

D. Diver 291

Chapter 291

The sun has already hit its high point in the sky and is beginning to fall down toward the horizon. While the sand is still scorching hot, the dry air is starting to cool off as the light rays aren't directly pointing at the top of my head anymore.

While walking back through the rolling dunes of the desert to the abandoned village the sensation I felt earlier keeps relying in the back of my mind. The pressure in my chest and the core overflowing with energy are all I can think about.

The more I ponder it, the more similarities it has to the way the wolves were leaking black fog containing trace amounts of refined energy.

Demonic Wolves seem to have raw energy swirling around inside them, ready to be used as a power source at any moment. My method of use is fairly different. I'm able to keep energy in my core in a state of limbo. It's resting between raw and refined. However, once released it can't be absorbed back inside.

I've lived most of my life without a drop of Demonic Energy in me, so I'm sure it's not vital to my survival like the wolves... I am curious If I'd be able to use it in a similar fashion to increase my physical attributes if I mastered my output better.

While silently daydreaming about the possibilities of my new discovery, the abandoned village finally comes back into my field of vision.

Along with it, the white dome-shaped building up on the hill does too. I do a quick scan of my surroundings and confirm yet again there isn't a single human or monster in sight.

Other than the beasts lurking deep within the black void to my right side, there is no life for kilometers in this abandoned wasteland.

The sun is getting closer to the desert horizon, so I turn to walk back to Solara. We all agreed to meet back at Chester's before sunset, so it's best I break my habit of always being fashionably late. Sometimes I have a good reason for it, today it would just be unnecessary.

I make my trek back through the rolling hills of golden sand.

It doesn't take long before the wooden porch of the old man's house comes into view. I make it just in time to see Abby and Maria walking up the steps as the setting orange sun starts to disappear from the sky.

A blue light bursts out from the door as I approach.

Fisher's voice yells in a happy tone to those listening inside.

"Pretty awesome right? I can control its level of protection on demand now! It's like an extra layer of mana shielding made from water magic without using up nearly as much energy."

I step through the door to see where exactly this blue light is coming from.

The swordsman is standing in the middle of the living room emanating a light blue glow. A thin veil of shielding covers his whole body, and it's visible to the naked eye.

Using my All-Seeing Eye for a closer look, I confirm his words with a smirk and a nod as we make eye contact before speaking up.

"Not bad... That's your ranked-up perk? The water defense you mentioned earlier."

My eyes scan it up and down before continuing.

"I had no idea it could be manipulated to different intensities, interesting."

He smiles and turns to Arie.

"We found out all kinds of things about our ranked-up buffs. There isn't much known about them from my standard education, all I know is this is a high-tier perk. Sometimes people don't even get a buff at all! Often a hunter's skills just get upgraded. I think the fact that we're already maxed out at legendary grade means we got something extra. Show him yours!"

Arie nods and stands to his feet.

"Sure, I got some practice in too. Take a look"

The archer begins to shine bright white.

Meanwhile, I think about what the water mage said. I know for certain legendary is not the maximum skill rank. Upgrading further would just require a lot more Proficiency Points(PP). If a hunter's skills can't be upgraded manually, a buff is rewarded.

Then again, I received a buff with plenty of points left to use. Maybe it has to do with a hunter's nature. A ranked-up perk could be different depending on the wielder's goals and desires.

I give up on my train of thought as Arie begins to materialize white magical objects in his hands. They glisten and shine like his white arrows, but shape shift from the form of daggers, to a large shield, then into a long sword, and finally a fantastic glowing bow.

He holds it tight, then lets the object disappear into thin air.

Not even mana residue is left behind, it gives off the same reading as when an item is placed into an item box. The energy is gone from this dimensional plane.

He speaks.

"Whatever weapon or physical item I picture in my head can be created with the same essence as my spirit arrows. It uses very little mana and they're much stronger than normal magic items."

Fisher crosses his arms.

"Very strong indeed. One of his conjured blades easily went toe to toe with my bonded water sword. Not to mention our base level increase in overall mana control is astounding. It's like I'm breathing in magic with every breath I take. We're on a whole new level..."

I nod with a thin smile, happy to see Fisher coming back to his old self.

"Good. Great to see some fast progress. If the boss is ranked up and as strong as Chester says he is, we'll need all the help we can get. Tomorrow, both of you should train more and see if you can push those abilities to any new heights. A single day of practicing a skill often doesn't show you everything it has in store."

I turn to Abby and Maria.

"How about you two, anything unusual to report?"

They both shake their heads and then Maria speaks.

"We went to the mercenary guilds, snooped around the bars, popped into the government office in disguise, and even checked out the dungeon hub. There was no sign of anyone talking about us, the Inner Circle, or the Association. It's like we were never even here. Business is moving like usual."

Abby crosses her arms.

"True, but it's not exactly like we were never here."

She chuckles.

"The mess you made down in the black market raised a few eyebrows. However, no one dared to walk into the dead zone region of the 2nd floor to check it out for themselves while we were down there. At the front gate, the guards just let us in and out without any mention of it. There were some whispers from nearby merchants, questioning why there had been no one entering or exiting the dead zone today. Most of them are convinced the boss and his minions are out of town, but I'm not sure how long their blind fear will last. People will get curious."

I nod.

"Good. We just need to hold off any wandering eyes for one more day. Tomorrow, both of you stay down there to make sure no one messes things up. We don't want the wrong person to see something they're not meant to see."

Finally, my gaze shifts to Chester. He has an excited look on his face and stands next to the tall display case of items I tasked him to sort.

Each of the items has small notes on them with descriptions and price points for market value and expected auction price, plus their specific perks and buffs.

He speaks.

"If we were to sell all of these slowly over the next few months, I'm sure a small fortune could be made."

I nod, letting him continue.

"But, you said you wanted them all sold by tomorrow. If I go to some of my old connects in town and sell to some trusted anonymous buyers, they'll purchase bulk items for a seller's price... About 100 gold for everything is my modest appraisal."

I shrug with a grin.

"Great, get them sold tomorrow. Anything over 0 is profit, but try to get the best price you can."

Chester turns around to pull out the blue and gold potions along with a smooth curved glossy black dagger as dark as night.

"These items, on the other hand, I think are far too unique to sell. There are no merchants or hunters in town capable of giving me a reasonable price for them. It may be worth keeping them for the future battles."

I look down at the gear and activate appraisal.

[Extreme Strength Potion] x10

[MP Invigoration Potion] x10

The potions show interesting readings in the familiar blue text boxes, but the dagger shows nothing at all. It's clearly a monster drop, but there isn't a hint of magic in it.

I use my All-Seeing Eye to get more information.

Extreme Strength Potion

Info: This Extreme Strength Potion will boost the user's base strength stats by 120% for 5 minutes. If initially consumed while on full HP, It increases the speed and agility stats by an additional 25%. The user will have a 50% debuff of all base stats for 30 minutes following potion use.

Class: C+

Type: Consumable

Durability: 1/1

MP Invigoration Potion

Info: This MP Invigoration Potion will boost the user's base mana control capabilities by 50% for 5 minutes. If initially consumed while on full MP, It increases the user's environmental mana absorption rate by 200% for the full 5 minutes of activation. The user will have a 75% debuff on all base stats and a 99% debuff on mana absorption for 30 minutes following potion use.

Class: B+

Type: Consumable

Durability: 1/1

"I've never seen anything like this..."

The potions look interesting, but what stands out most to me is the endless black void within the glossy curved dagger.

It gives off the same lifeless undetectable readings I get from staring into the Abyss.

Chapter 292

I take the black dagger from Chester's hands disregarding the glowing crate of potions in his other and begin twirling it around my fingers to view the weapon from every possible angle.

It's smooth and incredibly lightweight.

The old man starts to explain how the potions work based on a book he read about similar items years ago, but I drown out his words while staring down at this unique artifact.

The base of the grip fits tightly in my right hand, and the curved blade is about the length of my forearm. My eyes practically sparkle while looking down at the incredible item. It feels as if there's a bottomless Abyss within the blade yearning for power. I'm sure this item cannot wield mana, so I don't dare risk it and try. All I want to do right now is activate my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill and test out my theories.

Its surface is made of the same hard stone-like substance that the crystals dropped from the Black Knights and Demonic Wolves. The origin and specific details about this substance are still unclear to me, but with every passing day, it's starting to come together.

I need to get some alone time to test this blade's capabilities.

I'm mesmerized.

After a few dozen more spins and swirling motions through my fingers, I grab the blade tight with a smirk. My vision finally lifts from the knife and I snap back to reality, listening to the conversation going on in the living room.

Chester continues to speak about the potions with a kind smile.

"...so if you're ever in need of a boost during a battle against an overwhelming opponent, these may save your life. Just remember the debuffs are pretty intense. You'll have to rely on your teammates after the 5 minutes is up, or ensure the battle can be finished within that time frame."

I nod slowly, still only thinking about the weapon in my hand.

My teammates on the other hand are staring wide eyes at the potions. Then, they all turn to me.

I shrug, eyeing the potions for a moment, then take two of the golden extreme strength potions for myself, leaving the rest.

"Have at 'em', I think you'll make better use of them than me."

Anything with debuffs this high is not optimal for my long-term battle style. The mana absorption rate is pointless for me as well. With Plunderer, I can take in all the MP I need without the negative side effects of a potion. The Extreme Strength, on the other hand, I'll keep on me for a rainy day. It wouldn't hurt to hold onto a few, but my gear and skill buffs are better than anything these potions can add.

The 4 of them gladly accept and start splitting the potions amongst themselves. They put them in their item boxes and examine the glass jars in amazement. Abby is the first to look up from their newly gifted loot.

"Now that we've all given our reports, that just leaves you. What's the status of the observatory? You found it right?"

The room goes silent.

"I did."

There are a few gulps, but everyone waits patiently as I go on.

"Nobody was home. I take it they're either concealed in an area I can't sense or held up waiting somewhere else. The entire town was abandoned and the observatory up on the cliff didn't have a single living soul inside."

I reach into my storage and pull out the two black Demonic Stones.

"However, there are some interesting monsters in the Abyss."

Chester's eyes light up from across the room as I let the small glossy gems with the middle coffee tables surface.

His gaze darts back and forth from the dagger in my right hand and the gems rolling to a stop on the wooden surface. The old man's eye for rare items comes to the same conclusion as me in a matter of seconds.

As he walks over, I speak again.

"They were right by the edge. One of my abilities allows me to see them. It makes sense that you weren't able to while conducting research, it's an advanced technique. However, the fact that you said you heard some is fascinating. Am I remembering this correctly?"

Chester picks up the gems and starts examining them with a small bronze-colored circular tool while replying.

"Indeed. All I heard were growls from the border when I got too close. Also, an occasional roar followed by the sound of metal on metal ringing out from deep within caught my ear every few days."

He gulps.

"I've stepped inside a few times to conduct some tests, but never made it further than 10 meters. The darkness is sickening."

There's another moment of silence before Arie speaks.

"The Monsters in the Abyss. How would I stack up against one?"

A semi-worried expression crosses his face. I reply.

"Oh, you're definitely stronger than the monsters I faced today, the only problem is you wouldn't be able to perceive them. They... seem to exist on a different frequency than regular mana-based monsters."

The room is taken aback at this remark. Everyone's eyes open wide, wanting to know more.

I throw my hands up in a playful manner.

"Hey, I don't really understand it much yet either.... I need to do more testing tomorrow."

I hold up the black dagger tighter.

"This weapon may help me uncover some more clues."

A few sighs and slow nods are all I get in return as they realize we've hit a dead end for information gathering today. We all start to settle down for the evening, as the distant city lights are the only source of brightness that shines through the open windows.

Chester cooks up another meal and we spend the night rehashing our plans for tomorrow and start discussing potential options for what we'll do once we get out of this whole mess.

The only things that come up are starting a new life here in the Dark Continent, Moving to another one of the 8 Regions or Directly confronting the Association back home. There are other options too, but these seem to be our top 3 options.

All of them have their advantages and drawbacks, but we still have a lot to get done before making a decision. The conversation was only brought up to keep our minds busy while waiting for the impending confrontation ahead.

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Morning comes and we all leave to continue our respective roles. Maria and Abby head out to keep watch on the Black Market, Arie and Fisher go to the training rooms to refine their new ranked-up powers, and Chester leaves to sell off the High-Grade D and C-Class gear to his various merchant friends.

I excitedly make my way back toward the desert.

Although I like to keep my abilities as hidden as possible, that is not the full reason I didn't activate my Demonic Energy while with my group last night.

We're all in the same boat here, enemies of two foreign governments and only have each other to count on. There's no reason to not trust them, but at the same time, there's no reason to overshare.

My main worry is the potential dangers of the excess mana from their auras or magic residue in a room full of Elite Mages and rare items. One wrong chain reaction and we'd all be doomed.

"It's better I keep this to myself for now" I whisper under my breath while walking out of town and into the rolling hills of the open desert.

"Today... I'll learn how to use this blade, and enter the Abyss."

Chapter 293

As the silver towers in Solara begin to fade from my line of sight, I take my new dagger out of item storage and begin twirling it through my fingers again.

It looks like it should be made of heavy metal or dense stone like obsidian, but this long blade can't be more than 100 grams. It's made of a foreign substance I've never felt before in high quantity.

With too many questions begging to be answered, I activate my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill and the world around me flashes black and white. The rising golden hills of sand in the desert turn white in my vision, and the only darkness in the landscape is the shadows from the sun.

I'm starting to get used to the switch.

However, the blade in my hand now glows with a dim purple hue.

"This is new..."

It's barely visible, but from the contrast of the bright sand below me and the lack of color in my vision otherwise, I'm sure it's there. It's the exact same color as the wisps of matter that dissolve off Dungeon Walker portals I used to make when it was a base-level skill.

I take a deep breath, then allow a full unit of Demonic Energy to flow from my core into the blade through my fingertips.

It feels natural to do so.

Once in contact with my energy, the dagger starts to glow light purple closer to the sharp edge of the blade. Its intensity and luminosity increase but the shade of purple hue darkens as more energy seeps into it.

The denser the energy is packed the closer to the base color of a jet-black blade the weapon returns to.

I take a few more steps forward while examining the dagger further. The outer glow now has taken a somewhat physical rippling form. Light wisps of dark purple energy float around the weapon. Trace amounts of the excess refined Demonic Energy dissolve into the air.

Out of curiosity, I feed it more.

Another unit flows from my core into the blade and the purple hue darkness again. Thicker wisps with the consistency of candle smoke form around the black weapon and it only tempts me to give it more power to test its limits. One unit at a time, I continue sending refined cool energy from my body to the blade.

It hits 5 units, and the dark aura around it nearly covers my hand it's so thick.

While the matter still rests in the blade, it feels like the energy is still connected to me.

It feels powerful, but at the same moment, I have nothing to compare it to. It isn't similar to when I imbue my bonded blades with mana at all. Instead of energy being ready to expel at a moment's notice like my fire or pure mana attacks, this one is just powering up the weapon itself.

I can feel the black dagger being saturated, but that's about it. There is no extra control or immediate buffs gained, I've just created a stronger blade.

Wisps of black energy continue to surround the weapon. The more that's in the blade the faster its residue dissolves into the atmosphere.

I give it a test swing through the air.

The motion is quick and silent, leaving a thin trail of dark purple energy behind it.

Sporting a grin, I swing it again.

It leaves another streak of black and purple cloud-like residue across my vision as if I'm peering into the night sky through the desert sand.

The trails of energy disappear into the air, and I whisper under my breath.

"The Midnight Dagger. That's what I'll call this blade."

I continue to get a feel for my new weapon while admiring the sleek, stealthy, and dangerous aesthetic.

With every slash I conduct, the power within the blade is expelled little by little. After about 2 dozen movements, all 5 units have completely dissolved into the air. It's devoid of energy just like the moment I picked it up for the first time.

The weapon uses up Demonic Energy while in its base resting state, and a significant amount more when moved around at high speeds by the user.

I'm much more comfortable wielding my new weapon, but I still have to try it out on a monster to see how it really works.

With a satisfied sigh, I reactivate my mana sense and place the dagger in my item storage to continue the long walk back to the Abyss.

It does not take long before the black void comes into view and the vacant town lays silent below me in the valley. With an All-Seeing Eye scan along with enemy detection, I confirm there's nothing out of the ordinary in the town itself.

However, the white dome up on the hill shows an interesting reading that was not present yesterday.

There's a weak pulse of grey energy coming from the top of the observatory every 10 to 20 seconds. Without my perception, it'd be invisible, but I can see clearly that the mana-based energy wave is pointed straight at the Abyss.

Surprisingly, as it makes contact with the black void, it glides right through and fades away out of my detection range but creates no yellow sparks or hint of reaction with the darkness.

Despite the odd new sonar-like energy reading, there aren't any people nearby. It's tempting to peek inside and find out for myself what's really going on, but if by chance there's surveillance in the area I don't want to ruin my chances of meeting the Boss and his Craftsman tomorrow.

I grit my teeth and turn away.

The information is noted. I'll re-assess the situation in time. If there's no one home, I'm better off not knocking at the door.

Taking a hard left, I begin my walk along the Abyss just like I had the day before. Activating Demonic Vision and pulling out The Midnight Dagger, I patiently wait for a wolf to appear from the black fog.

After no more than 500 meters of travel away from the abandoned town, the first pair of red glowing eyes stare at me from within the dark border. It growls and tightens its jaw while digging its sharp claws into the sand, but doesn't budge from about 7 meters deep in the Abyss.

I take a step closer, channeling 5 full units of Demonic Energy into my sword just like when I tested it out earlier.

With every step closer that I take, the wolf's growl sounds louder and deeper. Its crimson eyes shine brighter through the darkness and the creature stands its ground.

Other than the two occasions where the wolves jumped out of the void to attack me, this is the closest I've gotten to one of these monsters. More importantly, this is the closest I've ever been to the Abyss itself.

With blade in hand, and confidence coursing through my veins I continue to draw near.

The hot sand beneath my feet crunches with every step, and my eardrums echo with the monster's deep growls.

I take a final step close enough to the swirling wall of darkness to the point where reaching out a hand would allow me to touch the barrier.

The wolf finally snaps and lets out a battle roar while jumping forward.

I do the same, plunging dagger-first into the Abyss.

Chapter 294

The tip of my blade pierces the black veil of darkness. The crimson eyes and dripping white fangs of the Demonic Wolf lunge toward me while my blade points right back.

It cuts clean through like butter.

Not only the blackness of the abyss but the wolf creature in front of me as well.

With little to no resistance at all, my dagger strikes the incoming wolf head on and it's cleaved in two before I even make another step.

Plumes of dark energy seep from my blade as it tears through the monster's flesh, killing it instantly.

As impressive as my destructive feat may be, my attention is much more focused on the darkness around me that I delved into unannounced.

With a thud, the two halves of the wolf land at my sides and my gaze locks onto the reflection of my glowing white eyes in the base of the glossy blade. I look around, and my vision isn't filled with pure darkness as expected...

It looks as if I'm just wearing dark purple sunglasses inside. Dark, but still more than visible enough to move around undisturbed. My vision is equal to that of a day that has turned to dusk. The rolling sandy hills are visible for hundreds of meters ahead of me, unlike moments ago when staring into the black void I could hardly make out the wolf's outline at 10 meters.

"This isn't right..."

I remember Chester's words well.

He mentioned he could enter the Abyss unharmed, but couldn't make it more than a few meters without the darkness becoming unbearable.

I'm having a much different experience.

Activating my manipulation skill, I absorb the energy from the fallen wolf. It brings my core back up to full and my vision lightens even further. My visibility reaches nearly half a kilometer.

Although the outside of the Abyss looks like a thick black cloud of fog, the air quality actually has no difference. It may be a bit thicker, but the amount is minuscule. My movements and breathing aren't affected at all. If anything, I feel even more energetic and ready for a fight than before.

As the two remaining halves of the wolf monster dissolve, the tiny black gemstone is left behind on the sandy floor. As I pick it up, the purple glimmer and glossy reflective surfaces shine in the light of my eyes again.

I throw it in my back pocket, not wanting to find out what would happen if I were to activate my spatial magic in here.

Wisps of energy still leak from my blade. After replenishing my stores from the world, there are just under 45 units in my core and a little over 4 in my dagger.

Turning my head to the edge of the Abyss behind me, the bright open desert is visible just slightly through a distorted white veil. It's the polar opposite of what the Abyss looks like from the outside.

Impossible to miss from a distance, but with no way of tracking where I am in here other than my positioning compared to monsters, my plan is to keep close to the outer edge.

Or, at least within a visual range.

"It looks like I have some work to do."

With a grin, I move forward deeper into the purple-tinted realm without another thought. Tightly gripping my blade and scanning the area for dense pockets of raw Demonic Energy, I start my trek.

I continue making my way east, and slightly north walking deeper into this unknown. It feels eerily silent, but then again so is the entire desert...

About 20 minutes pass before a grouping of 4 wolves come charging my way with glowing eyes and no fear or hesitation in their movements. I sensed them coming from a distance, but their travel trajectory hints toward the fact that they could sense me too.

Plus, there are many of them traveling together now. Not just the scouts at the border.

I run forward to meet the small pack head-on while channeling more energy into my blade to make up for the lost charge.

Two wolves jump out in front, and with a wide slash from right to left, I cut them down. The creatures' heads roll to the floor behind me while I prepare to attack their backup.

Just like mindless dungeon monsters, these beasts show no fear. They only run straight ahead attacking me with the intent to kill, nothing else.

The black and purple wisps around my knife start to grow as I continuously channel more energy into the blade to prepare for a second strike. In doing so, the second my legs hit the ground I feel a surge of power.

My next step is considerably faster than the previous attack and I lunge forward with blinding speed and precision. All of my perception senses increase for a moment as well.

The wolves don't have any time to howl for backup, they're defeated before they even know what hit them.

I smirk and turn around as all 4 fallen enemies stop moving and begin to dissolve.

Similar to my blade, black and purple wisps of energy evaporate from my arms and shoulders, adding to the refined energy of the Abyss. Once it leaves my body, it is lost from my control.

It stops flowing the moment my heart rate slows and my quick movements cease while absorbing all the raw energy from the wolves.

There is some leftover that I can't absorb, it just floats slowly into the air as the remains of the monsters' bodies dissolve.

I collect the 4 black gems and continue my walk making a mental note of the energy surge I just felt. It was like a temporary speed, strength, and perception buff, but with such weak opponents, it's hard to tell by how much.

It activates when my blade gets fully saturated with Demonic Energy and the output I'm channeling through my pathways has nowhere else to go. The power slowly seeps through my muscles and invigorates my body.

Afterward, I don't feel tired or fatigued at all.

"I need to conduct a few more tests..."

Over the next few hours, I run into more small wolf packs of 2 to 6 monsters per grouping every kilometer I travel.

My newest power-up is useful to take the wolves out quickly, but I'm only able to activate it when my blade is full. Even while battling 6 demonic beasts at once, I hardly have more than a second to produce any results. The phenomenon's true capabilities are still an unsolved mystery to me, I curiously continue to probe the void for something stronger.

Eventually, as I travel further east than I did yesterday, and nearly half a kilometer north into the Abyss, the remnants of an abandoned town come into my field of view. It's much deeper in than I'd initially planned on diving, but something interesting catches my eye...

I'd brush it off as just another evacuated settlement if it wasn't for the odd light purple, almost white, aura hovering over the vacant houses.

There aren't more than 20 houses in total, and most are made of wood and leftover scrap metal.

Squinting from this range the outer glow of the oddity is visible, but the only way to see what it really is is to walk over and check it out for myself.

The closer I get, the brighter the aura becomes. Once less than 20 paces away, the aura turns out to not be what I expected at all...

White and purple fire burns bright, flickering slowly and scattered in small patches along the sandy streets and even crackling atop a few small huts and houses.

It looks like it was thrown about by an angry fire wielder randomly. The fact that the flames are here isn't the odd part, it's that they don't show any signs of growing larger or flickering out. They just burn in place, giving off the light glow that drew me in.

Every step closer I take, the more it doesn't make any sense at all.

The moment I make my first step into the vicinity of the village onto a well-traveled path, I feel the sand shudder and vibrate beneath my feet. It stops for a moment as my eyes dart back and forth, then a loud fearsome roar followed by a metal clang rings out from even deeper within the Abyss.

Tightening my gaze on the direction it came from and letting my energy sensors search for power, I pick up on the essence of a monster with nearly the same amount of raw energy in its core as me...

This isn't a wolf. It's my chance to face a Demonic Monster with real power.

Chapter 295

I take another step into the town.

After the first ground-shaking roar, the air stays still, and silence fills the dark Abyss. The only movements I can sense are the white and purple flickering flames ahead of me.

Cautiously, I take more steps forward while gripping my dagger. The roofs of the small huts I walk past are torn off, and some are missing doors and walls. It's difficult to tell if this destruction was man-made before evacuating, or if the monster that released its battle cry earlier had something to do with all this.

Using my manipulation skill, I sense the dense grouping of raw energy coming my way at a steady rate. If I'm picturing it correctly, there are nearly 40 units swirling around inside this beast.

In response, I channel energy into my blade and start moving in its direction.

I make it all the way through the desolate village, peering out into the purple-tinted horizon awaiting its arrival.

At first, I thought it might be some kind of mutant wolf, or a humanoid version of one. However, considering its roar, it sounds too familiar to a type of monster I've fought in the past to resemble a wolf howl.

My suspicions come true as the 4-meter-tall shadowy figure of a high orc comes stomping toward me from over a risen sand dune.

Its skin is dark purple, and its armor is jet-black. The creature's crimson eyes are the first thing that becomes visible while it charges my way.

The monster raises a long glossy sword similar to my dagger's coloring and lets out a roar. It locks its gaze on me while its body begins to exude high amounts of Demonic Energy.

In doing so, it accelerates much faster. Sand flies up in the air to its sides as I finish channeling excess energy into my dagger. This activates my buffs to let the dark matter leak out from my body as well. The creature is fast, but I'm faster.

"It's time to fight."

Grinning, I lunge forward and match the Demonic High Orc's speed without an issue. My gaze tightens on its armor the closer I get, darting my eyes up and down to try and pinpoint a weak area to strike.

It's almost entirely covered from the neck down.

Other than its head, the areas I can strike are the backs of its knees, elbows, and a small area around its waist. That's where a majority of its Demonic Energy is leaking out from, so it's signifying holes in the defenses.

With eyes locked on the prize, I continue running forward as the armored High Orc runs down the sand dune with its black blade raised.

I jump upward, powered up with my new speed and strength buffs, as the Demonic Creature swings its blade down at me.

A clang rings out on impact. The heavy breath of the beast can be felt from less than a few meters away, and its red eyes illuminate the area where we clash, announcing the battle's start.

It's strong...

Much stronger than I initially imagined.

Once we collide, even with my buffs, I'm slightly overpowered strength-wise.

My mana control is worthless, and my stat-boosting gear can't be used. I'm reliant on the base stats of this body double's nerfed form plus whatever extra power the Mysterious Midnight Dagger can lend me in the heat of battle.

Although it slightly overpowers me, I still clearly have the upper hand. The monster's long sword begins to crack against the flowing essence of my dagger. My blade sinks into the metal of its weapon as it attempts to push it down further toward me.

Surprisingly, neither its sword nor armor glows, channeling energy like mine. It seems this blade is special.

It realizes its sword will break if it follows through with this swing any further, so it comes at me from the side with a tightened fist covered in Demonic Essence.

Hit straight on from the side, I'm sent flying down the desert hill while coughing up blood.

"I'll give it to ya, you can hit hard. Unfortunately, that's not going to be enough."

I smirk, catching my feet on the desert floor and repositioning myself for our second incoming clash.

It has the strength advantage over me, but I have speed. As long as I don't let it catch me in the air again, this battle is as good as won.

I turn to let it follow me to a more flat area of the desert right outside the village. Battling on a hill is giving it the unnecessary advantage of high ground. It takes less than 5 seconds to get the beast exactly where I want it. The High Orc lets out a roar while following and swinging its arms and blade, frustrated that I keep it meters out of reach at all times.

Then, once the battlefield is to my liking, I turn to face it, activating my buffs.

In the blink of an eye, I swerve around the creature's left side, narrowly avoiding its blade and aiming for the back of its knee. There's a small gap in its armored leggings, so I aim for it.

The sound of metal on metal rings out as my energy-covered blade chips a hole in its armor, exposing even more of its hind leg. The monster swings its blade around to hit me, but I lunge away, slashing at its exposed free elbow.

With every step I take, I burn through more Demonic Energy.

Each powerful stride of mine uses up about half a unit, and just dodging burns through another half a unit every 3 seconds that I partake in battle.

I could take a few hits from its charged fist if I needed to, but that first one hurt quite a bit. If I were to quantify it, the attack felt like the strength of a level 350 to 400 monster with a strength-based natural affinity.

Considering this, and the fact that the wolves I faced earlier with 10 units of demonic energy felt like level 100 monsters, I can safely assume that a single unit of Demonic Energy is roughly equivalent to 10 levels, stats-wise.

In my weakened form, I only have a few dozen levels up on this creature. It's best for me to stay cautious moving forward. There may be many other opponents like this one that I can't always brute force my way to victory; I'll use a more tactical battle style here.

Slashing at its weak points until massive holes in its armor become visible, the High Orc roars with frustration. These roars turn into cries of agony as I begin aiming for its flesh, not only aiming to weaken its defenses.

Focusing on speed, and using up a lot of my energy stores, I'm able to bob and weave around the brute with surgical precision. Hit after hit, the beast's vitality is brought down to a critical level. In doing so, the monster gets much slower as well.

Every attempt it makes to block uses up more of its own Demonic Energy, and every swing of its blade becomes sloppier by the minute.

The clang and crack of metal echo through the vacant town as its final desperate attempt to cut me down ends in its blade being sliced in two by my dagger.

The dark-skinned High Orc falls to its knees, unarmed and riddled with slash marks on its arms and legs. I jump above it and deal the finishing blow to the center of its forehead.

The corpse, shattered armor, and broken blade fall to the sandy floor with a series of thuds. I step away while breathing heavily.

I check the contents of my core.

Less than 10 units of Demonic Energy remain. I'm a bit fatigued, but the physical stress on my body is mostly forgotten as I'm invigorated by the fact that I took down my first difficult opponent in the Abyss.

"That was the first time I've managed to go all out with this new power... and it felt good."

The remnants of the High Orc start to dissolve, and I absorb the remaining raw energy it releases, bringing me almost back up to a full core, but not quite. The monster used up a lot of its own energy stores in our battle.

I bend down to grab the glossy black gem it leaves behind, but the ground starts to shake violently as I do.

Just like before I met this High Orc, the sand beneath my feet shifts. This time there's no roar...

I feel exactly where it comes from.

My eyes open wide and my heart skips a beat as I sense a monster wielding over 90 units of raw Demonic Energy lurking nearby in the Abyss. It's been waiting patiently for me to finish my battle before making its presence known.

Chapter 296

The sand beneath my feet shifts again, even more violently this time.

I'm frozen in place, feeling the presence of a Demonic Creature magnitudes stronger than the one I just faced.

I had to use all my tricks and mental power to stay ahead of a creature with a level lower than my own...

Lurking less than 500 meters away from me, I sense a monster stronger than anything I've ever faced in battle before, inside or outside of this Abyss.

"This would be a good time to run..."

Without thinking twice, I grab the glossy black stone off the floor from the High Orc I just defeated and turn to leave immediately.

There's a difference between seeking out a strong opponent for training my new powers and the death wish I'd be asking for to face whatever this monster may be.

Sand flies up from my heels as I sprint back toward the direction of the abandoned town.

I'm not sure how, but I feel the glare of something watching me from afar. I can't see it, but I know it's watching...

Using Demonic Energy to increase the strength of my footsteps, I race off at full speed toward the direction of the outside world. The ground starts to shake more and more violently, and the sand beneath my feet starts to churn and move.

It gets harder to find solid ground with every step I take.

I finally make it right to the edge of the eerie town of abandoned homes and crackling flames. This lets me know for sure the border of the Abyss is less than a kilometer away, but with the heavy looming presence behind me, it feels like much further.

My manipulation skill starts to go haywire. Over a dozen enemies ranging from 10 to 50 raw units of Demonic Energy start to surround me on all sides.

They appeared from nowhere... And the presence behind me is not weakened in the slightest.

To make things even more strange, they're all coming up from underneath the sand.

It's as if they spawned in.

I stop in place and grip my dagger as the ground beneath my feet becomes so unstable it's impossible to stand. If I had my wind magic right now, I'd fly out of here in an instant, but right now, I'm a sitting duck.

An explosion of white and purple light bursts from the ground no more than 10 meters to my right. It nearly blinds me before another of the same size erupts on my left.

Then another in front, and more behind.

Monsters are popping up from the sand one by one and igniting their bodies with a bright purple glow.

It's hot. Very hot...but luckily, the heat doesn't bother me much.

Everything clicks in my head as the sand clouds start to settle, revealing over a dozen monstrous Demonic Worms covered in flames closing in toward me.

This is a completely new species of Demonic Monster. The disgusting creatures range from 2 to 5 meters long and all share the same features: rows of white teeth that rotate in their open maws.

The skin around their bodies looks slippery and wet, yet despite that, it's covered in purple flames.

One of the smallest creatures of the bunch closest to me lunges in, targeting my right leg.

Gritting my teeth, not having any room to step back, I swing my charged dagger, slicing it in two.

Both halves of the slimy flaming creature wriggle on the ground as another one of its kind squirms in to attempt to take a bite out of my left side.

Again, I spin around and slice the flaming creature in two. Only the lower-level ones are attacking right now. They're scoping out my capabilities with their young and trying to identify my strengths and weaknesses. They may look stupid, but as a group, it seems they have a brain.

"Not good..."

As more of the 10-20 unit creatures throw their bodies at me, I feel the monstrous entity approach at an unnerving pace.

It's getting closer by the second, and I'm stuck slicing worms on the edge of town, not making any progress toward my plan to flee.

As soon as I attempt to escape from the circle that surrounds me, one of the larger creatures lunges in. Its wide-open mouth has 4 rows of razor-sharp teeth. Its diameter is close to the width of my body.

I activate my Demonic speed buffs and use up a full unit to jump out of the way as fast and far as it will take me.

In doing so, this allows others its size to squirm my way and go on the attack rather than just sitting back to watch.

All of the slimy monsters leave trails of purple flames behind them, and long indents in the sand look like the well-traveled roads in the village.

The mysterious sight of the flaming abandoned town is starting to make a lot more sense. I'm just wishing it didn't...

Smaller worms still lunge at me, but I cut them down with ease and absorb their Demonic Energy on the fly as best I can. They aren't a threat to me at all.

There are 3 larger worms, all over 40 Demonic Energy units. These are the ones that give me trouble. One bite from a beast like that, and I'm surely a goner. Every time I lunge out of the way and dodge an attack, the other two block my way to exit.

They're leading me back to the village, and there's nothing I can do about it.

I grit my teeth and turn to face the closest monster with my blade in hand. As it slithers toward me, I run back at it.

It's not the safest option for me to choose right now, but with a near A-Class level threat behind me, fighting 3 monsters near my own skill level is a much more reasonable goal.

Charging my blade to the max, I lunge at it straight on. As the worm tries to swallow me whole, I duck to the side and leave a deep gash along its slimy skin.

My blade rips through its flesh like butter, but the worm doesn't hesitate to bend its head backward and go for the kill.

I charge my steps and jump in the air high above the worm to dodge while landing another devastating blow on its exposed side. From what I can tell, this one is as good as dead.

All seems to be going well, but its two battle partners see that I'm not doing my usual running away tactic and join in on the fun to avenge their fallen partner.

"Dammit..."

As I fall to the desert floor after critically wounding one of the worms, I fall straight toward the other two with no way of changing my trajectory in sight. In a last-moment decision, while falling toward one of their open mouths, I point my left hand straight ahead and channel pure demonic energy out in its purest refined form.

The black matter hits the creature's rows of jagged teeth and punctures its jaw from the inside, causing the stream of dense energy to flow out the other side. Its head flails backward, but it's back in action the instant my feet hit the ground. The second worm, on the other hand, has no such obstacle and is now out of my field of view.

It slithers in from my blind spot and goes in for the kill.

If not for the vibrations in the sand below my feet, I wouldn't have noticed before it was too late...

However, maybe it already is.

I manage to spin my body out of the way, but the creature latches onto my left arm. It sees it as the weapon that injured its partner.

I clench my jaw as its rows of white teeth crush every bone from my shoulder down in a single crunch. Simultaneously, I use my free arm to cut the head of the beast clean off along with my now unusable arm.

It falls to the desert floor squirming covered in my blood as well as its own.

The final worm turns to me. Its teeth are even more jagged than before because of my last attack on it. The hole from my attempt to kill it earlier makes the desert sand behind it visible through its open maw.

It faces me with its two slain allies scattered on the ground around us. I stare back, slowly bleeding out and breathing heavily.

The worm slithers forward; I power up my energy stores and lunge at it.

With no support, this mindless worm is no match. I cut it down in three clean slashes, and it lies lifeless by its allies.

The remains of the dozen enemies that sneak-attacked me are scattered across the desert floor, covered in the purple flaming residue even after death.

They all begin to dissolve, and I absorb enough energy to bring myself back to full but don't waste a second to stop and collect their black stones.

The monster I'm dreading to meet finally decides to make its move.

I shudder as the ground shakes and rumbles. This movement is nothing like the squirming, shifting sensation of the previous attackers.

This feels like an earthquake. The only thing that could make such world-shaking movements is a true behemoth, slithering beneath the desert floor, stalking its prey with no thought of danger.

I run.

The ground beneath me starts to slowly rise, and all I can do is use every last drop of Demonic energy my body will allow to propel my steps forward. The white edge of the Abyss to the outside world seems to get further and further away the faster I try to run.

I manage to outpace the rising hill of sand beneath me, leaving the village about 100 meters behind, but the sight I witness does the opposite of giving me any extra sense of relief.

The desert floor rises and pops like a bubble as rows of house-sized teeth erupt from the sand in a perfect circle to swallow the entire village whole.

A tidal wave of rippling sand violently comes my way as the A-Class threat makes itself known.

Chapter 297

I can't believe my eyes...

"Impossible..."

I've never seen a creature this size, and have most definitely never faced one this powerful either. If my estimate is correct, the monster before me has the raw stats of a level 900.

It's a ranked-up version of whatever the tiny insects were that I just fought... This creature is on a whole different level.

The entire village of two dozen homes is swallowed into the open maw of this beast without a hint of restraint.

With four glowing eyes, tough spiked scales around its body, and waves of Demonic Energy pulsing from its very being; one thing is very clear.

I'm no match, no match at all.

I continue to run.

The rippling rubber-like consistency of the sand floor sends me flying through the air with every few steps I take. It's like attempting to stay upright in a raging storm on the open sea.

This Demonic Worm has control of the entire desert around it. The power feels similar to an Earth Manipulation ability, but without my mana senses, it's impossible to tell.

Still, using my remaining energy stores, I push myself to run with everything I've got.

Turning my head back one last time, its open mouth stares at me. It leaks a dark purple aura with hints of crimson light mixed within. Behind that, hundreds of meters of body come slithering out from the crater it's made on the desert floor. The creature's movements are that of an enormous serpent.

From here, it looks as if a skyscraper just erupted from the earth.

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, its entire body ignites into purple flames and dives forward into the ground. The luminescent beast begins swimming through the sand like it's water. I can instantly feel the immense heat its body produces even from here.

I turn back to focus on the glistening white wall to the outside world and burn through Demonic Energy at a rate faster than I even knew was possible. Gritting my teeth and making massive holes in the sand beneath every one of my steps as I propel myself forward with refined energy, I reach for the light.

Even so, with every powerful stride I take, the worm creature gets closer and closer.

Waves of sand start to distort the desert floor even more violently. They form in front of me now, and not just under my feet.

With wide-angled swings of my dagger, small holes in the mounds are blown away for me to lunge through. My vision attempts to tunnel on the approaching white wall to freedom ahead.

The worm behind me is getting so close that I can feel the vibrations of its teeth scratching against each other, and the presence of its glowing eyes burn into the back of my neck. Just being near it feels like there's an intimidation skill active on full blast.

At the same time, the edge of the Abyss is getting even closer. It's less than 30 strides away.

All of a sudden, the smaller mounds of sand that previously formed barriers in my path start to drift away. They all head toward the white border, and now the sand lays dormant around me on the desert floor...

"This is my chance."

Not questioning it for a second, I continue to run forward with even more speed. Without having to swing my blade or watch my footing for sinkholes, this makes things a lot easier.

The desert is flat and silent; the path before me is clear.

My remaining energy stores are under a third. At this pace, I'll be swallowed and ripped to shreds the moment I break through to the outside world. Still, if I can activate my mana-powered skills, I may have a chance. Every small advantage counts.

For a full 5 seconds, I manage to match the pace of the worm, but my luck doesn't last. Of course, my hunter wouldn't let me go free that easily.

Just a few dozen meters from the border, the sand dunes that moved away earlier begin to swell up together. Instead of dozens of smaller intricate distractions, the desert floor is starting to rise into a massive wall before my eyes. The flaming worm has led me to a dead end.

However, there's still hope.

I run up the swell of sand as it begins to consolidate.

The upward incline slows my forward momentum, allowing the worm to gain even more distance on me while I climb the ever-rising incline of desert sand.

I burn through every last drop of energy in my body, leaving a trail of denser black and purple refined Demonic Energy in my wake. With every lightning-fast stride, I jump an additional 5 to 10 meters higher into the air. The enormous worm dives directly below me and disappears into the steadily forming wall of mass that I climb.

Each step feels like an eternity, but I persevere and manage to reach the top of the moving sandy mound before it fully forms into an enormous sandstone wall.

As I jump over it, the flaming worm from the Abyss crashes through the base of its own creation, leaving nothing below me but its rows of sharp teeth and the void of swirling energy within its open maw.

I pass through the barrier of darkness to light. The purple tint from within the Abyss begins to fade.

The only thing on my mind is activating my mana sense again to fly away from this creature as fast as I possibly can.

The only problem is the Demonic Energy coursing through my veins and the blade that is completely saturated in my right hand. If I were to try and use mana now, I'd light up in a sea of sparks. My teammates would never know the full story.

Most importantly, I wouldn't get the information I'm looking for on the Inner Circle and its possible ties to the Association. If I die right now, I'll actually be in a lot more trouble when I wake up...

The view below me is almost entirely a mouth full of teeth, actively swallowing thousands of metric tons of sand in its path.

I let out a yell with no better idea than to throw my blade downward, fully charged with energy, as the rows of teeth come up to chomp down on me like an insect in the wind.

It glides through the air with wisps of black energy trailing behind it, then hits one of the monstrosity's teeth, letting out a light clink. It manages to leave a small chip in its tooth and bounce off to the side into the desert sand like nothing but a pebble.

Meanwhile, I expel every last drop of Demonic Energy from my veins while the mouth of teeth and violently swirling energy start to close around me.

Jets of black energy spill from my right hand out of every finger as I try to expel all of the remaining residue from using my power-ups moments ago.

"Finally..."

The world around me shifts from black and white to gold and blue as I reactivate my mana sense and step off the open air using a desperate full-powered wind summoning spell.

I thrust myself high into the sky, away from the Abyss, expecting to hear the loud chomp of the monster's closing maw echo through my ears and down my spine. It never comes... I don't make it a point to look back and continue using my wind summoning along with every active buff in my arsenal to fly away.

The enormous worm fades from my vision. Without switching to Demonic Energy as a power source, I'm unable to perceive it at all... Only the outline of sand around its body is left in its place. It looks like the desert has a mind of its own, trying to swallow me up into its depths.

Using all the air magic I have access to, I shoot straight up for the sky, not thinking about anything other than survival.

The churning, grinding, and crashing sounds of sand in the back of my mind start to fade, but I continue upward for a full minute straight.

Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, and only when I make it to the cloud line do I think to slow down.

I turn to take a look behind me, but there's nothing but open desert and the endless void almost a kilometer away far below.

A deep trail of sand follows me but stops about halfway between where I float now and the abyss.

I stop air-stepping and only slowly glide backward now to assess the situation further.

"I made it..."

A chuckle comes out.

"I really made it out of there alive..."

Blood still leaks from the wound on my missing left arm, so I use Self Regeneration to heal my injury. My blade, on the other hand, seems to be a lost cause...

"I really liked that dagger..."

I bite my bottom lip and come to a halt in the air to stare down at the unmoving desert below.

"Something isn't right, though. Why would it stop chasing me?"

I remember back to the Demonic Wolves that wouldn't take a step out from the abyss unless threatened or it was deemed necessary. They fought their monstrous instincts to stay within the Abyss at all costs.

Maybe the worm turned back when it lost its prey to the sky.

I curiously look closer but see no other sign of the creature in sight.

It's like it vanished.

My eyebrows scrunch, and my lips tighten while trying to figure out what happened during my run to the sky...

Staying on high alert with my heart still beating out of my chest, I slowly drift down to the desert floor a safe distance away.

After a slow descent, I land myself atop one of the highest sand dunes far from the Abyss. It overlooks the stadium-sized crater left behind by the monster.

My feet touch the desert sand, and I activate my Demonic Vision to get a picture of what's really going on.

The sight before my eyes is not what I expected to see at all...

Chapter 298

The purple worm's body lies on the desert floor, and it doesn't move forward at all.

Other than its mouth opening and closing with rows of teeth churning and grinding against each other and the Demonic Essence leaking out, the monstrosity stays eerily still.

The creature has made its way entirely out of the black Abyss, showing off its full body's length of just over 200 meters. Black refined energy oozes out from between its scales, floating up into the air and dissolving while the flickering purple flames begin to die down to conserve its energy.

A sight even stranger to my wandering eyes appears. There are small rips in its flesh that are starting to form. The scales curl at their edges, and some even dissolve entirely, falling off to the desert floor. It looks like holes in burning paper as the sun's rays shine down on it.

From the growing breaks in its skin, more and more of the black ooze leaks out and floats into the sky, while the desiccated bits drop to the ground.

Not only is refined energy dissolving in the air, but raw unfiltered energy also flows upward, being released from its insides too. The purple flames are hardly visible now.

Once the reaction starts, it only speeds up from there.

It looks similar to the wolf that I defeated outside of the Abyss earlier. The remains of its body are dissolving along with the energy inside of it.

As the reaction continues to get worse, it begins to finally move again, writhing in agony. A deep, mind-numbingly loud roar escapes its maw. The refined energy that leaves its body doubles in an instant, and a shock wave of matter pulses from the creature's core.

The desert floor shakes as it attempts to manipulate the sand, but the more power it uses, the faster the dissolving rate increases. More pulses of black energy shoot out from its body.

My eyes and mouth stay wide open at the sight before me.

The worm's head curls up in the air, and its tail end does too. The massive movement lifts immense amounts of sand over 100 meters into the air while it shakes the entire desert to turn its body a full 180 degrees to face the Abyss.

Huge portions of its scales and body mass fall off and dissolve into the air. Other portions are left to depreciate on their own in the open desert as they fall off the creature's now mutilated body.

It lurches forward to crawl back into the Abyss, but its skeletal structure begins to show beneath the decaying body.

A near A-Rank monster, impossible for me to defeat, is being killed by the sun.

Or so it seems...

Maybe it's just the open air or the lack of Refined Demonic Energy in the atmosphere.

Whatever the cause of this phenomenon is, it saved me from certain doom.

As the 4 glowing eyes of the worm creature plunge back into the darkness of the Abyss, the reality of the situation hits me.

The gut-wrenching feeling following my lapse in judgment and crazed battle sense finally catches up to me. The monster in front of me is an opponent I have no chance of defeating.

If Demonic Creatures can get this strong, then so can mana-based monsters. If mana-based monsters can, this only leads to the conclusion that there are surely hunters capable of subjugating them.

This is Sector 4 after all, the weakest of all the Dark Continent Regions.

I only scratched the outer edge of the Abyss.

If a beast like that roams nearby without a team of A-Class Hunters on standby to kill it, that only begs the question: What could possibly be more dangerous than this that they're busy with...?

Then again, there could be no one else with the ability to wield and perceive Demonic Energy like me. Maybe they don't even know what possible world-ending threats are lurking so close nearby.

It's a reassuring thought. However, I doubt the powers above me are that oblivious.

If they can hide the simple fact of mana control from the general public, I'm sure an even deadlier power source can easily be hidden away and only used by those who can wield it.

So many questions start racing through my head, and it begins to make me sick.

As I watch the back half of the Demonic Worm start to disappear into the darkness, my clenched jaw and tightened fists begin to relax a bit.

I let out a long sigh as the tip of the monster's tail completely vanishes into the void.

The only remnants that remain are the enormous pieces of decaying flesh and scales.

They too dissolve entirely as I stare into the crater left behind by the monstrous force I narrowly escaped from by the skin of my teeth.

I gulp. Then, drop to my knees and deactivate my demonic vision.

Letting the hot sun beam down on me feels very relaxing. I lie on my back and let out a relieved sigh.

For the next half-hour, I stay in the same spot atop the tallest dune, switching from my Demonic Vision back to my mana senses over and over to make sure the Worm has really left. In the meantime, I eat some food from my item storage and try to heal up as best I can.

After that scare, and immense use of Demonic Energy, my body is very fatigued. My mind is a bit rattled as well. It may be from the accelerated forced activation of energy while running away, or it could just be the craziness of the last few days finally catching up to me.

Either way, until I don't have any other responsibilities, I won't face the unknown monsters in the Abyss again.

My entire plan to pick information from the Inner Circle and find the links to the Association, along with saving Lydia, was almost ruined completely by my blind curiosity.

"There is one last thing I need to check..."

I hop down from the dune and activate my All-Seeing Eye along with Advanced Earth Summoning.

All of the Worm's fragments are long gone and dissolved, but I'm hoping I'll be able to find something that I left behind. Even in a damaged state, it'd be nice not to waste nice things.

I sift through the sand near the Edge of the Abyss from a safe range using my elemental earth summoning skill until a glossy black glimmer catches my eye.

The dagger that managed to make a chip in the monster's tooth floats toward me from over 50 meters away as I use my telekinesis to bring it near.

After a quick examination with both my Demonic Vision and Mana Sense, I come to the interesting conclusion that it's completely undamaged...

Also, the blade leaked out all of its remaining energy stores on its own; there isn't a hint of power remaining in it. If I'm not constantly feeding it energy, the blade becomes dull.

"Good to know..."

Airstepping away from the Abyss, I place the dagger back into my Item storage while pondering its origins. The fact that the High Orc I faced in the Abyss had similar weapons and gear, but couldn't imbue energy into them, piques my curiosity.

On top of that, to stand up against a creature with A-Class strength and not chip or crack at all? It's another baffling thought. Although it didn't do much damage back to the monster either, I'm still impressed at the raw strength my new blade holds.

I fly through the air while keeping my distance from the darkness on my left side; meanwhile, a thin smile grows on my face.

At least I learned some valuable information from my experience with an overwhelmingly powerful entity. It's better to be happy I didn't get a major setback, rather learn to step with more caution in unknown environments moving forward.

The sun will set in a few hours, so I still have plenty of time to do a check-up on the village and observatory before heading back to Soloara.

Over an hour passes as I make my way back.

Once the vacant desert huts and white dome atop the cliffside come into view, I activate all my perception skills to do a full detailed sweep.

I pause my flight path in mid-air and activate stealth as 2 unfamiliar mana-based enemy readings pop up on my radar.

Chapter 299

Up in the observatory, I sense the mana readings of two humans.

Although I'm a great distance away, I still instinctually hide with stealth and drop down closer to the desert floor for cover after the events that unfolded just over an hour ago in the Abyss.

To my surprise, the two readings are both between levels 300 and 330.

My gaze tightens, and I start to drift closer again. One has a swordsmanship skill, and the other has an extreme speed buff skill of 35%. These are fairly common combat skills... but considering their levels, these two are far from amateurs.

They could be grunts for the Inner Circle, but they don't wear those fancy pins. So, possibly they're Solaran guards tasked with searching the abandoned observatory to collect equipment they missed during the evacuation. My guess is the former. Either way, this is very suspicious and worth my while to check out.

My only task for the last few days has been to keep an eye on the town and observatory; I should take it seriously now that there's actually something going on.

Lower levels below 400, like these, can't perceive me while I'm in stealth mode, no matter what; it'd just look and feel like a breeze is passing through when I approach. Especially those with zero perception skills or any signs of mana control.

I continue to drift closer, making my way past the abandoned town and higher into the sky, just to be extra cautious not to turn up any loose sand with my wind-summoning ability.

As I do, a grey pulse of energy flies out from the top of the white dome. It vibrates as it disappears into the Abyss. My eyes track it all the way into the darkness.

I've seen the white dome expel this energy a few dozen times now, but it still makes no sense to me. If I get the chance, I'll have to figure out what that beam really does too. It's not at the top of my priority list but does stick out in the back of my mind.

As I get closer to the white dome up on the hill, the size of the structure starts to become clearer. The observatory is much larger than I initially thought.

At closer inspection, it's a lot more detailed too.

Now that I'm floating up above it, I can see the back that faces the Abyss in full view. Instead of just flat white walls that curve up into a dome on all sides as it appears from the village area, there's a 7-meter wide rectangular opening in the roof.

It starts at the point where the dome begins to curve and stops close right at the top of the structure.

This makes sense. It's where all of the star-gazing gear and technology would point up to the desert sky, facing away from the town.

However, from here it seems the old telescopes and astronomy tech have been stripped out, and new silver magical poles and wires create this oddly shaped sonar device. All of the miscellaneous gear and materials dully glow and pulse with the same grey energy I witnessed earlier. The scattered wires and magical items are charging up a thick metal rod that leads to a clear orb at its top, peeking out from the opening in the roof.

The longer I watch and stare, the more the orb fills with the grey glowing energy. It gets brighter and brighter, almost turning white.

Seconds pass, and it fills to the brim before releasing another crescent of the energy substance out into the darkness. It vanishes again once entering.

I attempt to use my Appraisal skill along with my All-Seeing Eye to understand what this structure is doing, but the readings I get back only confuse me further.

Half of the text boxes show up as blank or question marks, while the other half just show dozens of mana crystals that power up the makeshift device. While attempting to decipher what all the text says, another charged-up pulse flies into the darkness like clockwork.

Meanwhile, the two figures I caught on my radar earlier start to come closer.

I'm over 20 meters in the air above the structure and in my full stealth mode, so there's no way they'd notice me. I drift down closer, landing gently on the roof of the dome of the observatory near the opening. I'm close enough to snoop through the rectangular opening but far enough away that the next pulse of energy won't hit me.

The device is buzzing and humming. It only gets louder the closer I approach, and it grows in volume even greater the closer it is to being fully charged.

One of the worker's voices sounds out through all the noise. I use my heightened senses to make out the words of a young man's voice. He can't be older than his mid-20s by the sound of it.

"Hey, it's about that time again. We have to restock the mana crystals or they'll run out soon."

Another older-sounding raspy voice replies as the device nears its limit, rattling the surrounding roof and supporting beams.

"Yeah, I know. We have to clean up the basement area beneath the shielding once the boss is done too. They're having an important meeting tomorrow morning. Another Sector leader is coming to town."

The buzzing is starting to become unbearable, but I still hear the younger man reply in a surprised yet shaky tone.

"Really? Another leader is coming to Sector 4? No wonder we have the day off tomorrow."

The older man laughs and then starts to speak, but he's cut off by the blast of the sonar beam. Another grey crescent of light shoots off into the dark, foggy Abyss below the cliff area.

It takes a few seconds for the ringing in my ears to cease, but by the time I recover, the two men are already walking away.

The younger one keeps talking in a more relaxed manner now.

"Well, the restock is done. Now we just have to sort that gear and wait for the boss to open the shielding and give the okay to do our cleanup."

The older one replies, talking about what he had for lunch before their voices start fading and the buzzing of the mechanism increases, overwhelming my senses again.

My mind is piecing together their words, but only some things are clicking.

First things first, I have verbal confirmation that we're in the right place. Talking about Sector leaders and this mysterious Boss being here, along with an important meeting scheduled for tomorrow, is a good sign.

Second of all, if my assumptions here are correct, another Inner Circle higher-up is coming to meet here. That's most likely the craftsman, but I won't know for sure until I see for myself. If this is the case, it also means that this number 1 Boss of the Sector 4 Region is not at the top of the food chain.

How interesting.

Puzzled over the new information I've gathered, I sit and wait, letting the blast of energy from the makeshift device shoot off into the Abyss over half a dozen more times.

Then, my perception senses pick up a large mana reading appearing from underground. My All-Seeing Eye perceives a massive door sliding open, shedding new light into the inner workings of the basement of this Observatory.

Just moments ago, this layer of the building was completely invisible.

I try to fathom what's going on, stretching my perception into the new area to search. It's impossible to see anything exactly, but with all the new excess mana floating in the air, I'm able to pick up on the presence of two more people.

I gulp.

Unable to read any of the status features of one of the newly found members, I can only assume they're locked in the same mana-binding cuffs I was trapped in days earlier.

The other reading drops my jaw as the blue text appears in my mind's eye.

[Lv. 651]

Active Items:

Enchanted Ring of Protection[IC] [+125% Defense]

Enchanted Ring of Protection[IC] [+125% Defense]

Enchanted Ring of Protection[IC] [+125% Defense]

Platinum Amulet of Protection[IC} [+110% Defense]

Platinum Amulet of Strength[IC] [+100% Strength]

Red Ogre's Ring of Attack [+100% Strength][+100% Speed]

Red Ogre's Gauntlet of Rage [+100% Strength][+100% Speed]

Magma Serpent's Scale [+90% Fire Magic Resistance][+40% All Magic Resistance]

Dark Goblin King's Charm [+10% Mana Control Output]

High-Grade AAA-Class Shielding Artifact [9/10][IC]

Active Skills:

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Extreme Defense [Legendary Grade]

Extreme Strength [Special Grade]

Stealth

Buff:

[Solid Steel Defense]

Only one thought comes to mind. This must be the organization's leader; Number 1. The man in charge of the Inner Circle's dealing in Sector 4.

Chapter 300

Whoever this is, they're definitely the leader.

They have the [IC] branding all over their gear, along with that shielding artifact that every one of their lackeys had on.

With Demonic Energy, I'm sure I could take him out, but not questioning him and killing the man on the spot would do more harm than good. I'd have to use mana to subdue him properly, and his level and gear's stats are much higher than mine.

The idea of breaking through the ceiling and rushing down to fight this mob boss crosses my mind, but after the mental and physical fatigue from my defeat just hours ago, it does not seem like the

best option. I may have dozens of skills at my disposal, but raw strength may win if we were to fight right now.

Plus, with the recent close call and lesson learned about fighting unknown enemies when more than just my own well-being is on the line, I decide to take this small victory of information and retreat. Before I slowly glide away from the white dome in silence, a stern man's deep voice rings out. With my enhanced senses, it's audible from two floors below.

I stop, hovering in mid-air to listen.

"Alright, you two, I'll be examining the sonar's data for the rest of the night. Clean up the cells downstairs, then give number 2 her reminder to meet here at sunrise with the captives and a written list of all the information they've gathered. After that, you're both free to do whatever you'd like tomorrow. I don't need your assistance."

There are a few replies from the grunts as I feel the presence of the strong man walking up the stairs to the main top floor.

Their voices are completely drowned out by the loud sound of the sonar device blasting off another energy wave.

I take this as my cue to see myself out, continuing my flight path upward and not looking back until the white dome is completely out of view.

There's no telling how long I could stay hidden with a monster of a man lurking below me. His mana control is most likely on par with, if not greater than, my main body. Not to mention the nearly 10x natural defense stat bonus he has with all the buffs.

If I have to get into a physical confrontation with him tomorrow, I'll need to spend tonight coming up with a plan to safely deal with the matter.

Plus, another sector leader is coming too. Preparing for the absolute worst is necessary. There are a lot of unknown factors at play here, and with the limited time allotted to me, I can't do this one all on my own.

If this craftsman requires my full attention, I may have to rely on my teammates for help.

While these thoughts race through my mind, I finally break through the cloud line above and whisper under my breath.

"Bottom line is, all of us are going to have to get a lot stronger."

I air-step all the way back to Solara, only touching down to the ground and turning off my stealth skill once I make it into the outer residential district on the northeastern edge of town. The sun is starting to set, but it's still fairly light out. There should still be over an hour left of golden rays.

Once I make it back to the familiar front porch of the two-story home, the only one waiting there is Chester. He's outside, peacefully admiring the city.

It makes sense; the others are still off training and guarding the black market's dead zone.

The old man raises his hand and waves as I approach.

"Welcome back so soon! You'll be happy to see the haul I pulled in for your loot today."

I raise an eyebrow, turning my stern expression from being deep in thought all the way here into a grin.

"Oh yeah? How much did you manage to sell?"

The grey-haired man turns and opens his front door, letting me come inside to see three brown leather sacks on the middle table of the living room.

Gold coins are flowing from their openings, and at least 10 or 15 coins are scattered across the counter.

Chester lets out a chuckle as he sees my eyes light up at the sight.

"Last I counted, there were about 263 gold coins. More than double my expectations. Most of the High D-Grade and below gear was sold off at standard quick-sell pricing to my usual contacts, but I managed to snag an over-the-market price at one of the old trading dens. A few old clients happened to be all in the same place. There was quite the bidding war for a few of the larger C-Grade weapons and enchanted battle items."

I cross my arms, and my smile only widens as he continues.

"There's apparently a Solaran government-hosted auction tonight. Many merchants and speculators are trying to get their hands on worthy items to enter and see massive gains. It's just your lucky day; I was able to get exceptionally inflated prices."

I pause, thinking to myself about the amount of money I just pulled in.

At first, I only wanted to sell it off because most of the gear was worthless to me. D and C rank items will break on impact with any of the monsters I'll fight in the future. I'd be better off using my fists.

If I can't channel mana into it or the gear gives me close to a 100% buff or greater, I hardly bat an eye.

However, now that I've come into contact with the leader of the so-called weakest Sector, my head is spinning for other options.

Fisher and Arie are ranked up, but they still will not stand a chance against that menace.

Maria's Ice magic may give them an edge if she jumped in, and Abby is the perfect support. Even so, they're all too weak to confidently put them up against a level 651 tank alone.

Their lives are on the line this time, not mine. If I want to fully prepare for what's to come, I need to come up with a way for us all to get a lot stronger overnight.

I let out a long sigh, then finally turn to Chester, asking a question.

"What's the lowest cost you can get high-grade mana potions for on short notice? Let's say I were to use that entire gold stash to purchase."

His eyes widen, but he scratches his chin and starts thinking too.

"You really know how to keep an old man busy now, don't ya?"

He stares up at the ceiling and mumbles under his breath.

"Now let's see... Down at the dispensary, the owner can turn raw mana crystals into potions. At the market price of 1 bronze per Mana Point worth of crystal, and 100 bronze equalling 1 silver..."

He pauses.

"100 silver equals 1 gold... So each gold piece here would be equivalent to around 10,000MP worth of potion."

I roll my eyes at the thought of it. 10,000 times 263 gold we have is only 2.6 million MP. This is a small fortune worth of mana, but it's nowhere close to enough to raise our mana control considerably. Tens of millions each is the only amount that would raise any of us by a measurable amount.

Chester speaks again.

"However, here on the Dark Continent, the demand for potions and high-grade crystals is far less than that of the cities you come from. Weapons are the higher-tier items that people are usually looking to buy. It's more practical to make a living with them. I'd say if we're buying any potions or crystal items, it could knock the price down by 2 to 3 times. So, 30,000MP per gold coin."

Shaking my head while realizing even at this price drop advantage, it's still less than 8 million MP, I reply.

"Still, this isn't enough..."

Silence fills the room as we think.

My recent shift in necessities is due to the fact it's the only way we could all get immeasurably stronger in the next few hours. With Abby's restore skill, and an unlimited mana supply, maybe our control levels could hit a point where handling these threats wouldn't be so stacked against us.

I speak up again, thinking of a new idea.

"You mentioned the Solaran Government is hosting an auction. What exactly is sold in a gathering like this?"