"I'm not stupid. You have two cores. This isn't your first time... I'm not sure how you managed to get away with collapsing a full Labyrinth in the past without us noticing, but we have you now so crisis averted."

I freeze up.

She knows about the cores... which means she knows exactly how Labyrinths work. The only other notable hunters I know that have this kind of knowledge are the A-Class, Rodrigo, and the Regional Director, Brutus.

Who is this woman...? Who does she work for...? And What does she really want from me?

I grit my teeth, but she speaks again before I get the chance to.

"Come on, spit it out. Was it an Earth Dragon? No, Lightning, it was a Lightning Dragon, wasn't it? It was a-"

I cut her off.

"Tell me who you work for and I'll tell you what I saw."

Her expression completely changes. The air pressure in the room shifts too.

Instantly, she reaches for the silver dagger strapped to her thigh and makes it glow white while pointing it straight at my throat.

"This isn't a negotiation. I ask questions and you answer, got it?"

She thrusts it forward, stopping millimeters away. I can feel the thin layer of mana shielding react with my skin but can't activate my own to protect myself.

She's definitely an Elite level hunter or higher, but without my perception skills, it's hard to tell more.

Her expression grows more stern and she takes the knife from my throat and stabs it straight through my right hand without a hint of hesitation.

"You single-handedly took out an Arch Demon and successfully absorbed its core without suffering a single scratch or showing any signs of mana fatigue. This is a feat less than 5% of Elites ever reach in their entire careers."

I roll my eyes, gritting my teeth and bearing the pain of a dagger through my hand dripping blood, I respond.

"I'm sure plenty of Elites could have taken that Demon out."

She smiles, taking her hand off the blade but leaving it stuck through my hand and the metal table underneath it.

The blond crosses her arms and starts walking back and forth side-eyeing me.

"Good. Information. We're getting somewhere."

She stops pacing.

"Now, what unique skills did this Demon have?"

Blood flows from my hand as I stare up at the woman in anger.

She's not going to tell me a single thing about her. The only clue I have is the number on her uniform and the fact that she can wield mana shielding. Her fair skin makes it more likely that she isn't from around here, and most likely from outside the walls. Other than that, It's hard to tell anything else for now...

I curse under my breath, then respond through a clenched jaw.

"Association, or Solaran? At least tell me that much."

She smirks, grabs a knife from her other pant leg, and begins twirling it around her fingers.

"As I said before, I ask the questions and you give the answers. This is how it's going to work."

She points the knife to my neck again and asks the same question.

"What skills did that red-horned creature have? We know most Greater Demons have a teleport skill, but Arch Demons often have varied abilities. What did it have?"

I feel the tip of the cool blade touch the upper side of my chin and blood trickles down to make clinking sounds as it hits the metal table.

I whisper through gritted teeth.

"That's it. It only had a teleport skill."

Her eyes flash white, then she stabs my left hand with the new silver blade. She gets close to my face again and yells with a twisted grin.

"Don't lie to me."

I feel blood flow from my other hand as well now as I feel her breath on my nose and mouth.

"The only way you're getting out of here is if you tell me what I want to know. Do you understand? If I kill you here and now, I'll take your cores and that'll be the end of it. So it's in your best interest to spill it. You may get a chance to walk."

This time around, I don't even react. If she's really going to torture me until I talk, the best thing I can do is stay silent and think of a way to escape. If she kills me, those cores will disappear once my real body wakes up anyway.

I tighten my lips and don't respond, deep in thought.

She leans in even closer to me, less than a few millimeters away, and whispers.

"No one knows you're here. No one is coming to save you. No one can-"

I back my head up slightly, then swing forward and smack my forehead against hers, stopping her from speaking mid-sentence.

Pain splinters through my skull, down my spine, and makes its way through my full body, nearly knocking me out.

The instant fatigue from these black cuffs hits as I exert any excess force, but It's worth the pain and energy.

I let out a laugh as the blond-haired woman falls backward onto the floor wide-eyed with an expression of shock on her face. There's a light sloshing sound from a shallow pool of water as she hits the floor.

My interrogator immediately scrambles to her feet, unharmed but covered in green and black grime and red-faced with anger.

"You want to play games? I can play games... I said I'd kill you if you don't tell me what I ask you! Do you not value your life?"

The woman puts her hands on her hips and stares at me.

"You asked for it..."

Her eyes fall to her soaked uniform, disgusted by the sour-smelling liquid covering her left side.

"You may be tough now, but let's see how you handle a few days without food and water. Those wounds on your hands won't heal easily without magic. You'll talk. They all do."

I smirk, still amused by her fall.

She turns around, unlocking the metal door at the back of the room and speaking in a lower more serious tone."

"Really think about your situation. Just answer my questions and all of this can be over. I'm not an enemy, so don't turn me into one."

I give her no response, and she slowly nods.

"Looks like you'll be difficult. Enjoy your peace of mind while you still have some left."

She turns back to me with an indifferent look on her face, then slams the door.

It echoes for a moment before I'm left with a knife in the back of each hand sitting in a damp empty room.

Letting out a sigh, I talk out loud to myself.

"Well, that probably could have gone a lot better... Now, how am I going to get myself out of this one?"

Chapter 275

My eyes dart around the small room looking for any possible ways to break free, or even narrow down where I've been taken.

Nothing appears after minutes of searching. I'm really just stuck in a bland empty room.

One thing I know for sure, once I get out here I'm not going back to the Association with open arms. This is all their fault. Withholding information and giving constant orders for worthless store credits was what I needed to do to get access to more powerful dungeons and learn more about the world.

Now, getting involved with these organizations has proven to be much more trouble than good.

I've grown exponentially, have teleportation access to the Vice City labyrinth, and wield more than enough skills to blend in wherever I need to.

Whether it's finding a home in Solara, or venturing out to one of the other regions other than Vice, they all seem much more pleasing than working like a blind slave moving forward.

I take in a deep breath and talk to myself again.

"No more following orders... and no more helping the weak... someone always takes advantage of my kindness."

Sometimes I forget why I started all of this.

I just wanted to get stronger and have fun doing it. This isn't to help people, I'm here to help myself. I only got involved with the Association because I had to. Look what that's led me to. Handcuffed in the basement of some rival organization's lair.

Or even worse, this could be the Association's doing. There's definitely of chance I was betrayed by that grey-haired regional director.

Whatever the truth is, I'll figure it out in time. Now, all signs point to getting the hell out of here and not looking back.

"But how...?"

Sitting in silence, I try to activate my magic again. I scroll down every skill on my list and not a single one activates. Each time I try, not even a hint of magic is produced. My natural mana stores have been drained to 0 and these cuffs are blocking off any ability to wield or gather in more from around me.

It feels like an invisible veil has been cast over my skin, blocking me from sensing or using mana.

"Breaking out with magic is not going to be an easy option..."

Next on my possibilities list is just sitting here and taking the beating for 14 days until my real body heals itself and wakes up. That woman says she'll kill me if I don't cooperate, but she wouldn't have gone through all this trouble to keep me alive and give me time to think if that was the case.

Little does she know, killing me is my most sought-after option. I shrug.

"I guess I'll wait."

That's exactly what I do.

An hour passes, and nothing happens at all. The room stays silent, and my mind keeps wandering to try and piece together where that woman could possibly be from.

None of the clues given so far make any sense, and thinking about it more is just making my head hurt.

Another hour goes by.

The pain from the knives in my hands hurts, but the fact that this flesh is a meaningless clone mentally dulls the pain.

Two more long hours slowly pass.

Footsteps come by my door, but trail away as fast as they came, leaving me in silence again.

"Looks like she really meant it. I'll be alone here for quite a while."

I'll have to do something productive to pass my time. There must be something I can work on that won't waste these 14 days of waiting. I let out a sigh.

"There's only one skill I haven't tried yet."

The reasoning behind this is that it backfired horribly the last time I tried.

Demonic Energy Manipulation.

There isn't a drop of magic running through my veins, so if there was ever a time to practice, it'd be now...

I take a deep breath and then activate the skill. Instantly my vision goes black and white, just like it did back in the Boss Room. Back then, I could see and sense particles of black energy floating around the air very clearly. Now, I don't sense any at all.

The only things perceivable to me while using this skill are my two Demon's Cores, and the thin pathways leading from my fingertips through my arms and to my chest. The same paths leave my chest and are used to distribute this energy to my brain, back to my arms, and down my legs.

These are the same pathways used for mana manipulation, but I don't often think about it much. Wielding magic is easier to use instinctually than focusing on the exact position of the individual particles.

Maybe learning how these pathways work would help me improve in the future.

"Or right now..."

I get the faint sensation of Demonic Energy far up above me. It's difficult to picture the exact distance, but it seems to be over 500 meters away up and to my left side.

It's the only hint of energy I can sense, so I latch onto it and pull it closer.

At first, my weak pull hardly moves it, but the closer it gets the faster I'm able to reel it in. The tiny wisp of black energy is minuscule compared to the amount I was wielding in the boss room. It'd take a few thousand of these strands to stack up to that energy I was handling earlier.

It makes sense. I'm not even in a dungeon. There's hardly any natural mana out in the real world, so I'm lucky to have found any Demonic Energy at all.

Its origins and exact properties are still a mystery to me, but I assume this must be some residue from the collapse. Or possibly just natural demonic energy floating in the world.

Either way, I'll absorb it soon.

It takes nearly 5 minutes, but the small black cloud of twisting matter finally enters the room. It slides through the ceiling without any resistance and seeps right into my fingertips.

I grit my teeth as it feels exactly the same as it did before. The sensation of boiling water makes its way through my veins and slowly flows toward my cores. The last time I tried this, I only had one core, the Greater Demons. This time, I have two.

Although they're technically imitations, they work exactly as they should. The larger Arch Demon's core takes dominance and filters the dark-colored energy. The moment it hits the small black orb in my chest, the cool feeling of fresh natural flowing water pours out the other side.

It starts to spread all throughout my body and I stop to think.

There are still small amounts of residue from the hot raw energy creeping toward the core. The bulk of it is cool and flows easily. The refined energy is much easier to control, It's also what I used to attack the Demon.

If I were to expel this now, the trace amounts of hotter raw residue would definitely still be in my wrists and arms leading up to my chest.

A grin of satisfaction and realization crosses my mind...

If I were to activate my magic in those same pathways while the residue is still present it would create the same chain reaction I witnessed earlier.

"It all makes sense now..."

I focus on the tiny remaining wisps of black energy to filter through my core. Within a few seconds, just over 90% of it is gone.

After a few more minutes, I've squeezed almost every last bit through.

It takes 20 full minutes to double and triple-check that every last particle has made its way through. Now, the only energy that remains in my pathways is the cool and refined version.

I think to myself again.

This energy reacted even more extreme when it hit the Demon's shielding. If my thoughts are correct, having any amount of even this refined Demonic Energy in my system when switching back to magic triggers the reaction.

I decide to release an attack.

Staring forward, I point my right index finger up in the air and let all of the power flow toward it.

Instantly, a thin line of black light flows out and shoots up about a meter into the air. Moments after it leaves my hand, it disperses and loses its tight thin shape then falls to make a miniature puddle on the silver table top in front of me. It swirls around like heavy air.

It wasn't much, and it all happened so fast.

There's no magic for it to react to, so it just sits there for a moment, not doing anything.

I stare forward at the tiny thin palm-sized puddle of spinning black energy.

The puddle starts to shrink.

It begins to evaporate.

I watch with eyes wide open in awe for a moment, then try to pull it back in toward my fingertips again with my manipulation skill/

It doesn't budge.

"So interesting..."

There's still about 10% of the refined residue still flowing around in my pathways. After careful manipulation, referencing the ways I tried to move the raw energy around, releasing the last bits of refined energy through my fingertips only takes a few minutes.

By the time every last drop is released, it all dissolves into thin air.

"I did it."

Ember said it would take extensive training to properly wield Demonic Energy and filter it through a core. He's right, but I have a loophole that will make it much easier. I'll master this new skill.

These magic-dampening cuffs are a blessing in disguise. They may seem like an effective way to trap an elite-level hunter in normal human restraints, but in reality, whoever put me here has given me a perfect training ground to perfect my Demonic Energy Manipulation.

I focus on my surroundings and search for more. Using this skill actually causes me quite a bit of fatigue, but it's combined with the fact that I'm locked to a table in a dark room without food or water.

At this rate, I'm sure I'll be fine for a few more hours of training this new skill.

A few hours pass.

I'm able to find 3 more similar-sided clouds of Demonic Energy all hovering around the same general area. Just over 500 meters away. I've come to the conclusion that I'm about 100 meters underground, and a source just under half a kilometer away leaks out a small amount of energy every 60 to 90 minutes.

I still can't tell what the source is, or why it's only coming from one direction, but that doesn't matter much to me.

All that does is I'm now able to filter through all of the raw energy in just 10 minutes and expel pure demonic energy up to about 95% on the first try. Slowly dripping the rest from my fingertips takes under 2 minutes in total on the last attempt.

This is a huge improvement from my first, but there's still a lot of work to do.

Unfortunately, I'm exhausted after a long day of training.

I deactivate my skill and rest my head on the cold hard table between my handcuffed arms.

My stomach growls and my lips are dry, but that doesn't stop me from falling asleep just minutes later.

Everything goes dark.

Time passes.

I'm not sure how many hours exactly, but it feels like almost half a day goes by before the loud sound of banging on a metal door wakes me up.

It's followed by a familiar blond woman's voice.

"Rise and shine Demon Boy! Let's see if you feel like talking today."

Chapter 276

As my eyes adjust to the dim yellow light again after a long night of rest the metal door at the back of the room swings open.

The short-haired blond walks in with two new silver daggers on her thighs and a leather pouch over her shoulder that seems to be some variation of an item box. She sports a wide grin, showing off her annoyingly symmetric pearly white teeth.

The woman takes a few steps forward and then reaches into the item box to pull out a small wooden stool, a long leather whip, and a silver key. Next, she takes out a small brown box and a crystal clear bottle of water. The scent of spices and hot food fills the air, there must be food in that box.

She places all of the assorted items on top of the small stool similar to the one I sit on at the back of the room as the door slams shut.

The blond gets close, but far enough away this time that I won't be able to reach her with my forehead. She speaks while grabbing one of her knives and twirling it around.

"How was your night? Any trouble sleeping? I bet you're feeling more talkative today, aren't you?"

She smirks, but my eyes are more lively than yesterday after the great night of rest I just woke up from.

I reply, looking at her, then moving my gaze to all of the gear she brought in.

"Just fine. What's on the menu today?"

My mouth is dry and my stomach is empty, but oddly enough it's not as extreme as I would have expected. This may be a positive side effect of using a body double skill. These clones may need less food and water to exist than a regular person, I'm not positive yet.

She replies, ripping out both of the knives from the back of my palms with her free hand in one rough motion.

"If you cooperate, maybe you'll find out. It's all yours if you talk."

The blood-soaked blades hit the ground behind her with a clang and a splash. Crimson liquid starts to leak onto the table again as she's reopened my wounds.

"Now, where were we?"

The woman looks up at the ceiling and then back to me.

"What unique skill did that Demon have, and what element did its Dragon possess?"

She puts a foot up on the table and continues spinning her blade, then takes out her other one. My eyes gloss over and I just stare dully ahead while replying in a monotone voice.

"It's just going to be the same as yesterday isn't it."

She angrily reacts.

"Yeah, and worse is you keep that attitude."

She points the blades to my fingers.

"We'll do one nail for every hour you don't cooperate."

She turns to the pile of gear, pointing out the whip.

"Then move to more extreme measures if you still have nothing helpful to say."

I still don't budge. I'm unsure if the fact that I know nothing that happens to this body matters is the main component of my calm attitude right now, or if this woman is just imperfect at her job...

Telling your captive exactly what you're going to do to them isn't exactly prime torture tactics.

Thinking about my situation even more, with a single release of Demonic Energy while she has her shielding activated, it would most likely be more than enough to take her out. However, if pushed hard enough she'll leak information of her own. Playing along for now may be beneficial.

Returning my gaze back to her, I reply.

"Do your worst."

She does.

Five hours pass and my entire left hand's nails have been taken, but I don't react much to the pain or the situation of guaranteed demise I'm trapped in from her perspective.

Every time the woman asks what power the demon has or the element its bonded dragon wields, I continue to ignore her. Occasionally, I'll return some questions back to her.

"Who do you work for? Maybe I'd be more inclined to answer if I knew where this information was going."

All I get in response each time are slashes to the arms from her daggers and threats to take off my fingers instead of just the nails. I don't react.

Three more hours pass and I can tell she's getting much more frustrated.

After a bloody barrage of attacks followed by an indifferent dull response from me every time, I hear her curse under her breath as she paces near the back of the room.

"If only it wasn't for these cuffs, I could use mind magic on this brat. I need to figure out which one came back."

I raise an eyebrow, then show a grin. This is the first bit of emotion I've shown all day.

"Mind magic huh? Why can't you use it now? What's so special about these cuffs? Take them off, try it out."

The most interesting detail that piques my interest is her last line. She needs to figure out which one came back...? Which what? Arch Demon? Dragon Type? Or something else...

She scowls and grabs the whip at the back of the room letting out a fit of rage.

"They said you'd be a special case and not to take those cuffs off for any reason for the chance that this special investigation would all be compromised."

Crack

The lash hits me across the chest. Gritting my teeth and exhaling loudly I reply through the stinging sensation that rips my shirt.

I mock her words from yesterday.

"Good. Information. Keep it coming... Now we're getting somewhere."

I chuckle.

This only pisses her off more, leading to more cracks of her whip and bloody mutilation from her daggers. The remark and info gathered were worth it.

Two more hours pass, and we're both exhausted by the end of it.

Possibly her more than me. Both covered in blood and sweat, she decides to end today's session here. The one thing that irks me a bit is the satisfied look on her face.

With a smirk, the blond opens the door and turns back to me.

"Now you understand what the next few days will be like. I can do this for as long as I need to, it's best you cooperate. If not, tomorrow will be even worse."

She slams the door shut, and I let out a long sigh while placing my head down on the blood-soaked table. My entire body burns with gashes from that whip and my hands can barely move from the knife marks and lack of nails.

I take a deep breath in and out, then begin my Demonic Energy Manipulation training without a moment of hesitation.

The small trace amounts of black wisps continue to spawn every 30 minutes or so just 500 meters away. If I don't grab onto them within a few minutes of them spawning, they float away.

I manage to filter the energy 6 times this session. Even though I'm on the verge of exhaustion, it's much easier to manipulate the black matter this time around.

By the time the 3 hours of training are up, I'm able to filter the raw power through my core to 100% refined energy in under 2 minutes. Expelling it in a single thin blade-like line has become easier too. The initial expulsion uses up almost all of the energy and I can propel it all the way to the back wall of the room. It hits the metal door, but doesn't do any damage and hardly makes a sound. It still takes 15 seconds to drip out all of the remaining matter.

The refined Demonic Energy dissolves away without a trace.

"Good progress... but I need to get better."

The fatigue catches up to me, and I begin to drift off.

Before I can attempt to tamper with these cuffs or make an attack on the woman, I need to get more proficient. Plus, every day I keep her talking will potentially bring me more information. My goal is to absorb, refine, and expel Demonic Energy almost instantaneously before attempting an escape.

At first, I just thought I'd just let her kill me and forget about all of this to go rogue in silence, but the more she tortures me the more it seems she's enjoying herself. It doesn't matter if she's just a hired grunt, or doing all of this by her own free will. I'll get revenge on this woman no matter what.

My new mission is to make her suffer the same fate as she's given me, then burn the organization that trapped me here to the ground.

Everything fades to black as I fall asleep.

Many hours later, I wake up to the sound of loud metal banging and the woman's voice as she barges in through the door.

Today, I have a new plan.

Chapter 277

"Rise and Shine. Today's the day you spill it."

The woman comes in with her usual food, water, and torture weapons wanting to know more about the Demon and the Dragon I fought. She's much more straight-faced today and doesn't fold under any of my initial questions or tauntings.

I lose a lot of blood from deep lashes and she even tries cutting my fingers rather than just the nails.

Her newest method is a torch soaked with a flammable substance that she continuously uses to poke and prod me while asking questions. I don't even flinch from the heat so she stops this after just a few hours.

My month-long training sessions of solitude and battles with ruthless monsters have been much worse than this. I can handle a few cuts and burns from a human. My physical appearance on the other hand tells a different story.

This only works in my favor.

The woman's cooler demeanor flips back to the same hint of rage I witnessed yesterday.

"What's with you? Is this information really that valuable that you'd rather die than give it away?"

Instead of my usual silent or dull generic one-word answers, I decide to entertain her now. Last time she was in this state she leaked much more than intended.

The woman tightens her lips while taking a step back.

I respond with a smug look on my face.

"Is the information that important that you'd waste days down here instead of killing me?"

I get another angry lash across the chest as her eyes glimmer with rage.

"I'd face a worse fate than you if you died before giving me any information."

Then another.

Crack

She keeps yelling.

"You're just a nut case. It's been 3 days since you had any food or water and you're mutilated beyond repair yet you're smiling like you have the upper hand here."

I cough and spit out blood showing her the grin that she despises.

"So you can't kill me until I talk? That's good to know."

Crack

Her face goes red again and any hopes of a conversation dwindle.

Another long day of torture continues.

However, I'm not sure who's in a worse position.

A few more hours pass before she's had her fill of action. The anger, frustration, and rage have turned into maniacal laughs while she continues using every torture trick in the book.

My questions and taunts aren't getting through to her anymore, she doesn't reply with anything meaningful. She just keeps asking the same questions in response.

A few hours later, the blond tires out and begins to pack up to leave. Before doing so, she force-feeds me half a bottle of water, then walks out the door with a final line.

"That's so you don't die overnight. You were correct. I can't kill you until I get what I need, but you'll wish I could."

The metal door slams closed and I begin my Demonic Energy Manipulation training almost immediately.

I don't have a status screen that gives me the exact amount of Energy I'm wielding, so to make things simple today I decided to name each individual wisp of energy as "1 Unit of Demonic Energy". They're all roughly the same size, so it makes things simple.

The unexpected cool liquid refreshment gives me enough energy to train for 5 hours straight. I manage to refine 9 wisps of energy and make a very intriguing discovery.

I can achieve complete refinement in just over 1 minute per try. It's some improvement, but not nearly as fast as I would have wished. It's been mostly muscle memory and perfecting the flowing movements, not an innate power-up. So, I may just need much more practice and possibly more levels to get faster at this.

Expelling the energy on the other hand has managed to become nearly instantaneous.

I've figured out a method to speed up this process.

If while absorbing the Demonic Energy in the surrounding area, I don't allow it to leave my core after being refined I'm able to keep this refined black swirling matter inside my core and not touching any of my pathways.

When all of the refined energy is released at once directly from the core to whichever part of my body would like to release it from, 100% of the matter is expelled in a single shot.

On my 9th and final attempt of the night, I manage to hold the Demonic Energy inside my core, deactivate my skill, and confirm that it remains refined even 10 minutes later once I activate it again.

The energy shoots out all the same creating a thin black blade-like shape before hitting the door in the back of the room with a loud clang.

I fall asleep from the fatigue after this.

Everything goes dark, and then my day of torture starts up the moment my eyes open again.

"Rise and Shine!"

I hear her voice ring out after the metal door swings open.

There's already a twinge of anger and frustration in her tone as she walks in. This is a good sign.

I'll just say quiet today and see if she lets anything out during her moments of rage. One or two more training sessions will be enough to start tinkering with the cuffs and planning my escape.

The woman begins her punishments.

An hour or so of the usual goes by. Then, she tries a few different tactics.

"Don't you want to see your friends? Tell me what I need to know and I'll let you all go free!"

The woman takes out the silver key that she flashed to me on the first day as well.

"There's no need to be stubborn. Drop your pride and choose to survive. I'll unlock your cuffs."

I roll my eyes and don't give in. Although, I'm jumping with excitement on the inside. There's a small hole in the metal linking the black cuffs together that looks like a key could fit inside. I wasn't sure if that silver item was used for the cuffs or the door outside. Now It's very clear to me.

She taunts me more about my teammates, and her eyes get wider and crazier. I don't bother reacting, I'm busy thinking about other things. Whatever is happening to my squad is beyond my control at the moment. Based on her previous actions and statements, it seems like there isn't anything they have that she would want to know.

I have no reason to trust this woman, so there's no point in worrying about them now. I'm solely focused on myself.

She can't believe this lack of reaction, and the torture just gets more violent.

Eventually, she says something new under her breath that piques my interest.

"Everyone else is done with their interrogations, but I'm stuck working overtime for you."

Crack

I get hit by her whip again.

I decide not to push her over the edge, the last time I did she gave me the silent treatment. The fact that she isn't working alone is news to me. Now I know this is an organized operation. She's working overtime...

Instead of making a smug remark, I let my head and full body go limp. If she's already talking to herself, I might as well let her keep it up.

She murmurs inaudible curses, while continuously asking about the Demon and Dragon again, but gives up about 30 minutes later. She lets out a long sigh and lifts my head by the air while staring into my half-open bloodshot eyes.

"Looks like you're too worn out for the day to be of any good use. We'll pick this up tomorrow."

She lets out a chuckle and forces a small amount of water down my throat. I don't react, acting as unconscious as possible in the hope she lets another thing slip.

The woman packs up her gear and opens the door.

Her next words make my heart skip a beat...

She murmurs under her breath.

"Brutus could have given us more information on this bunch, I can't get a word out of this brat. It's going to be a long week."

The moment the metal door slams shut, my blood begins to boil.

Brutus. The Regional Director has something to do with this... I don't know if she's a private 3rd party hire, an association secret branch, or something different altogether.

The only thing I know is I'm getting out of here tomorrow and getting to the bottom of this.

With a clenched jaw, I begin my Demonic Energy Training. Another breakthrough is necessary today.

I manage to refine 1 unit of energy, store it in my core, deactivate, and reactive my skill to expel an attack 3 times. Each time I would wait increasingly longer in between reactivating the skill just to make sure there's no time limit.

By the 3rd time, over an hour goes by while deactivated, so I'm fairly positive I can store this energy indefinitely.

Next, I'll find out how much I'm able to store at a time.

Over the next 2 hours, I absorb 3 units of Demonic Energy into my core all at once. I turn off the skill, then turn it back on, allowing me to expel the energy in the same fashion nearly instantly without any issue.

The form of the attack is a bit more distorted and imperfect, showing similarities to the blob of black energy I released on the Arch Demon by the time it reaches the back wall. However, for the first few meters, the energy stays in a very concise and sharp knife-like form.

I take 2 more hours to try it again.

This time, I hold 3 full units in my core and release them in 3 separate 1-unit attacks. Each is much more stable for longer than the full 3-unit strike.

This will do. I'll have to train more another time to perfect it, but it's not necessary right now.

I absorb and refine 3 more units of energy, then wait with my eyes wide open until morning.

My heart beats out of my chest and the final words that blond woman said repeat in the back of my head over and over keeping me awake and alert.

Only 4 hours pass before I hear her voice ring out as the door flies open.

I fake raising my head and show a disoriented squint.

"Rise and Shine! Looks like you're feeling much better than last night! Shall we get started?"

She smirks, taking out her gear and placing it at the back of the room.

My jaw tightens and I stare forward at her with built-up anger waiting patiently for the perfect moment to make my move.

She picks up on my tension and takes advantage of the situation.

"Would you look at that. Finally realizing I've got you exactly where I want you, huh? It's pointless to resist. Tell me what I need to know."

She shows a devious smile with her eyes lock on me like she's eyeing her prey.

With her hips swaying back and forth, the woman walks over while reaching into her item box to pull out the silver key.

She starts to spin it around her index finger as she gets closer and closer.

"Just one word could set you free. Come on, I already told you I'm not the enemy. These may be harsh methods, but I'm on your side here. Trust me."

Her footsteps get louder, and her voice gets muffled in my perception as she continues to talk.

All I can see is the key...

She leans over the table dangling the silver magic item right in front of my face.

The woman is taunting me again, saying something about my teammates, and how long I'll be in here if I refuse to speak. I can't make out the full sentences.

I'm much more focused on my Demonic Energy Manipulation Skill activating.

I take aim and prepare to attack. It's time to make my escape.

Chapter 278

It all happens in an instant.

I shoot a thin black blade of refined energy from the tips of my fingers out of my bloodied right hand. It flies up in the air, heading straight for her left shoulder.

The woman's expression changes to disbelief, and she activates her mana shielding before the collision. She's an elite-level hunter, so even when completely caught off guard her shielding activates for protection.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to her, this is the worst move the blond could have possibly done.

She lets out a scream as yellow and white sparks fly.

Her mana shielding gets sliced clean through and her left shoulder takes the brunt of the explosion that follows.

With no way of avoiding or blocking the incoming attack, this results in a loud thud and clang as her disconnected arm hits the table in front of me. The rest of her body is blown backward from the blast of expelled mana shielding.

The silver key falls from her fingertips into a puddle of blood on the table between my cuffed wrists and chest.

I tilt my head down and grab the key with my teeth, craning my neck forward to position it toward the keyhole during all the confusion.

Her disconnected arm rolls off the table to hit the floor, and the woman looks at me from the other side of the room in utter shock. Her wound is dripping blood, but more importantly, crackling with yellow and white sparks on the parts exposed to my Demonic Energy colliding with her shielding.

Even her disconnected limb is crackling and slowly dissolving into a pile of ash on the floor as I finally manage to get the key in the small hole.

Click

I deactivate my Demonic Energy Skill, making sure the only remaining 2 units of matter are locked away in my core.

The cuffs both open at once, and I feel the world around me begin to come back to life in full color once again. The mana in the air is very weak but it's more than the OMP I've been subject to for the last few days.

I immediately plunder just enough from my surroundings to use self regeneration on my burns and scars while re-growing my fingers and missing flesh.

The silent shock turns to screams of horror from the woman sat in the back corner of the room. She just speaks in a frightened tone as I get up from the table.

"N-No... H-How?"

I use inspect and appraisal on her to make sure I'm not in over my head here.

[Lv. 312]

Active Items:

Golden Amulet of Protection [+70% Defense]

Golden Ring of Power [+65% Strength][+50 Mental Strength]

High-Grade B-Class Shielding Artifact [31/100][IC]

Active Skills:

Lie Detector [Legendary Grade]

Dagger Mastery

A ton of red flags pop up in my mind. Her level is way too low to operate mana shielding, but there's an artifact in her status that somehow allows her to activate an artificial one. The [31/100] must be an amount of uses remaining, but the [IC] is a mystery to me.

Her top skill on the other hand... I've seen it before, just not a legendary-grade version. The Director's assistant has the same one. It makes sense someone with a similar skill would be put in a position like this.

I make a mental note and take a step forward.

She speaks again.

"T-This is... W-What power did you just use? I-Impossible. Even A-Class hunters can't use magic in those cuffs. It's not-"

I roll my eyes and cut her off while reaching into my item storage to take out my imitation sword, letting it flicker with flames.

"Enough talking. I'm in charge now. I ask the questions."

I turn my gaze to the remains of her severed limb as it has almost entirely turned to ash.

"If you don't want the rest of you to turn into that, I recommend you do as I say."

She gulps, shedding tears while frantically looking at her wound and trying to use mana shielding to block out the reaction. I watch the artifact tick down to [30/100], then [29/100], and finally [28/100] before she stops.

Every one of her attempts only makes the sparks fly even higher, speeding up the effect.

She replies.

"Y-You can stop it. Can't you?"

I smirk.

"Of course, I'd just like you to answer a few questions first. Then I'll stop it and let you go free."

My version of stopping the reaction is killing her and letting it fizzle out on its own. Other than that, I'm as clueless as she is. There's no way I know of that can stop this reaction once it's started.

Again, the short-haired blond weighs her options, but the sparks growing closer to her vital points only get worse for every second she stalls.

It seems my twisted version of stopping the reaction is enough for her lie detector skill to believe I mean it.

She nods.

My questioning begins.

"Who do you work for? How is Brutus involved? And why do they want this information about a Demon and a Dragon so badly?"

She starts to speak but swallows her words.

I light my sword on fire and point it at her while gritting my teeth.

"You have less than 3 minutes to live if that reaction continues. I suggest you speak now."

This is also true. Based on my experience, this is about how fast the sparks spread.

She wipes her eyes with her remaining good arm, takes a deep breath and replies.

"T-The Inner Circle."

I raise an eyebrow as she shutters before continuing.

"I'm just following orders... I-I don't know why they want this information. A-And the Regional Director was just our information gatherer. He told us exact times, dates, and your physical descriptions."

She gulps.

"N-Now, please! Make it stop!"

I yell back.

"Who is the Inner Circle? Where can I find them? Does the Director run this group?"

Her face goes white.

"I-I don't know. I just follow orders. I don't know anything. I- I- Please help me-"

I cut her off as the sparks start to spread to her chest and lower torso. It seems I've already hit a dead end here so some more urgent questions are necessary to answer now.

"Last one and I set you free."

Her eyes widen with hope as I continue.

"Where are my teammates? How many others are working here? And who's in charge?"

The yellow and white crackling light particles move up her throat and down to her legs as she replies.

"Th-Three floors up, your teammates are in the cells unit. Right now there 8 followers like me on duty and 1 Inner Link. That's William- I mean number 1, he's- he- h-"

Her words begin to fade as the dazzling light show takes over.

I nod and sigh, then point a finger at her forehead while acting my earth magic as well as my conceal skill.

With the special grade conceal perk, I shift my face, body, and even clothing to look exactly like the woman. Her black combat suit and daggers are replicated perfectly down to the silver pin labeled "005".

Her eyes widen as she realizes exactly what's happening.

I shoot a small stone projectile through her forehead setting the woman free as promised.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Lie Detector[Legendary Grade]

[YES][NO]

I choose yes as her remains sizzle away in a final violent display of sparks.

Even the magic items get destroyed in the reaction. I was looking forward to checking out that unique artificial shielding item. It's a shame, but on the bright side, I got a new skill out of all of this.

I check my status to see more details.

Lie Detector

Info: The Lie Detector skill allows the caster to determine if the words an enemy speaks are true or false while making physical contact.

The perk granted for surpassing the [Special Grade] rank allows the caster to use this skill on any words they hear. It doesn't matter who speaks, or what distance they speak them from. The caster will know if it is a truth or a lie.

The [Legendary Grade] perk allows the caster to know if the inner thoughts of a person are true or false with physical contact. It is reliant on audible answers, but if the truth is being bent the skill can tell.

[Unique Perk] [Telepathy Holder] Physical contact is not necessary if this skill is paired with the Telepathy skill to temporarily perceive an enemy's inner thoughts as spoken word. Only mana control of a significantly higher power can block this perk from activating.

Grade: [Legendary Grade]

[Upgrade]

"Incredible..."

It's an amazing skill, but I have no time to worry about this now.

Left on the woman's wooden stool, there's a cold bottle of water and a box of steaming hot food. I gladly accept both offerings and store the rest of her D and C class magic items in my item storage.

Then, I turn to the black metal cuffs and silver key still resting in a puddle of my own blood on the table in the back of the room.

Curiously enough, the cuffs never turned on or off. Even now, I don't feel any magic power coming from them. To me, they just seem like normal metal even while using my All-Seeing Eye.

I walk over and try to pick them up.

The second my finger touches the cool black metal, all of my magic senses shut off in an instant. I pull my hand away and they turn back on.

I attempt to put the cuffs in my item storage by leaning the table forward and letting them fall into my portal, but the moment they touch the white spatial magic, it disappears and the cuffs hit the ground with a clang and a splash.

I let out a sigh.

"I guess I can't have everything...."

If I can't transport this item without deactivating my magic, it's best I leave it be. The key, on the other hand, I grab and throw in my storage just in case

I do a scan of the room, making sure I've taken everything I can. I double-check my concealment disguise and confirm I still look like a perfect replica of the woman labeled number 5. Then, begin walking to the metal door.

After a deep breath in and out I open it up and walk through into a narrow cement-walled corridor. It's dimly lit with the same flickering yellow bulbs as the room I just left. The crimson liquid staining the floor and walls behind me turns it into more of an orange hue.

Closing the door behind me quietly, I turn right while activating my enemy detection skill to scope out each floor of this underground lair.

Chapter 279

My footsteps echo in the hallway and the flickering yellow lights above mask the grime that covers the grey walls, ceiling, and floor.

There are metal doors every 10 to 15 meters that lead into similar-sized rooms, but the long curved hallway seems to go on forever as I make my way forward. My enemy detection skill only shows one other person on this floor and they are still rather far away at the end of the hall.

It's a level 202 with a swordsmanship skill as well as that same High-Grade shielding artifact activated. It must be something their boss hands out to each of them. However, a defense item of this class can't be cheap...

As my footsteps echo further and further down the hall, a raspy middle-aged man's voice eventually calls out.

"Number 5, back so soon? Did the kid finally talk?"

I don't respond, but pick up my pace slightly to see who made this remark. My appearance may resemble the short-haired blond woman, but my voice is still the same. Responding would not be the best idea.

I turn the final bend of the long narrow corridor to see a mean-looking man whose appearance is exactly what I'd pictured. Dark eyebrows and a buzzcut with poorly inked tattoos on his visible skin. Three bottles of alcohol are all half empty on a small table next to him along with a few piles of paper and a pen.

He crosses his arms and raises his head as we make eye contact.

"Come on, it was that bad again? You were hardly gone a few minutes. The boss is getting restless you know. We have another job to tend to 3 days from now so you better hurry it up."

I tighten my gaze and keep walking toward him. The rough-looking man has a silver pin on his shirt too, labeled "009". I get within 3 meters and see a stairway leading up to the next floor on my left side. He speaks again.

"What's with you today, you're acting differ-"

Before he can finish speaking, I get close enough to the man that he starts eying me up and down with lust-filled eyes. Reaching out my right hand I activate my newest ice magic skill and freeze him solid before he even knows what hit him.

I let out a sigh while manipulating the mana within my ice to phish out the labeled pin. I shatter him to pieces without a second thought and stare down at the small silver item using appraisal.

High-Grade B-Class Shielding Artifact [64/100][IC]

It's exactly the same as the one this woman was wearing. I throw it into my item storage and begin walking up the industrial-grade stairs without another thought. They're split into 2 sections of 12 steps, sturdy enough for dozens of people to walk on at the same time.

This place must have been built and used by a large organization a few decades ago but seems to have been forgotten by time. All the rooms are empty or filled with old tables and chairs. They've been stripped of their valuable items multiple times over.

The next two floors turn out almost exactly the same as the first one I just left. Each of them consisted of a long narrow corridor, abandoned rooms, and a guard watching the stairs leading up to the next floor.

Number 8 and number 7 are levels 245 and 269 respectively. They each have mediocre combat skills and the same enchantment shielding artifact linked to their numbered pins, I put each of these items into my storage after leaving them on the ground in pieces.

I move up to the next floor, this is where my enemy detection skills start to act up. I sense 8 people on this floor, but only 3 of them show their status. The first one I meet is level 286, number 6 at the top of the stairs.

Unlike the floors below, it seems this one has heightened security.

The skinny red-haired man with a stealth skill doesn't stand a chance and is taken care of before he can say a word or even realize what's going on. I take his pin and walk down the hall slowly toward the 7 people remaining on this floor.

One status holder stands at the far end of the hall, while another is in one of the rooms about halfway down the long passage. They're only level 337 with a body hardening skill so I open the heavy metal door without a moment of hesitation.

A short brown-haired man with freckles and a scar across his cheek shows me a smug look as I walk in and close the door behind me. He sits at the back of the room on a wooden stool reading a newspaper while jingling a ring full of silver keys. A pin labeled "004" glimmers on his black combat suit.

To my left and right side, there are thick metal bars blocking off the sides of the room into two separate cells. It only leaves a 10-meter by 2-meter-wide walking space in the middle of the dimly lit room.

My eyes widen as I see exactly what I've been looking for on my left side.

It's very dark at the back of the cells, but I can see a faint outline of green hair on a short woman sitting against the wall. As my eyes adjust even more a blond is sat next to her and the tall archer

lies flat on his back in the same cell. Another faint outline of the blue-haired mage rocks back and forth a few meters beside them.

It's my team.

I quickly turn to the right side, as there is one more presence in that cell too. I assume it must be Lydia, but the man speaks before I get a closer look. I turn my head back to him to hear what he has to say.

"Finally. Did that brat finally talk? You killed him so we can go home and get some rest, right?"

I clench my jaw and don't respond. My eyes dart back and forth as I slowly walk forward. They meet both Abby's and Maria's. Each of them looks angry enough to kill me on the spot if they had the chance. With sharp eyes and gritted teeth, they haven't lost their will to live one bit.

Both of them wear the same black metal cuffs as I had on earlier. This explains why I can't appraise or sense their magic at all.

I'm happy to see them alive and well, but I can't celebrate just yet.

I bring my eyes back to the short man and nod slowly a few times. He smirks, responding immediately.

"Excellent, Excellent. Wait. In that case, why are you here? Why not just go directly to the boss-"

Raising my hand in the air, I activate my earth magic and shoot a stone bullet through the man's forehead before he can finish his final question.

His time is up as well. I've killed a lot of people today, but they all know too much and have hurt my teammates unprovoked. They deserve worse. I'm doing them a favor by making it quick and painless.

His eyes go blank as he stops mid-sentence and the ring full of silver keys falls to the floor with a series of clangs.

I hear gasps from my left side while I lean down to grab the pin and keys before turning to the cell. I walk over still in full disguise.

The sight before my eyes is horrendous once it comes into full view. It makes me want to look away immediately.

Each of them looks like they went through similar, if not worse torture than me. They're all covered in burns, gashes, and clothes stained with blood.

In the cell, Maria, Abby, and Arie are sat together with Fisher shaking and looking at the floor a few meters away. He's alive, but in the worst condition out of any of them, pale as snow from blood loss and shock.

The women both stare at me with the same angered expressions while Arie looks up at the ceiling calm and deep in thought.

I take another step closer. Then, speak in my undistorted deeper-toned voice while deactivating my conceal skill and tossing the keys through the metal bars.

"Sorry for the wait. Let's get out of here."

My appearance shifts back to my original form, minus the white eyes and black arm tattoos.

I smirk while watching both Abby and Maria shift their expressions from anger to joy, even Arie sits up realizing what's going on. His indifferent gaze turns to curiosity, but still, something seems very off.

Fisher doesn't budge. He continues to stare at the floor, murmuring something to himself.

I turn to the other cell, expecting to find Lydia behind bars once the yellow light illuminates the back of the room. Unfortunately, I'm mistaken.

An old man with a long grey beard stares back at me with cold and tired eyes. He doesn't say a word, just lifts his cuffed wrists up toward me.

There isn't anyone else in his cell. The white-haired mage is nowhere to be found...

Chapter 280

Despite the happy sounds of my teammates unlocking their cuffs and slicing through the metal bars of the cell behind me, there's still a major issue to still be solved.

Lydia is missing.

The other presence on this floor that was masked by the cuffs happened to be this bald and bearded old man, not the white-haired katana-wielding mage I expected to see.

My mind races and I activate my enemy detection skill along with my other perception perks to scope out the floors above me. There isn't any sign of her, only more enemies.

I scoff and curse under my breath. The old man speaks as I start to turn away.

"Please, if you would be so kind as to free me too young man."

I look him in the eyes and he stares back with the same cold eyes, now with a glimmer of hope at the back of them. His wrists are bloodied and bruised, but it seems they've healed many times over. There is food and water near the back side of his cell

I respond.

"Why do they keep you around? It seems like you've been locked up for quite a while."

He gulps, giving me the hint of a thin smile.

"Wrong place at the wrong time I suppose."

I scrunch my eyebrows and tighten my lips, questioning his statement.

A loud clang sounds behind me as the last portions of metal bars crack the cement floor and my teammates start walking out. White and green light casts a glow that reflects off the old man's face. Abby is restoring everyone's wounds. I respond, intrigued by the old man's words.

"What for? There's a lot of things that aren't quite adding up here."

He replies.

"I was doing research on the Abyss. That's all it was, unfortunately. A northern section of the city links to the source, a man named number 1 found me while I was doing a few tests. He wanted my data, and I- well- I believe you can infer the rest."

I try to activate my Lie Detector skill, but it doesn't give me any readings. My eyes shift down to the magic-blocking cuffs that must be the cause of the interference. I want to believe what he has to say, but the easy thing to do would be leave him behind and not carry any extra baggage.

My teammates are the only people I care about right now.

Before I make my decision, Maria hugs me from behind.

"I knew you'd come. I knew you'd find a way!"

She's half crying and half laughing. I forget about the old man for a moment and turn around to hug her back.

Abby gives me a smile and mouths a thanks but is still busy working on Fisher's wounds. Arie walks up stretching his arms with a calm expression.

"Thanks for the save, but this is no time to celebrate. You know better than I do, we have a lot of work ahead of us. Not a single one of us is safe, and I don't even know who the enemy is."

I grit my teeth, holding Maria even tighter.

"It's everyone. The Association. Solara. Who ever this damn Inner Circle organization is. Plus... where is Lydia? Could she be tangled up in this mess too?"

Silence fills the room.

Maria steps back, catching her breath and putting a more serious look on her face.

"No. You may not know her as well as me, but Lydia wouldn't betray us. I'm sure of it."

I nod slowly, not wanting to doubt her words, but the passive perks of my lie detector skill activate, and a soft green light envelopes her body.

It fades soon after, and based on everyone's lack of reactions it seems I'm the only one that can perceive it. It isn't blue text like my other skills, but I can instinctively comprehend that these words are the truth in Maria's mind.

I nod.

"I believe you. I'm just... laying out all of our options here."

A muttered tone escapes fishers lips.

"S-She's right. Lydia is as loyal as they come. That woman puts up a cold front, but I've teamed with her for years. She'd die before selling us out."

He coughs blood as Abby continues to restore him. The same faint additional green glow confirms these words are the truth.

My thoughts start racing.

Every second that passes in this escape plan of mine is making things more and more complicated. I don't necessarily care for her as much as my teammates that I've grown with, It's just that I hate not knowing the full truth. It makes me very irritated.

Being manipulated and deceived left and right by higher-ups and organizations that are supposedly stronger than me is not something I can put up with any longer.

I grit my teeth, trying to think things through. Before I can piece anything new together, the locked-up old man's voice echoes through the silence of the cell.

"Your white-haired teammate. I believe I know where she is."

All 5 of us turn his way, and I raise an eyebrow.

"Okay. Go on..."

He lifts his hands again.

"Please, help me out of here and I can lead you to their boss' room. The man with the pin labeled number 1 on his suit. I've been there a few times in the past, and I saw a young woman with white hair being brought in as I left just a few days back. She was yelling about how they;d regret this when her teammates came to save her. I thought it was a hopeless threat, but it seems what she's said will come true."

I look down at his cuffs, then back up at the man.

"Fine. Uncuff him. We'll give this guy a chance."

I'm sure I could make it to the Boss' lair myself, but just to make sure it wouldn't hurt to have someone lead the way. Plus, he definitely holds resentment toward this organization same as me.

"For now, the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Abby throws the keys into his cage and I use sharp mana-imbued earth magic stone fragments to slice an opening in the metal bars, I use my perception skills to watch closely as the man's black metal restraints fall to the floor with a clang.

[Lv. 89]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Appraisal

I activate my conceal skill immediately, changing my status to read that of an average level 350 hunter with only swordsmanship and the earth summoning skill that I've shown already. I'm almost positive Appraisal skills not of the special grade can only identify item stats, but its better safe than sorry.

I speak.

"Any suspicious movements and you're dead. Got it?"

He nods as I continue.

"Now, confirm everything you've said to me so far is true."

I point an earth magic imbued index finger that just cut through steel bars at his forehead, but all the man can do is smile.

"Of course it's true. Please, let me lead the way."

His demeanor flips from hopeless to joy-filled and helpful despite the deadly weapon pointed straight at him.

He walks out of the cell and begins making his way to the door at the back of the room. The same light green glows around his body then dissipates just as fast.

The man is no more than 150cm tall, just a bit shorter than Abby. He walks with a limp on his left leg, but the speed at which he hobbles toward the door makes it almost unnoticeable.

He doesn't speak another word before making it to the exit. The 5 of us stand in awkward silence as well. He speaks again while turning back to me.

"The name's Chester by the way. You've saved a stranger's life on a gamble, now I must do the same to pay you back. Please, allow me to help you find your friend."

His eyebrows shift up and down as he is clearly thinking deeply about something while struggling to keep eye contact with me. His attention darts around the room, but the genuine smile stays on his face.

Technically from his perspective, this is true. In reality, I saved him because I'm curious about a few things. What kind of loot this Bossman may be stashing in their office is first on the list... A close second is finding and saving Lydia. Third is one other thing that won't stop lingering in the back of my head. It's the question of what research this old man was doing on the so-called abyss that was so important that he was locked up for not sharing his data.

If I had to make an educated guess, the abyss is the blank energy reading that stretches out from the northern border of the city. This is what I sensed days ago upon our arrival, but haven't gotten a chance yet to check it out.

As odd and awkward as this man may be, he holds the key to many answers I seek.

I reply with a smirk.

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