

D. Diver 281

Chapter 281

Chester makes a quick glance at each of us. I'm fully on board with following him for my own selfish reasons, but I'm unsure exactly what my teammates think of him.

"I'll accept your help, but I will have a few questions for you once we make it out of here."

I give him a nod, he returns one. Then, I shift my gaze to my teammates to see their reactions. To my surprise, most of them are hardly paying attention to our deal at all.

They're all more worried about getting out of here and thankful to Abby for restoring their horrendous injuries.

Fisher stands up, looking a lot better but still as pale as a ghost. He's the first to speak.

"Let him lead the way. If this is our only clue, then so be it. Now that these cuffs are off, we can actually think straight and defend ourselves. Maybe our gear is locked up in that office too."

I examine all of them more closely, realizing their item boxes and magic items are all mostly stripped from their bodies. A few rings and pendants remain, but their weapons have all been confiscated.

My sword and dagger are kept in my dimensional storage, so I didn't think much of my replica item box being stolen from me. The contents of these storage pouches are much more valuable to them.

"Here. These should be enough for now. "

I take out a few higher-level long swords and daggers from various High-Grade C-Class dungeons for them to arm themselves in the meantime.

Arie and Abby seem to agree with Fisher's earlier statement, they look ready for war. I'm not quite sure what they've been through over the last few days, but I get the feeling they're looking for revenge. Each of them takes a pair of silver daggers, unfortunately I don't have a bow for the archer.

Maria stays close to my side and nods while picking up a long silver sword from my loot pile.

"It's alright for me. Whatever is fastest. I just want to save my training mentor."

Thankfully her cheerful attitude remains.

Fisher finds a long sword that suits him and I place the rest of the gear back into my storage. We all walk through the metal door and out into the hall.

I shift my appearance back to the blond-haired woman who tortured me. If we'll be facing the boss, I might as well get some information out of him if possible. He's expecting number 5 to report, so it would be an immediate red flag if anyone but her shows up.

I take the lead while scanning the floors above. The old man quickly follows on my left while Maria stays close to my right.

Abby, Fisher, and Arie trail behind in a triangle formation.

There are a lot more enemies that pop up on my radar. Dozens in fact, just on the floor above us.

The odd thing that sticks out to me is that there are only 2 of any considerable fighting status. One is on this floor, and another is two floors above. Various level 50 to 200 workers are scattered across the upper 3 floors.

It doesn't make much sense to have guards at such a low level when one Elite would do the trick and probably cost much less to manage. However, who am I to judge the inner workings of an enemy organization?

It takes less than 30 seconds before the guard at the end of the hall shows his face. With tan skin and short black hair, a muscular grunt pulls out a white glowing dagger. He's level 365 and has the build of a man who weighs twice as much as me.

Using appraisal, I find he has a wind-summoning skill and carries a bonded blade.

The silver pin labeled "003" shines on his shirt collar.

As we turn the winding corner, the man stares us down with anger and surprise in his eyes. He begins to swing his glowing white weapon immediately to stop us from approaching.

He yells.

"Number 5 what are you doing bringing the prisoners here? If they make it up to the next floor we'll be in big trouble. Have you gone mad-"

I cut him off.

By propelling a single mana-imbued fragment of stone, a hole in the man's forehead materializes before he can even warn us not to come closer. The grunt falls to the floor in a pool of his own blood.

It seems there are actually some highly skilled hunters working here. I haven't met a wind summoner before, but our meeting didn't last too long. It's a shame that dagger is worthless, once bonded with another human it's not like anyone else can use it.

I speak up to my teammates while collecting his pin.

"We have to be very careful moving forward. There are dozens of guards up above us."

I grit my teeth.

"They're low leveled, but they still may know too much. It's best we take care of all of them."

Before stepping onto the stairs, Chester interjects.

"As far as I know, the only ones who are in on this operation are the numbered guards with pins. I doubt those innocents know you even exist. The next floors are much different than the ones you escaped from below."

I tighten my gaze, not fully grasping his statement. I see the wisps of green energy shine from my Lie Detector skill all the same. He knows something we don't, but I'm still not going to trust these words blindly.

"I'll see for myself."

We walk up the stairs and the sound of a moving crowd, conversations, and even laughter start to fill my ears.

This set of stairs is painted white and has newly installed handrails attached to the walls on both sides. There's a bright bulb at the top of the stairs that lights up the area more luminous than I've witnessed in days.

Once the 6 of us get to the top of the second flight, a shiny silver double door waits for us to open it. It has a series of mana-imbued locks that would keep almost anyone below Elite status out from the other side.

I mutter to myself.

"This doesn't make sense. Why would the Boss have his room so close to the surface and neglect the floors below?"

Footsteps are walking by and the presence of weak E and D-Class magical items is much more apparent now.

Chester replies in a hushed tone.

"The floors above are even more concealed than the floors below. Hiding in plain sight is what these crooks do best."

I raise an eyebrow but am more focused on the passing hunters on the other side of this door.

When old ones leave new ones keep coming. Some go upstairs while others come down from higher floors. Half of the hunters on this floor are just standing still. None have the shielding artifacts or any identifiable features I can pinpoint.

They're all just low-level grunts.

Letting out a sigh, I come to the conclusion that I won't find a moment free to make my way through the door without being noticed. I slice through the locks with a thin strand of manipulated mana and let the door slowly swing open.

Chester speaks again while I do.

"Welcome to the bottom floor of the unofficial Solaran Black Market."

The voices, moving magic items, and abundance of low-level hunters finally begin to make sense. We all walk out onto the floor and it opens up much wider than the corridors below.

Turning to my left and right, I see a few vendors with mana crystals, potions, and low-class gear lining the walls every few dozen meters. They have small wooden stands and bright-colored blankets on the floor with their best-selling items on top to attract customers. The floor is made of hard concrete, but the lighting systems are more modern making it brighter up here.

There's enough room for all of us to walk side by side if we wanted, it's far less cramped than the dungeon-like environment below us. There's a curved nature to this floor structure. Based on the mana signatures of people moving around, it feels like a massive circular loop. Like any good shopping center, the customer can wander around and look at the selections forever.

It's similar to the underground market in the Vice Region's Capital, just much smaller and less populated.

A team of men in red robes walk by and point their heads to the floor to avoid eye contact. Everyone here would rather not be seen. They aren't guards, they're just citizens in the market.

Chester points to the left as each one of us walks out from the silver double door.

"The fastest path to the second floor is this way. That's where we'll find the Boss."

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I do another quick scan to find that including the floor we stand on, there are only 3 more to the surface.

Just as Chester said, there's only one hunter of any power level even close to ours in the immediate vicinity.

Considering this... another issue comes to mind.

The numbered badges on the agents that I've been killing have only been rising. The last one on the floor below was number 3. If this were to follow any ordinary pattern, there should be at least 2 more left. Number 2 and number 1... plus, I can't sense any other presence near the high-level hunter on my radar.

Maybe they're more skilled at hiding than I thought. I speak up in a hushed tone to Chester as we begin to walk.

"So, do you know anything about this guy? What's the point of having a black market in a city like this anyway? Isn't the entire desert its own off-the-grid market isn't it?"

He chuckles.

"Right, right, you all aren't from around here."

I never mentioned that to him, but maybe given our circumstances, it's fairly easy to tell. So, I don't mind his whispered statement. The old man continues as we pass the first concentrated region of merchants that chirp at us with prices, but stop as soon as we show our disinterest. Chester ignores them entirely.

"Your intuition is correct. There's no real reason to have a black market district in a settlement like this. The tax on dungeon loot is so low, and rarely enforced that there isn't much of a market difference between selling on the street or here underground."

I nod slowly as we pass silver doors similar to the one we walked out from and step over old wooden crates that must have come from makeshift stands or raw materials being sold here in the past.

The old man keeps talking, I listen with interest.

"Still, this isn't a lawless city. There are government officials in charge, and basic human law must be followed or it'd be utter chaos. Even if we are disconnected from the outside world, that doesn't mean the hierarchy of power structures change overnight. There are always people that want things done without those above knowing about it."

I smirk.

"Yep. Understood. Paranoia runs deep everywhere, even if the Association isn't in control. Some citizens don't want anyone messing around in their daily lives, especially their money. No questions asked. It makes sense."

Chester shrugs.

"Sure, that may play a role. More importantly, special artifact crafting orders are placed here. It's known that for the right price, anything can be bought. Nothing is off limits, not even items or information from the outside world. When a problem can't be solved by regular means, most come here to get it solved."

He pauses.

"Confidentiality is tight as well. No one knows who runs the place, and no one really bothers to ask. No matter the request small or large as long as you have enough money, it's always completed and no one will ever know you asked."

We round another bend, passing a few groups of men and women in robes and cloaks that hide their faces. Occasionally, the familiar-looking silver doors that are usually tightly fashioned to the walls are missing entirely or severely damaged.

Some lead down flights of steps just like the ones we came up, while others show wide-open warehouse-like rooms. On even rarer occasion, there are deep holes in the floor dropping further down into the shadowy depths of more abandoned underground hallways and dark rooms.

The underside of this city is larger than I'd ever imagined.

Everyone following is tense, I can feel their mana flowing through them at a much faster speed than its normal resting rate. They're on the verge of activating their skills at any sign of trouble. I'm the only one here that knows a major threat isn't nearby.

I speak up as a large opening in the cement wall shows a sturdy-looking staircase up to the next floor.

"Stay on guard, but there's no need to be so nervous. The Boss isn't a high-level elite or anything. I'm sure any one of us could take them on alone. If he was powerful enough to take us on, I'm sure he would have cleared the labyrinth himself and wouldn't have been in this mess."

The grips on their weapons loosen, and I feel the hot churning mana in my teammate's veins being to slow as they realize I have a good point.

We walk up the flight of stairs to the next floor.

This section of the market is segmented out into more district regions. Every vendor has their space, and it's marked off by a straight black painted line every 10 to 20 meters.

The gear is more organized, and of much higher quality. There are long tables, white cloth coverings, and even multiple workers at some of the stands. There are full businesses down here. It's mostly High-Grade D-Class gear for sale. The perfect balance of affordability for the common hunter, and increased quality to drive a high and consistent price.

Chester speaks while pointing down the hall.

"It's this way. I can take you near, but I don't know how I'd possibly get you inside. You'll have to figure that part out on your own."

I nod, extending my perception's range to find a level rating over 400 behind a few odd mana-imbued barriers. They seem like more than enough to keep out a B-Class threat. The unique structures are a similar strength to the mana shielding in high-grade training rooms, possibly even

greater. Plus, there's 3 layers of them. The readings are no more than 200 meters away, and hardly 15 meters off from the main path.

I'd like to get a closer look to see exactly what these barriers are.

This boss is hiding in plain sight, yet he's behind a fortress in the center of a black market that is more secure than most government training facilities.

I grin.

"Interesting."

Chester looks at me with worry in his eyes. I reassure him by pointing to my face.

"I'll have an easy enough time finding a way in with this disguise. Don't worry."

We make our way down the brightly lit hall until the buzzing sound of mana is audible. The vendors thin out around this section of the market and most hunters that are shopping walk around the loop in the opposite direction so as not to come in contact with this deadzone.

The black lines that separate the hall into sections stop and the area is empty. The lights shine white instead of their usual dull yellow. The concrete walls and floor are clean, like they were scrubbed clean with water magic recently.

It's the polar opposite of the sight we just left.

I speak.

"It may be best if I go in here alone. I'm sure it would only lead to an instantaneous fight if you all showed your faces. If only I show up, there's a possibility for me to scrap some more information."

After a few murmurs and back and forth, they agree.

All 5 of them step back as I walk forward into the buzzing and empty section of the market.

The curved nature of the walls makes every step forward feel like I'm walking much further and faster than I actually am. My teammates disappear behind me, and a square-shaped silver door almost twice as tall as me appears in my field of view. It looks like a bank vault, and hums loudly even shaking the floor with its power.

The metal wall is thick and reinforced with mana shielding on both sides. There is a thin 1-meter wide gap between two more vault-like doors of the same caliber stacked behind it.

I'm curious to know if a fully powered fire-magic imbued slash could make its way through. They may pose a challenge if I have to break in with force.

A voice rings out from a small black box above the door before I have the chance to test out my curiosity.

It's a woman's voice.

This surprises me, it's not the black market warlord of a man I was expecting.

Her soothing tone echoes through my ears.

"Number 5. Back so soon? This must mean good news. Please, come in."

The circular handle on the front of the vault turns on its own, swings open toward me reveals the picture-perfect copy of a door behind it.

A moment of silence passes, then the second metal door's handle spins, clicks, and swings open just like the one before.

The last door opens in the same manner and I begin to walk forward accepting my invitation into the Boss' lair.

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The silver doors slowly open and I walk through as the woman's voice from the black box stops.

The buzzing sound of ambient mana surrounding me is very loud. It only gets more violent the deeper I walk through. A glowing white light distorted the air in front of me, but using my perception skills I can tell there's a room just 5 meters ahead.

There's another odd barrier that connects the 3rd door to the room before me, but I sense no ill-intent or power-draining abilities attached to it. It's light grey and would not be perceivable without my All-Seeing Eye. The odd energy is in the shape of a small dome surrounding the person inside. I step through.

The buzzing stops entirely.

The bright white glow of mana shielding fades away behind me too.

The room is silent.

All I'm left to see is a fair-skinned woman with long black hair and violet-colored eyes. She sits in a tall black chair behind a mahogany desk. The room is circular and feels like a private study. The walls around me are covered in artifacts, colorful paintings, and intricate maps of the desert.

Beautiful furniture lines the walls and are separated by tables covered by velvet cloths and lush green house plants liven up the mood. There are potions in colors I've never seen before, and weapons that must drop from monsters I've never fought before.

The floor beneath my feet makes an eye-catching pattern of red, yellow, and orange material to create an extravagant-looking carpet.

I try my best to keep my eyes facing forward acting natural as I'm in disguise, but the room around me leaves me in a state of awe. The woman in front of me pays no mind to my wandering gaze and continues to speak in the same tone as she did over the black speaker.

"The Boss is out for a while. He left for important business late last night. Whatever news you're here to tell him is going to have to wait."

A shiny silver pin labeled "002" is on the upper portion of her tight black combat suit raises more questions.

I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 414]

Active Items:

Platinum Amulet of Protection [+85% Defense]

Golden Amulet of Strength [+70% Strength]

Golden Ring of Magic [+65% Mental Strength]

Silver Ring of Protection [+45% Defense]

High-Grade A-Class Shielding Artifact [4/10][IC]

Active Skills:

Hush [Legendary Grade]

Stealth

She has an upgraded version of that shielding artifact and her hush skill must have something to do with the lack of noise in the room around us.

The woman continues as I come to a halt less than 2 meters in front of her desk.

"He's obsessing over those black stones that Elite mage had on her."

I raise an eyebrow, thinking back to Lydia telling me she would collect more drops from those Demonic Energy wielding Knights. I haven't fully examined those stones myself yet, but it seems their boss is taking an interest in them.

The woman sees my confusion and continues.

"I don't get it either. That Ice Mage wouldn't say a word so he's taken her to the observatory for a private interrogation. The Boss knows best, so we shouldn't question him."

I nod slowly, still examining the room around me carefully. I spot a collection of item boxes at the back edge of the wooden desk in a small open-topped black box.

The woman sitting down gives me a glare and changes her tone.

"Yeah. These are the captive's items, don't get any bright ideas. They'll be going up for auction later this week."

I tighten my lips and gulp.

She chuckles and continues.

"Anyway, how's the interrogation going? Will you be ready to present him and that old man by sunrise in 3 days? We'll have the crafter bring a one-time use artifact to scrape any leftover information together that your lie detector missed."

I stand in silence thinking to myself.

Everything she's saying is clicking together like a puzzle in my mind. The observatory must be where the old man was doing research and was kidnapped by this organization. The stones Lydia collected are drops from monsters wielding Demonic Energy and they're somehow related to the abyss. Lastly, the Labyrinth and Arch Demon are connected to all of this too. But how?

I need to know more...

The woman's voice enters my ears again, interrupting my racing thoughts.

"Hello? Is everything okay? Did that Association Hunter finally break you? You didn't kill him, did you? The Boss would not be happy about that."

She's waving her hand in front of my face waiting for a response.

The longer I don't give her what she's expecting the more suspicious she'll become.

I set out a sigh.

It seems like this is all the information I'll be extracting today. She knows too much, but luckily she's given me many clues to help my hunt near its end. Just one more after her it seems.

I begin charging up by absorbing the mana in the air from the doors behind me. In one swift movement without changing the expression on my face, I grab my sword from item storage and swing it across my body at her at point-blank range to release a wave of pure pink mana.

I would have used fire magic to ensure a quick victory, but if anything were to go wrong the entire room would go up in flames and that could lead to many other problems.

To my surprise, she reacts quickly.

Her eyes open wide while activating her shielding artifact while jumping to my right side out of her chair.

Her easygoing smug expression instantly changes to cool and calculated killing intent.

An explosion of white mana vibrates through the air as my light pink crescent of pure energy collides with the Shielding. It holds up for a moment, but cracks under pressure and my attack manages to pierce through leaving a horrific gash across her body.

Although A-Class in name, I have my suspicions the craftsman who made these items is overhyping his work with the artifact names. The B-Class shielding from earlier grunts was sliced through like it wasn't even there, and this A-Class is hardly on par with a ranked-up Boss monster.

Still, it is impressive that a magic item can replicate such intense mana control without a competent wielder using it.

She dives to the floor and reaches her hand to the underside of the desk while boosting her shielding artifact again. I hear a click, then she rolls to the floor away from the wooden table and black armchair. Another layer of mana envelopes her. Fractions of a second later, it pulses again. Another layer forms and the protective white glow around her only gets thicker.

I throw another bright pink mana-imbued slash at her while she activates stealth and tries to evade my vision.

Unfortunately, it makes no difference at all. I can see her as clear as day.

The attack hits her straight on and destroys both new layers of her shielding, but does manage to slightly weaken the brunt of the blast.

I grit my teeth in annoyance and throw another.

"You put up the best fight so far, I'm looking forward to meeting your leader."

The final attack finishes her off. I don't give her the chance to respond.

A series of blue text pops up over her body.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Hush [Legendary Grade]

[YES][NO]

I choose yes quickly, collect the artifact labeled "002" from her body, and then run over to the desk to store the item boxes of my teammates in my item storage.

Before I get a chance to look around the room for any more clues I hear a loud thud. It's followed by the splintering and cracking of wood. Then, another loud thud. Then, another.

The heavy metal doors that were previously open behind me shut one by one in rapid succession.

On top of that fact, the walls and ceiling start to slowly close in. The magic items and paintings on the wall shake and rumble as the room begins to shrink.

The loud buzzing sound of mana creeps back into my ears from all sides as the woman's hush skill is no longer active. She lies in a puddle of blood with dead eyes and a wide grin. Her final gaze points toward the glowing red button she pressed underneath the Boss' desk.

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She triggered a death switch...

That red button activated a security precaution to destroy evidence and trap any intruders inside if their room is compromised.

I've got to give this woman credit, she caught onto the situation pretty quickly and reacted in a professional and timely manner.

Nevertheless, I have to focus and get as much gear as I can. Then, get out of here.

My eyes dart to the other side of the wooden desk to see a bundle of mana crystals and two piles of potions. One half of them glows bright white and the other glows gold. Without thinking twice I open my storage and let them all fall in.

The buzzing mana shielding from the doors begins to spread throughout the outer walls of the whole room as they shrink toward me fast.

I take out my blade and begin to charge up an attack, but hesitate on going all out.

There's an entire floor above me, not to mention an entire city above that. If I damage the structural integrity of this marketplace, I'll be in a much bigger predicament.

I don't mind killing those who get in the way of my freedom, but innocent bystanders don't need to get hurt if I can manage it.

I release a refined strike of pure pink mana at the silver door, it's similar to the strength I threw at the woman earlier.

A loud crack and buzzing sound splits through the mana shielding and leaves a thick cut on the hard metal, but my slash is stopped by the next layer of shielding behind it.

The energy dispersed from the blast makes the walls and ceiling above me shudder and creak as they close in at a steady rate. The shielding on the door regenerates almost instantly, bringing me back to square one.

Rolling my eyes, I mutter under my breath in a sarcastic tone.

"Great..."

I react and try to let out a mana blade with 25% more power. On impact, even more white energy erupts from the broken shielding and the ground shakes. The blade slices through the first door's front and back shielding but gets blocked by the 2nd.

My jaw tightens as the room shakes and deep cracks start to form in the ceiling and walls. Small bits of rubble fall and the sound of heavy metal support beams around me quivering and bending at odd angles makes me start to rethink my approach.

To make it through all 3 doors, it'll take a full-powered strike, but the backlash will surely take out everything above and below me for at least 15 to 20 meters... There's only a single layer of shielding behind these walls floor and ceiling, it's a weaker point than the door, but attacking it directly would end in a similar result. If I don't destroy this shielding mechanism entirely, it seems it will regenerate indefinitely.

Blasting it to pieces could work, but it may be futile as well. An act of mass destruction may just be for nothing, it would be best if I avoid that option.

My eyes dart around the room as the tables and small dressers begin to tip over. Painting and magic items fall off the walls. One of the works of art shows a man in a silver suit of armor holding a golden sword on top of a green hill. He's facing off against a black dragon with a red underside covered in dark flames.

I turn to the other wall as one of the large trophy cases full of jewelry, daggers, and swords starts to tip over and fall. The front glass rattles as it falls toward the floor.

Fractions of a second before it hits, I open a spatial magic portal below it, and dozens of items and artifacts fall into my storage.

"Might as well take something if I'll all just be crushed or destroyed anyway."

I step back, bracing myself against the mahogany desk.

Then, something clicks.

"Right... if It were destroyed..."

I deactivate all my active skills and place my blade back into my storage system while expelling any hint of magic in my system before attempting my next idea.

The room around me goes black and white as my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill activates. The buzzing noises stop, and all my mana sensory shuts off too.

It's still a strange phenomenon, but familiar enough now that I don't hesitate to eject a full unit of Demonic Energy from my core directly at the door.

The second I do and my pathways are clear, I deactivate my skill and reboot my mana senses. I don't dare activate my shielding.

The color splashes back into my vision as the crackling sound of mana forcibly being destroyed in a violent chain reaction fills my ear. The entire front door of the chamber door bursts into sparks. It spreads around the outer layer of the room and seeps into the doors behind it as well.

The overwhelming power of the shielding was a burden when trying to slash through it with brute force, but it's a blessing in disguise when reacting with this dark foreign matter.

The stronger and faster the mana flow is, the quicker and stronger it burns and crackles away.

My eyes open wide in awe as the violent sparks engulf the doors and the entirety of the room in a matter of seconds. The walls continue to close in as the sparks get more and more violent, making it hard to even hear myself think.

From the data I've gathered so far, as long I don't use any mana shielding, or directly touch the sparks while using an active skill, it will not harm me.

I stand my ground and wait as the display of light hits its climax. The walls around me are covered in yellow and white miniature explosions and any magic items with enchantments or pure mana flowing through them get completely destroyed on the spot.

It's a scary sight, but I trust my intuition. I grin as the reaction starts to get quieter. As it does, the moving walls around me come to a halt too. Whatever magic mechanism was pushing them toward me has been destroyed.

After just 15 seconds, the entire room is left in a state of dust and ash. A few sparks crackle here and there. Then, they all go completely dark.

The three sets of silver vault-like doors have crumbled to pieces, fallen victim to my unique attack.

Other than the small cracks and falling dust from the ceiling, the room is silent.

All I can hear is my heart beating and footsteps crunching the decimated furniture, art, and magic items as I walk out the front door.

I take a right turn to make my way back to my teammates, but the sound of running footsteps tells me I won't have to wait long.

All 5 of them come running around the corner with weapons in hand and stern expressions across their faces. Even Chester trails behind keeping up with the other as best he can.

However, they slow their sprint and power down their skills as they see me walk out from the blackened doorway completely unscathed. No one says a word, they just come to a halt.

I'm alone, not with our teammate that they all expected me to rescue. It's clear there was a power struggle that just took place, and I appear to be the lone survivor.

I let out a sigh and put on a confident smile.

"Don't worry, it isn't as dire as it seems. Though, I've got good news and bad news."

Silence fills the well-lit hallway as my words echo through their ears.

The final charred remains of a structure fall over in the room behind me, making a loud thudding sound before I continue. It only heightens the suspense.

"The bad news is, the Boss wasn't here. Neither was Lydia. The good news is, I believe we have more than enough information to find out exactly where they've taken her. To find our teammate, we'll have to venture near the Abyss."

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"It's not urgent, but we have some work to do. We'll save Lydia in 3 days."

The meeting at sunrise in 3 days is supposed to take place at an observatory by the Abyss. This is where I'll be able to find this mysterious Boss, as well as a new hidden variable. A craftsman capable of making mind-reading items.

The exact location of this hideout is still unknown, but at least we have a reference and some very solid clues. We may be in a rush to get information, but the immediate threat to Lydia's life has been averted for now.

I reach into my dimensional storage and take out the pile of item boxes that were lying out on the desk before the room was completely destroyed.

"Here, I managed to find all your gear too."

My teammates pause for a moment, still taking in my words from earlier and staring at the sight before their eyes.

The burnt and decimated remains of the office behind me raise too many questions to ask, so they just take their item boxes and sort out which one belongs to each of them.

Arie speaks up first.

"I think our best plan of action is to get out of here... then everyone can share their findings once we have a safe and secure place to talk."

I nod.

"Agreed."

My gaze travels left and right while I scan the marketplace, finding the point nearby on this floor where most people are traveling upward.

I point in that direction, but the old man speaks while facing the same way before I do.

"If you need a safe place to stay, my home may suffice. It's small, but not near the center of the city. I'm happy to let you stay for a while. Plus... Now I feel obligated to help. I had no idea you were heading to the Abyss."

Abby looks hesitant and speaks while tying her item box around her waist.

"What's the Abyss? A-And how can we trust him? Won't an old man just slow us down?"

The green-haired healer has been in a very bad mood ever since we were released, and rightfully so. I understand why she's pissed off, so I respond mid-sigh trying to de-escalate the situation.

"We can trust him. Chester is as much a victim as all of us. He actually has the key to solving the final clue in finding Lydia. We just need a moment to talk without wandering eyes."

I look around the corridor, implying that anyone could be watching.

Abby begins to interject but decides to nod and tighten her lips.

Maria chimes in.

"I'm exhausted and starving. I think we're all in the same boat here."

Both Arie and Fisher shrug and Agree. The Archer looks like he's thinking deeply about something still while the water mage appears paranoid and pale in the face.

Hopefully, a hot meal will get his color back.

I turn to the old man with a smile.

"Great, it's settled. Lead the way."

He happily agrees and we make our way through the next section of the Black Market.

A few heads turn as we walk out of the marketplace's dead zone, especially following the loud clang and explosion that could be heard throughout the entire floor.

A few lights flicker, and it's clear we were up to no good but we run into no trouble while getting to the surface. We keep our heads down and mind our own business. I've reverted back to my original form, but keep the picture of the number 5 and now number 2 agents clear in my mind.

I have a feeling their appearances may come in handy moving forward.

As the 6 of us make it up a final flight of stairs, two oversized and under-leveled guards open the silver doors to the surface. They're both between level 250 and 300. They don't say a word, but nod and let us by. It seems they're just put in place for appearances, to make sure no troublemakers act up down here.

For all I know, they could be grunts for the Inner Circle organization too, but with no identification pins or acts of hostility, it's very unlikely they're high up enough in the chain of command to know who we are.

Once we walk through and set foot on the street outside, I'm surprised to find we're in the middle of the city.

The blue sky and golden sun are directly overhead. It must be around noon. I put a hand in the air and squint as everyone else follows.

The high-rising silver towers shoot up from the earth all around us and the Solaran Dungeon Hub is nearby too. Less than 500 meters away in fact. From a quick deduction, it's clear that that was the source of my Demonic Energy Absorption while locked up.

One of those dungeons is giving off more than just excess mana into the environment.

Other than these few landmarks I'm completely disorientated. This city is a foreign place to me. I'm sure I could find a place to eat and sleep on my own given enough time to wander around, but taking one good look at my party, they're beyond tired.

It wasn't as clear to see down in the cells or open market, but they've taken a serious beating and need a place to rest as soon as possible.

I take a deep breath in and out of fresh air, then speak up with a smile.

"Chester, take the lead."

We make our way through town following the old man as he confidently makes sharp turns and weaves through the busy mid-day city streets.

We pass the towers, then walk through a high-tech training and magic item marketplace, then a middle-class residential area.

The 6 of us take a quick detour as the old man stops to go into a grocery store at the edge of this district. We spot him a few silver coins and he does a bit of shopping before finally leading us to his neighborhood.

We're on the northeast portion of Solara, and apartment buildings along with small single-person-owned homes are much more spread out. Some even have small front yards.

There are little to no shops, and hardly any people walking out on the streets. It's not a poor area, but not a rich one either. It's just an oddly undeveloped outer region of the city.

Some of the empty lots are covered in sand as they haven't been cleared after the last sandstorm. No residents care to clean up land they don't own and the Solaran government seems to neglect this part of town more than its richer areas.

The old man's home is cozy and compact, but much larger than I expected it to be. It's on its own small plot of land, with other similar two-story houses lining the streets nearby as well.

He walks up the front steps of the porch and waves for us to come in while holding a bag of freshly purchased food in his free hand.

"Come on in. Please, rest and make yourselves comfortable. I'll make us something to eat in the meantime."

With the door propped open, each of us walks inside with curiosity.

His home is covered in magic items and trinkets. There are maps and artwork on the walls of the main living room even more engravement than the office I just blew to pieces. I assumed he was a researcher or a merchant, but this was not what I imagined at all.

Chester walks through a door to the kitchen and points to the three long couches lining the walls of his wide-open living room. Some are covered in artifacts and magic item clutter, while coffee tables and dressers are stacked in between.

"I wasn't expecting guests. Feel free to move everything on the couches to any of the open tables. It's not delicate."

Then, he points up a narrow flight of stairs.

There's a shower upstairs and an extra bedroom on the right. Clean up and I'll have a meal ready for all of you soon. Then, we can get down to business."

As urgently as we all want to get to the bottom of this, Chester is right. We will all function better with full stomachs and some real rest.

One by one we agree and clean up to change into spare clothes brought along in our storage. Meanwhile, the scent of spices fills the air making my mouth water while waiting.

Maria and I make ourselves comfortable on the couch nearest to the door leading to the kitchen, Aire and Abby in the middle, then Fisher near the exit.

"Order Up!"

The old man comes around the corner as we're all on the verge of dozing off the sleep. He carries steaming hot bowls of vegetables, meats, and soups, with rice and fresh fruits on the sides.

He pulls up a small table and a comfortable-looking chair of his own.

With a quick thank you, we all dig in without saying another word.

After nights trapped in a cell and chained to a table without food and water, it's hard to tell if Chester is a master chef or if we're just severely nutrient-deprived.

Either way, Abby finally lightens up and speaks out loud what we're all thinking.

"This is the best meal I've ever eaten!"

Only smiles fill the room as we finish our food, but the threat to our teammate and the questions of the Abyss still loom in the back of all of our minds.

After a satisfying meal, we all sit back and enjoy our small moment of bliss.

Chapter 286

"Alright, let's get down to business."

After a nice meal and a hot shower, we are all aware that the nightmare of captivity and torture is over. Our new mission is to piece together every bit of information we have to save our friend.

After my initial statement breaking our food coma, all eyes are on me.

I look around the room a few times, then activate my newest skill.

"Hush"

A near-invisible grey orb of energy expands from my index finger and surrounds the entire room. All sounds of the outside world completely vanish, and we're isolated by an impenetrable sound barrier.

It doesn't hold any physical mass and can be walked through without any external sensation. Unless you're of an Elite level mana control status, it would not be possible to detect.

My teammate's eyes begin to wander, so I explain.

"It's a sound barrier. A new ability I picked up recently."

Arie, Abby, and Maria are used to my random odd new abilities, but Fisher and the Old man look amazed.

Still, they let me continue in the silence.

"Let's recount the last few days. Mention any slip of the tongue from the guards, or even a painting on the wall that you noticed off. Anything and everything helps. All extra information is good information. Our first priority is finding our teammate, but there's something much bigger at play here too."

With a round of attentive nods in my direction I begin to recall the events of the last few days.

I start with the pins that act as shielding, then the name of their organization, and finally the ranking system they seem to follow.

Placing the silver "002" badge on a small coffee table I look over to Chester.

"What do you think? I've never seen a shielding artifact like this before. It's easily on par with ranked-up bosses."

He examines the pin as I continue on about the short-haired blond's torture techniques and how she mentioned Brutus giving up information on all of us.

Abby gets red-faced at this point and interjects through gritted teeth.

"So they were involved. That's the final straw... Ever since I joined the Association they've only treated me like a well-paid slave. All of this information being held from us while we risk our lives only to be sold out to the highest bidder. I don't know about you guys, but I'm not going back."

I nod with a grin.

"Agreed. Brutus deserves a taste of his own medicine. I'm in the same boat, but for now this isn't our top priority."

Next, I carefully explain why they were interrogating me for so long, and the reason for their questioning Lydia. While leaving out the part where I myself have the power to wield Demonic Energy, I explain how they wanted information on the final boss room as well as details on items Lydia was farming on the floor below.

Maria and Fisher are angered by this point.

The blue-haired mage is the first to speak.

"So that's what they meant."

I raise an eyebrow as he continues.

"While I was being questioned, the guard wouldn't stop asking me about black stones. He wanted to know if I was hiding any. Over... and over."

He looks back down at his lap.

"We're known to party together, so maybe they had some past intel and wanted to be thorough."

He mutters to himself and blue light flickers in his eyes.

"I'll make their leader pay. They have no idea who they're messing with."

My gaze turns to my right as Maria begins to speak, adding to his frustration.

"I just want to get Lydia back and make whoever took her away suffer."

A cool sensation fills the room as her ambient ice magic drops the temperature by a few degrees.

Arie doesn't seem too concerned with the current matter at hand, he speaks up piecing together a separate matter.

"The Abyss. What do you know about the Abyss?"

I sigh, turning to Chester.

"Not much at all actually. I was hoping our researcher here could fill us in on the details. Their number 2 in charge said they would be a meeting at sunrise in 3 days at the observatory near the Abyss."

With enough All-Seeing Eye and enemy detection scans of the city with days to do so, I'm sure I could find this place on my own. However, Information from this source may give some extra insight.

He chuckles.

"I'm just an old curious Merchant, researching the old artifacts I've collected over the years is more of a hobby than an official title. But, I'll gladly take the role."

He smiles and holds the silver pin up in the air.

"First things first. This is a fascinating piece. It's made by a craftsman on a level I've never witnessed before. There are no items like this available on the open market, and it's manmade without a doubt."

He sighs.

"With that being said, the organization we've made an enemy of is one that has been running the underworld of this city for quite a while. Their leader is slick and elusive, while the underlings are killed, captured, and swapped out often. There have been a few occasions in which average Solaran hunters turned in the Inner Circle's thugs."

We all stare at him wide-eyed, keen to hear what he has to say next.

"It's known that a near impenetrable base was operating in the black market, but not even the Solaran government cared to step in. Sometimes when they have a task too heavy to handle, they'll ask the Inner Circle to get it done."

Silence fills the room again.

I speak up with a suspicious tone.

"So these guys are well known? So much for a secret organization..."

Chester laughs.

"No, no. You've got a point. They're only well known in the higher circles. I would never know much about them if their underlings hadn't come to my old pawn shop for rare items every once and a while over the years. I'm retired now, but I've watched this city grow along with the people in it. I'd be blind to not know how things work around here."

There's a long pause, then he stares me in the eyes.

"I know you're strong. Stronger than any hunter I've ever met in fact. Just know, If you make an enemy of the Inner Circle, you'll either die or be forced to see how deep the rabbit hole really goes."

Another long pause follows as I ponder the old man's words.

Then, I respond.

"I understand. I'd like to know everything."

A thin smile curls onto the corner of Chester's lips, then he gets up from his seat and starts to head upstairs.

"One moment, I have exactly what you're looking for."

Less than 30 seconds pass, but the building tension in the room grows making it seem like an hour passes before he finally comes walking down the creaking wooden steps holding a stack of papers.

"Here. Everything I know from researching the anomaly known as the Abyss."

Chester places the papers on a center coffee table and we all lean in to take a look. There are illegible scribbles and drawings of the city within the desert with red Xs around its borders labeled with dates.

"I'll start from the beginning. The more context you have, the more this will make sense to you younger ones."

He explains.

"Out in the Dark Continent, each sector has a major city capital with a Labyrinth attached. This is Sector 4, technically the weakest region of them all."

We all nod, not wanting to miss a word.

"Just like major countries outside the walls, the more magic energy enters the Labyrinth, the bigger it becomes."

He swallows.

"If you don't mind me asking, how many floors did this one have?"

I reply.

"26."

Chester thinks for a moment.

"Interesting. Considering that The Vice Region Capital you all came from has well over 10 times as many inhabitants and divers that we have here, it's safe to assume it has 50 or more floors."

Fisher interjects.

"So what? The floor number doubles for the increased population of a region for every power of 10. This isn't secret information. What's that have to do with any of this?"

The old man chuckles.

"It has much more to do with it than you may think. The 8 major powers partnered with the Association rule the world in modern times. The Vice Region may have one of the largest economies and highest populations today, but many forget about the capital city that stood here in the 9th region before the War."

The old man takes a long breath to cool his nerves.

"Deep within the Abyss, you will find the greatest forgotten Labyrinth of them all."

Chapter 287

I whisper under my breath.

"No way... Of course..."

Chester smiles and points to one of the more precisely drawn maps on his notebook papers, happily eyeing me as he realizes I'm piecing together the puzzle on my own.

One of the papers has a ring separated into 4 sections labeled 1-4 and a black void in the center of it. He moves it out of the way and points more specifically to a detailed map of Sector 4 with detailed markings.

The drawings show the city of Solara, then a series of structures with notes and descriptions right between the city and the approaching black void. One of the structures is labeled "The Observatory". There's a small map key that outlines the rough distance between points. It's about 10 kilometers off the northeastern border. So, about a few hour-long trek at a moderate speed.

He speaks.

"This right here is the region I was doing research on over the last few weeks before I was kidnapped by the Inner Circle and questioned for days. There's an abandoned stargazing observatory that is atop a large cliff right on the edge of the incoming Abyss."

Arie interrupts.

"Incoming? What do you mean by incoming? And... North... East...?"

Chester interrupts.

"Yes, Northeast. This is the closest portion of the city to the Abyss. With every surge, the darkness grows closer. It's only gotten significantly worse over the last few months. Most of the neighboring villages outside the city were evacuated. We..."

Chester pauses.

"We... have no idea what happens once they're swallowed up."

Arie keeps his cool calculated expression, seemingly not disturbed by this news but thinking hard.

The old man goes on.

"Most of the tests I've been doing have been to find the best way to reverse its spread, but the matter is impossible to manage and has a violent reaction to any magic that interacts with it. The most fascinating discovery so far is that if a person doesn't activate their magic skills and carries no enchanted items, they can walk through like it is heavy air."

I nod, realizing exactly what this substance is.

He continues.

"It isn't harmful to humans as long as no mana interacts with it. Actually, if we take sight and touch out of the equation, the substance is basically not even there. It doesn't show up on any radars and gives off no heat or energy readings no matter what I do. The only problem is the darkness, and increasing density the further we travel in. There have even been rumors of monsters that lurk deep within the Abyss... No one has managed to kill one yet or directly prove their existence, but I've heard one roar with my own ears just a few nights back before I was caught."

Chester stops talking, giving all of us a moment to digest everything he's just said.

To me, it sounds like this abyss is refined and used up Demonic Energy. The properties he's described and the inability for me to sense or absorb it add up. This is the excess energy that is produced from some reaction that happens every time there is a surge.

The monsters he talks about, on the other hand, confuse me quite a bit. For a monster to survive or even thrive in an environment like this, it would need the ability to control its mana output and not react with the energy around it. Meaning they're all at least ranked up beasts. Or, an even more interesting idea, they're not wielding mana at all. Just like the Black Knights. Demonic Creatures.

I point down at the map and finally speak up. The corners of my lips turn up with curiosity.

"So it'll be quite simple. We show up at their meeting spot and rescue Lydia, just like that. If their underlings were this weak, I'm sure the 5 of us can handle their leader."

This is the main plan, after all, I'm just more interested in what lies beyond.

Chester nods slowly, looking down at the silver "002" pin that is still in his hand, then up at all of us.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. As I said before, his underlings are merely pawns in the operation. Considering the rare gear I've seen move through Solara over the years, and the equipment that man had on the one time I had the chance of making his acquaintance, I'd say he's at least on par with all of you."

There's a long pause before he continues.

"Plus, whoever made this artifact must be on another level altogether, it almost feels mythical. If you're positive they'll be at this meeting too. I'm sure they will not go down easily. This pin is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to their potential power."

My heart skips a beat at his wording. I interject.

"Mythical... why use that term?"

I swallow as he shrugs and replies.

"No reason. I'm not sure. I've just never seen an artifact of this caliber. It feels as though it's a natural dungeon drop, but it is clearly manmade. The inner circle branding makes that known. The craftsmanship of an item like this is second to none. That is why."

He looks up at me but changes his tone when he sees my confusion.

"All I'm saying is, it's best not to be overconfident in a situation like this. The Inner Circle is known to never fail a request, so don't take them lightly just because you're Elites. This organization is much larger than just Sector 4. There are powerful people in every region of the Dark Continent. More powerful than you, I'm sure of it."

I nod with tightened lips.

"Understood."

The rest of my teammates take his warning to heart as well. We all shift to a much more serious and strategic conversation.

The 6 of us begin to devise a simple plan of action to follow over the next couple of days to prepare for our surprise attack. Taking Chester's words into consideration, all 5 of us will use our strengths to ensure the success of this assault.

We all have simple tasks to carry out.

Maria and Abby will stock up on Mana and HP potions in the city while not being seen by wondering eyes. Their smaller frames will draw less attention, and natural charm may make it easier to interact with the public. They will spy on nearby mercenary bars as well as government buildings to be on the lookout for Association activity, Solaran guards, or any whispers in the underground market. Just to make sure we're not being targeted or found out.

Next, Fisher and Arie are both newly ranked up so they want to get some training in. Both of them have yet to see their full potential in combat, so the two of them will be training in shielding rooms as well as the dungeons at night during their less crowded hours.

Chester explains that it takes roughly 1 bronze to enter an E-Class Dungeon, 10 bronze to enter a D-Class, and 1 silver to enter a C-Class. These aren't exact prices because daily rates change and there are no letter ratings out here in the desert. The rates are low, and the security is even lower. Their dives will be more than enough to turn a profit while training.

The old man has a job of his own too. I take the display case from the Inner Circle office out of my item storage with dozens of magical artifacts, items, and those odd-colored potions. His task is to find potential anonymous buyers for all of it and to make sure combat items helpful to us will be left behind for personal use.

His Appraisal skill may be at a lower rank than mine, but his eye for items and connections in this city are far greater. All items will be run by me before he places them up for auction, just in case.

Finally, my job will be to venture out into the desert and use my long-range perception skills to keep an eye on the observatory. I'll be standing guard to see if anyone enters or leaves the general area. More precisely, I'll be doing some of my own research on the Abyss.

I want to see this phenomenon for myself.

If any unusual activity occurs or oddities in our assignments need to be made known, we report back at Chester's home every night and share our findings.

After delegating responsibilities for tomorrow, all 6 of us fall asleep in the comfort of Chester's cozy living room.

It's going to be a long 3 days ahead of us, but now we have a plan.

Chapter 288

The next morning we all wake up at the crack of dawn. Falling asleep early in the day gives us more than enough time to fully recover.

After a quick breakfast made by Chester, we all leave to start our daily assignments and agree to meet back before the sun goes down.

My 4 teammates head southwest back into the more dense parts of town to scope out the markets and get in training while Chester waves us goodbye from his porch. I make my way further north, bringing some extra food and water along as well as a detailed map of the region.

Chester promises me he'll have all the gear sorted with reasonable price tags that he'll be able to auction them for.

Knowing this, I leave with a smile full of energy.

Less than 10 minutes of walking through the thin region of the suburb-like residential area goes by before I'm met with the outer edge of Solara. The vast desert in front of me leads off only to the mysterious Abyss.

Although I can't see it from here, I can definitely sense its presence.

I step off the stone road onto the cool sand. Then, activate my wind magic to start propelling my steps forward to make my way northeast at double speed while gliding a few meters above the ground.

The sun is still rising, and the desert is still not too hot from the midday rays. However, the blue sky and yellow sun are slowly making themselves known.

It's just sand and rock with the occasional rolling hill and valley to spice up the landscape. After almost an hour of travel passes, the sand below my feet is getting hot and I'm actively using my new Ice Magic skill to keep my temperature regulated.

The rising and falling dunes of sand don't change much at all, and the far-off mountains hardly get closer the further I travel. One thing that drastically shifts is the amount of open desert between me and the eerie blank spot in my perception.

Just as the map lays out, I'm nearly 10 kilometers in and it's getting very near.

What I'd thought was just a blank region of the desert a few days back, now finally comes into view as I make my way over a hill of sand to look down into a deep valley. From over 800 meters away, it's very visible with the naked eye... A jet-black wave of fog looming far off in the distance is stopped at a halt just waiting to flood the desert.

Its edge is flat like a wall standing at least 25 meters high, but squinting off into the distance, it looks like the black matter gets thicker and taller even farther out.

I whisper under my breath.

"This is definitely refined Demonic Energy... but why is it acting like this?"

There's so much energy in such a wide open space that it doesn't make a hint of sense. Whatever being or planetary disaster expelled this energy is capable of feats my mind cannot comprehend.

My body lets out a reflexive shudder, but I take a deep breath and continue examining the landscape.

I take a few steps forward to walk down the valley, but my eyes drift downward at the even more fascinating sight in front of me.

Split in half by the edge of the wall of Demonic Energy, there are the remnants of an old town.

It looks similar to the unnamed village my team stumbled upon when we first entered the Dark Continent. It was most likely home to just a few poor families sticking together as they're not welcome in neighboring cities for one reason or another.

The streets are sandy paths and the houses are made from leftover wooden building materials, cloth, and stone.

Less than 20 one-story homes are left sticking out from the black Abyss.

My heartbeats start to pound in my inner ear as my eyes scan the area carefully while moving forward on high alert.

"I've never seen anything like this."

Far off to my left, the valley curves upward with a single path leading to a rock-filled portion of desert. Its peak is only half a kilometer away. The orange rocky cliff hangs over the top of the black pool of darkness and a white dome-shaped building sits on top of it.

My eyes light up.

"That must be The Observatory."

I activate enemy detection and inspect from a distance to see if there is anyone inside or nearby. To my disappointment... no one's home.

There are hints of leftover mana residue inside from recent low-tier skills and item usage, but no actual people.

I scan the rest of the abandoned village to find small hints of similar mana reading remaining from weak magic items and most likely healers or merchant skills, it's impossible to tell. There isn't any sign of movement or life.

They must have all evacuated before the abyss got too close.

I decide to walk closer to the village. As I approach, the wall of black mass seems to get taller from my point of view, and the darkness within is even more ominous.

After a few quick sweeps through the streets and snooping through the open homes, I confirm to myself that it's really abandoned. From here, I can see the faint shadows of homes within the Demonic Energy. This is the other half of the town. The structures are not damaged at all, just engulfed in the energy.

I let out a sigh, walking along the edge of the barrier.

At closer inspection, it's clear to see that the energy is beginning to dissolve and float into the sky dispersing in the air just like the remnants of the energy I expelled while training in that cell.

The only difference is that more energy comes flooding in from what seems to be an unlimited undetectable source deep within the continent.

None of my perception skills can tell the actual scale of this phenomenon, all I have to examine this mass are my eyes...

After walking over 100 meters from the town, I make some distance between myself and the wall of black fog to take out my sword and attempt some tests of my own. I believe everything the old man said, I just want to see it with my own eyes.

Charging up a decent amount of mana into my sword, I swing it from a safe distance away and let the pink mana crescent collide with the black wall.

It pops and crackles on impact in a violent yellow and white display, but is eaten by the wall of black mass in a fraction of a second. The sparks stop just as fast like nothing happened.

The desert falls silent.

I can see some of the energy was displaced as the mana it reacted with mutually canceled each other out. Before I can blink, the damaged region is completely restored.

I pace back and forth, trying again and again with all of my elements. No matter what, the same instantaneous reaction occurs, and the mana is swallowed up into nothingness while the barrier heals.

"Great. This confirms it really is some variant of refined Demonic Energy. As expected... Now, let's see what's inside the Abyss."

I put away my sword and completely rid my body of mana before activating my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill.

The world around me turns to black and white. All perception of mana residue in the nearby settlement disappears from my mind, and the only thing left before me is the Abyss.

Most of it is hollow and empty, unable to be manipulated at all like toxic waste. However, to my surprise, there are small wisps of raw usable energy floating not too deep inside the black wave.

Less than 50 meters inside, there are nearly 10 units of Demonic Energy swirling around a central point.

I raise an eyebrow and step closer while attempting to pull the energy toward me. I can't visually see a thing, but my manipulation skill lets me feel that there is raw energy there without a doubt.

There's only 1 unit left in my core, so absorbing more when it's available in such high density is a great opportunity.

As I pull 1 unit toward me, the entire bundle of 10 drifts my way too. It starts spinning around a center point in an erratic fashion but is still manageable to control and manipulate while reeling it in.

I take another step forward, closer to the edge of the Abyss. Eager to absorb the energy, but now on guard because of the unnatural ease of extraction.

The energy I'm pulling in begins to move toward me at a faster and faster rate the closer it gets.

As I stare straight ahead into the darkness, two glowing red eyes appear staring right back.

Chapter 289

A pair of crimson eyes peer at me from within the Abyss. They're filled with the anger and killing intent of a wild beast.

I jump backward at the sight of it.

My vision is completely black and white, making this bright red gaze stand out even more to me. I can't sense any monsters nearby, but I begin to connect the dots while skidding to a halt on the desert sand a ways back from the black wall.

Expecting some horrific and bloodthirsty Demonic Creature to crawl out from the fog, I grit my teeth and deactivate my manipulation skill.

If it's anything like the Knights I fought on the 25th floor, one solid wave of mana will take it out no matter how strong it is.

To my surprise, the moment I deactivate my skill the glowing red eyes disappear from my vision.

Golden sand below and blue sky above come back into full view and the black Abyss slowly churns lifelessly in front of me.

My breathing is heavy, and my eyes shift back and forth. I'm positive what I just saw was really there, but now.. it seems to have been an illusion. I use all my mana-powered perception skills, but they do nothing for me.

There is no level that pops up, no readings on my enemy detection radar, not a single bar of text from my appraisal skill, and most importantly my All-Seeing Eye draws a blank.

I gulp, taking another step back, then reactivating my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill again.

A loud growl fills my ears and the crimson orbs stare at me from the edge of the Black Abyss yet again with unwavering resolve. The outline of a large wolf begins to form around the floating eyes. It waits patiently for me to approach, but doesn't show any signs that it will willingly walk out from the wall of darkness.

Its eyes burn red, and the vague outline of its body from behind the black wall has 10 units of raw energy swirling inside it.

My mind begins to race at the thought that the only reason it let me manipulate its energy earlier was because it was curious to see what was greeting it from outside its domain.

With this Demonic skill activated, I can't use any of my magic. However, without it activated, I can't see or sense this creature at all.

I have no gauge of how strong Demonic Monsters are, and I'm not sure if right now is the time to find out.

"Well... First things first, I'll need to check if you're working alone"

Extending the range of my Demonic Energy manipulation skill, it can be used as a makeshift radar system. It seems like whatever this wolf creature is, they store raw energy deep within them.

If there are any like it in the vicinity, I know exactly what to look for.

After about 15 seconds of searching, 3 other similar bundles of roughly 10 units of Energy just like this one scattered around the edge of the Abyss waiting for something to draw their attention.

Luckily, they aren't too close by.

I let out a relieved sigh, powering down my skill to let mana flow through me again. Taking out my sword I release a barrage of high-powered attacks at the portion of the wall where the crimson-eyed wolf stood moments ago.

It may be invisible to me now, but if anything is caught in a chain reaction like this it's as good as dead.

As the sparks fly and the thin layer of black wall mends itself I put away my sword and switch back to my Black and White Vision.

The final remnants of the wall are forming back to their original form, but the glowing eyes of the wolf creature don't budge. It's waiting too far into the Abyss for an attack like that to affect it at all.

I assumed so, but wanted to give it a shot.

Its burning red eyes still stare at me from a distance, but it refuses to walk out from the safety of its dark protective veil.

Curiously, I take a step forward.

With only a handful of the monsters in the area, and just one within a range I'd like to try another test. This one has a more promising potential outcome.

Taking another step forward, I point a finger straight ahead. The closer I get to the red eyes the deeper and louder the guttural growl becomes. With every step on the hot sand I take, the more clearly I see this beast for what it is... Less than 5 meters from the slowly churning black wall, I let my final remaining unit of Demonic Energy flow from my core, through my right arm, and out my finger as a cool dense blade.

Unlike the magic from my previous attack, the thin crescent slices through the less dense refined black energy and heads straight for the outline of the wolf's neck.

At this close range, its eyes shine bright and its thick black fur and muscular body become visible too. The creature stands nearly half my height and is over twice as long. Its claws dig into the sandy ground below and its curved white teeth reflect the red glow from its eyes.

As my thin blade of energy gets close to the beast, its gaze sharpens and it twists its body away with a snarl.

The energy hits the side of its body missing any direct vital points, but leaving a heafy wound behind on its side.

It's hard to tell exactly how baldly it's been injured, but considering the ear-piercing howl it lets out I'm guessing it's pretty bad.

"Great here comes company..."

Not wanting to bite off more than I can chew, I do a quick scan of the environment to find the other creatures start running my way almost instantly.

They're fast.

I grit my teeth. Not knowing enough about the enemy is the most powerful advantage it could have on me.

The only two things keeping me from running away are the desire to see what loot this monster drops and the fact that they're potentially very easy to kill...

I've come to this conclusion because an energy blade that hardly made a dent in my cell door a few days ago managed to critically injure this beast. It must either be much weaker than I first thought, or my energy attacks have a higher effect on Demonic Monsters than regular material objects.

I'm hoping it's both.

My look of concern turns to a confident grin as the essence of raw Demonic Energy leaving its body shows up in my mind's eye. Small black wisps start to leak out from its wound as the monster attempts to crawl away into the void undetected.

"Not so fast."

With my same outreached right hand I begin to manipulate the escaping Demonic Energy and filter it through my core. There's no resistance at all and the whimpers from the creature get fainter and fainter.

It never stood a chance.

At the same time, 3 distant howls from the wolves I detected earlier ring out in reply over and over while drawing closer.

Almost half a minute goes by and the wolves only get louder.

All 10 units of the fallen monster's energy reside inside my core now and the wolf lies lifeless 15 meters away behind a wall of darkness. It's hard to make out its body, but I'm positive its red eyes go dark.

"One down, three to go."

I raise my hands and get ready for another fight. The howls stop and 6 crimson eyes appear from behind the fallen monster deep within the darkness.

Chapter 290

Three more Demonic Wolves slowly make their way toward me through the darkness. This time around I'm much more confident in my abilities and have a core full of Energy ready to coarse through my veins for a barrage of deadly attacks.

Once the first pair of red glowing eyes gets close enough, I let my attack fly without hesitating for a moment.

The thin blade of darkness cuts through the fog and ends in nearly the exact same fashion as its fallen foe before. The monster realizes it's being shot at and moves out of the way only to be critically injured before it's too late.

It whimpers as it's thrown backward and the two wolves behind it growl while speeding up toward me jumping past their injured ally.

I smirk, sending off another blade of energy at the next closest one to watch it swerve to my left and narrowly dodge a vital blow. It still skims its hide, but the wolf continues charging on with its remaining partner not too far behind.

Another attack flies out from my fingertips, but the monster lunges to the right to avoid most of my strike. It gets hit again, but its speed doesn't slow.

I clench my jaw and focus as the two remaining wolves start to approach the barrier between the Demonic Energy and the clear air of the outside world.

Using both hands, I let out a dual attack to make sure no matter which side it jumps to next the creature will be wounded. As predicted, the monster faces its final moments just a few meters from the slowly shifting black wall of matter.

The remaining wolf on the other hand seems to have different plans.

It jumps over its fallen ally and breaks through the wall of darkness with a growl and pulsing red eyes. I wasn't sure if it was even possible for them to come out from the Abyss, but it seems my question has been answered.

The wolf creature is no longer just an outline of fur, teeth, and glowing red eyes.

The monster looks like an alien being.

"This is no normal dungeon monster...."

Its thick fur gushes out Refined Demonic Energy with every step it takes. Not much, but enough to notice that trace amounts of the raw material in its body are being used and dissolved into the air like a life force.

It wasn't very clear when it was under a veil of black clouds, but out in the open it's clear that there is a black and dark purple aura constantly coming off of its body.

Saliva drips from its row of fangs and the beast follows a random zig-zag pattern kicking up sand as it runs closer. It watched me take down its friends and has already learned from their mistakes.

I react by releasing 2 more waves of thin energy toward the wolf, but its erratic movements and sand in the air allow it to only be grazed by one blade. Again, I release two more as it comes closer and closer only to hit its side making a deep gash but not slowing down the Demonic Wolf by any means

It jumps in the air with claws outreached and fangs ready to sink deep into my flesh. I release my final 2 waves of dark energy and they impale its body from close range. One through the heart and the other straight through the underside of its neck to pierce its skull.

I fall backward onto the hot sandy incline behind me and the Demonic Creature lands with a loud thud as well.

I let out a sigh, then chuckle to myself while standing to my feet.

If I was in my normal form not wielding Demonic Energy, these beasts would be a breeze. With their speed and reflexes taken into account, the wolves I just faced are hardly that of a level 100 mob.

I'm just not used to combat without using my mana-imbued items and skills. They caught me off guard, but I easily handled it before it was too late.

"Well... that's one problem taken care of, but my questions are not answered... In fact, now I have more."

I put my hands on my waist and stare down at the lifeless wolf creature pretending to wait for a response, then use my manipulation skill to refine the the raw energy seeping from its fallen corpse.

Not wasting any time, I absorb the energy from its two partners as well. Each of them has between 7 and 10 units floating inside them. The more strength and power they exert, it seems as though they would use up more of the energy leaving less raw matter behind.

As tested previously by the first wolf, the moment their raw energy stores run out, they die. It's their life force energy, but also their means to use strength and power.

Even now, an odd phenomenon is taking place. The corpse of the fallen monster is beginning to dissolve into the air at a rapid rate. Just like the refined energy from the Abyss, it is being consumed and evaporated by the atmosphere.

Wracking my brain for a better explanation than my loosely thrown-together theory, I deactivate my Demonic Energy manipulation skill to let the color of the world flood back in around me.

It would have been a refreshing shift, if not for the fact that the corpse of the black wolf disappears completely from my vision.

All that remains in its place is a tiny black gem. Its glossy surface reflects the sun's rays.

I gulp, walking over to it and switching my vision back and forth to see the monster reappear and disappear every time I change my skill. For every passing second the remains of the creature get smaller and smaller in my Demonic Vision, while for some reason I'm unable to see the beast at all while using my mana senses.

It takes less than half a minute before the only thing remaining in both of my visions is the black stone on the floor.

Picking it up from the golden sand and holding it in my palm, I can confirm it's exactly like the stone from the Knights in the Labyrinth. The only difference is their size. This gem is not even 1/5 as large as the Knights from the 25th Floor.

"Still.... It's a clue."

Putting the stone into my item storage, I think about whether or not I should enter the Abyss to try and scavenge the remaining stones.

For now, it's not a smart idea to step into unknown territory without more information. It's best I battle more of their kind at this lower level before doing anything rash.

I begin walking along the edge of the abyss while scanning for more enemies.

A few hours pass and I repeat more of the same.

Using Demonic Energy as well as mana crescents every 500 meters or so to attract trouble, a few low growls and glowing red eyes pop up in my vision and a similar scenario plays out.

If I release two slashes at once I can take down the lone wolves without giving them the option to call for help.

Aside from the wolves, the further from the city I get, the more I extend my manipulation sensors into the darkness. Deep within, it's harder to sense at this distance but I feel the presence of a few creatures wielding well over 30 Demonic Energy in their bodies.

This is another reason for killing my prey swiftly is to not alert these friends. I'm curious to know what these powerful monsters are, but I'm unsure if my crude attacks will be as effective on them compared to these wolves.

No more unnecessary risks. Today, I stick to what I'm good at.

I manage to defeat 6 more wolves of similar strength and stature in total, but only 1 more allows me to kill it outside of the Abyss.

While absorbing the last opponent's energy my core nears 50 Demonic Energy Units stored inside. To my surprise, I begin to feel an odd pressure in my chest. I begin to have trouble holding all of the refined energy inside.

Trace amounts of black energy leak from my core, through my energy pathways, and out all my pores very slowly in a dark mist-like form.

It's a cool sensation. Almost invigorating.

It doesn't hurt, but I don't like the fact that I'm not doing it on purpose. If I were forced to switch back to using mana right now, it wouldn't be pretty.

"Whatever is happening, it can't continue until I understand this better."

I release enough energy from my core in thin streams from my fingertips to allow it to rest at a stable level. Around 45 Units seems to be my max without it spilling out in an erratic fashion or that odd pressure in my chest getting worse.

With a sigh of relief as the oozing black energy stops coming out, I whisper under my breath again.

"That's enough for today."

At this point, I'm far from the city and observatory I was meant to keep an eye on, and over half the day has already gone by. These have been some interesting tests and a great step forward in my research.

I step away from the edge of darkness and begin walking back to the abandoned village.