

## D. Diver 321

### Chapter 321

The dust settles, and Abby restores everyone including herself back to her best ability. It's clear there is still some leftover mental and physical fatigue; all four team members are moving slowly with sore muscles and aching bones.

Lydia, approaching, previously restored by Abby after being freed from the cuffs, has her eyes wide, and an expression of pure shock and awe is plastered across her face.

"W-What happened to all of you? This..."

Her voice trails off as she looks at the ice sculptures before her and the burned town off in the distance. Streaks of red energy cover both of them, reminiscent of the aura that was engulfing all of the fighters moments ago.

Abby replies, "It's a long story, we'll fill you in on the way back."

She turns around, making eye contact with every member of the group.

"Before we do anything else, we need to find out what happened to Jay."

Arie points a hand toward the ashes of a burned abandoned city. "I have a hunch if anywhere, that's where we'll find some clues."

Everyone shares a few thin smiles, and a few hugs with Lydia, but quickly make it to the blackened and demolished village. Everyone's excited to have successfully saved Lydia, but there's a much more important matter to focus on.

Once everyone is safe and accounted for, then the team can finally relax.

"Over here!"

Abby finds the crash site first using her earth magic. After a few minutes of searching, the hot morning sun has started melting Maria's Ice, but the light breeze is still pushing cold refreshing air over to the burn site.

Fisher and Arie walk over together while Abby continues to catch Lydia up to speed. Although the white-haired mage is saved, she looks awfully on edge, still looking over her shoulder at every crunch or crackle from the fallen burnt debris of the town left behind.

On the way to the town, a loud crash from up above on the cliffside followed by a rumbling buzzing noise for a few seconds makes everyone's head turn for a moment. However, it's just the observatory's top floor collapsing down to the first due to the severe damage done before the battle. This only makes the white-haired mage's paranoia worse.

Abby's voice rings out again as she stands over the briefcase and item drops next to the shattered uniquely black-colored armor.

"I found the soul stones... and the leftover gold... this is everything left in Jay's inventory..."

Arie comments on the odd metal scraps. "He never wore armor like that."

Lydia peers around a charred woodpile, and her eyes open wide at the sight of the gear. "That's- That's the Sector Two Leader's Armor, I'm positive."

Tons of theories are thrown out as all five of the remaining members debate what could have happened. The red aura and the contents of the briefcase are even brought up, and the pile of silver numbered pins that specifically represent ranks within the organization look just like the ones on the Sector 4 Leader they fought.

Fisher breaks the tiptoeing conversation with the truth of the matter. "Whatever way we look at this, there are two things that are clear. Jay isn't here, and neither is the Sector 2 Leader. It looks like one of them must have used a self-destruct-type move. That's the only way a battle like this could have ended."

Everyone looks around, seeing the craters and flame marks along with an unmistakable red aura staining the air.

There are a few gulps that fill the silence.

However, Maria's cheerful attitude breaks the tension. "It must have been the only way. It may not be convenient, but he said he'd find us back in Solara in just over a week if anything like this were to happen. His real body will fully recover soon. I didn't think it'd come to this, but in the end the battle has been won. We took back what was taken."

She holds onto Lydia's hand tighter, looking up to meet her eyes. The rest of the teammates jump in, talking over the matter and what to do next. In the end, there's only one option.

Arie is the one that says it to the team. "We'll have to clear this place out, then wait for Jay in Solara. We move as a team. I have a feeling this is only the beginning. There's going to be a lot more eyes on us soon. We've been outcast and sold out by the Association, they'll want to cover their tracks. Now, we've just taken out 2 of 4 Dark Continent Underground Sector leaders. These two organizations won't take it easy on us, plus I'm sure our actions have most likely affected many lines of business and trade in many areas of the world. Our actions the last few days have real consequences."

Abby interjects. "They had it coming to them, so what?!"

Arie chuckles in reply, putting his hands up in a playful manner. "Hey, I'm not saying they didn't ask for it. I'm just saying we're not just basic low-level hunters anymore. We're playing a more dangerous game with even more unknown powers. Many of which can't just be punched harder to defeat. We'll need to get stronger in more ways than one before a force like this challenges us head-on."

There's another long pause as the group reflects on the past few days.

A round of nods follows, as the seriousness of the situation stacks up more and more the longer the sun rises overhead.

The discussion fizzles out, but it's decided that the only thing to do now is clean up the area then wait out of the public eye for a week before the whole group can come up with a plan together. To Lydia; the Soulstones and mention of a skill that allows one to seemingly return from the dead after just a few days is mind-bending news, but with all that's going on Maria assures her it will make sense once fully explained.

Abby places all of the assorted gear into her item box including the Soulstones and even the broken armor of the Sector 2 Leader.

After further rummaging, she manages to find the shattered black longsword too. Once the ice melts from the Sector 4 leader, the only item still left intact and unshattered from the ice and battle is the golden "004" pin.

Arie and Fisher try clearing up the Red Aura that still fills the air, but despite their trial and error, nothing seems to work.

During all of this, the remains of the observatory up on the cliff start to hum, and a white and grey glow comes from all the fallen debris from the previous collapse.

Another loud bang echoes down into the valley as the white and grey energy expands, destroying the entire building along with a portion of the cliff.

The team still exploring the burning town are a safe distance away, but the immense power of the blast still turns heads again.

Maria chuckles. "It was probably that equipment Jay was talking about on the top floor, it must have been damaged in our battle."

Fragments of metal, rock, and debris roll down the cliff in unrecognizable shapes. Some burning with orange flames while others are covered in the greyish glow moments before it dissolves into the atmosphere.

Fisher sighs. "Dang, I wanted to see if there was any good leftover gear in there too. I guess we still could find some... but I doubt it's in good condition anymore."

More time passes, and the area is stripped clean of any valuables or identifying items. The only thing that can be known from the sight here is that a battle definitely took place, and one or more users wielded some odd crimson energy.

Arie's guesses it will all be covered by the Abyss in the next surge anyway. So, it isn't optimal to leave the place like this, but it isn't the worst situation that could have occurred. There isn't anything more to do.

The group of five makes their way back to Solara and finds Chester nervously waiting for them to return.

Everyone is mentally and physically drained, so there's a happy greet and quick run through of events that took place with the old man, but everyone eats and falls asleep within the hour of stepping in the door. It's only been a few hours since they left, but it feels as if the many days of fighting have finally come to an end.

—

\*Knock\* \*Knock\* \*Knock\*

There's a light knocking on the door that evening, but the team of five are still sprawled out and sleeping in the living room.

Chester hurriedly nudges Arie awake.

He wasn't expecting any visitors, and Arie is the only one here who looks like a Solara native while being much stronger than Chester if there's any issue. If it's a government official or just an old business friend, Arie would be the least suspicious out of anyone to answer.

He whispers in a low tone as the archer wakes up. "There's someone at the door, and I'm not sure if I should open it. I can't see who it is."

Immediately, Arie peers out one of the windows to see the setting sun. He uses his mana control to feel around the house and whispers under his breath. "There is definitely someone there, but the feeling of this reading is odd. The person is strong, very strong. However, It's impossible to tell how strong they really are..."

He wakes everyone else up to be on guard before approaching the door.

Ready to summon an arrow and even activate all of his buffs again, the archer slowly opens the door.

"Who is it, what do you want?"

A confident voice responds. It's paired with a bright white smile and sharp blue eyes.

"My name is Lith Galeheart, I'd like to come in and have a chat."

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[Level Up] x48

[Addition New Stat Points] +377 Mental Strength

[New Skill] Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]

[Red Hydra's Aura Detected: Bond Success]

[Accelerated Hibernation: 56%]

[Accelerated Hibernation: 89%]

[Accelerated Hibernation: Success]

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I open my eyes to see over half a dozen blue notifications covering my vision.

The sun is bright, making me squint my eyes as a cool breeze passes through my hair. I'm lying flat on my back, but when I try to sit up a dizzy, lightheaded feeling takes over before I rest my head back down onto a glossy cool surface.

White clouds pass by on my sides, and the sound of two massive wings flapping are the only things that my senses pick up.

In my mind, it feels like only a moment ago I defeated the Sector 2 leader, but to my body, it feels as if I haven't taken in sufficient nutrients or even moved a muscle in weeks. My bones ache, my mouth is dry, and my head is pounding.

I need to get back to my teammates. I'm sure I defeated the immediate threat, but it's unclear how much time has passed and what happened afterward.

Still, I can't let these notifications pass me by without taking a look... I finally got a crafting skill, on top of that it's a very high grade. Even in a dazed state, I know a Mythic Grade skill is something I've only seen on one other status before; Ember's.

At the thought, another realization hits me like a brick wall as I open up my telepathy skill.

"Ember! I'm awake. The Hibernation process is over!"

There's an instant response, and the slow rhythmic flapping of the wings on both sides of me starts to speed up.

"You're finally awake, Master. This is great to hear. It seems we've leveled up quite a bit too. You've been busy in that second body."

There's a small pause, then I respond.

"How long was I out for? I got a notification the process ended early, but I'm not sure how early."

At this, the throbbing sound of my own heartbeat in my temples only gets worse. I reach into my item storage and pull out leftover water and food from our travels through the desert. As I eat and drink while using self-regeneration, all of the aches and pains go away, but I'm still a bit disoriented. Ember responds.

"I'm unsure too. At least a week, two at most. Up in the skies, with only an unmoving artificial dungeon sun, it's difficult to tell the exact time."

"Understood."

I take another minute to gather my thoughts.

It may have been weeks to Ember since I last left him to calmly roam the skies in this dungeon, but it's only been mere minutes in my perception since I just finished up one of the most intense battles of my life.

"Let's head to the dungeon exit, slowly. I need some time to think."

He turns his body, gliding down. The wind in my face slightly picks up, but it feels good.

The calm and nonchalant attitude of Ember is always nice, but sometimes he could be perceived as a bit too calm or uninvested in situations. However, I like it this way. As long as I'm alive and we're getting stronger he's happy to not ask questions. The simplicity of our relationship is comforting.

[Status Open]

[Lv. 562]

My eyes immediately drift down from my updated level to my new skill. I activate my All-Seeing Eye for more information.

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## Craftsmanship

Info: Craftsmanship allows the caster to mend, adjust and create magic items. The quality of these crafted items is based on their level, mana control, and the materials used in the crafting process.

Before crafting each item, the caster must choose a tier.

The first tier of Craftsmanship [No Grade] allows the crafter to mend, adjust, and create magic items with additional stat points in one category.

The second tier of Craftsmanship [Special Grade] allows the crafter to mend, adjust, and create magic items with additional stat points in two categories. It also grants the caster to convert these two stat point categories into percentage-based buffs.

The third tier of Craftsmanship [Legendary Grade] allows the crafter to mend, adjust, and create magic items with additional stat points in three categories. It also grants the caster to convert these three stat point categories into percentage-based buffs. The caster is capable of bonding element stones to items making unique growth-type weapons to be solely paired with a user.

The fourth tier of Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade] allows the crafter to mend, adjust, and create magic items with additional stat points in ALL categories. It also grants the caster to convert these stat point categories into percentage-based buffs. The caster is capable of bonding element stones to items making unique growth-type weapons to be solely paired with a user. In addition to outside materials, the caster is able to imbue copies of any skills or properties they own or make contact with.

Unique items, bonds, and materials used will vary the outcome of every crafting process.

Grade: Mythic

[Upgrade]

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My eyes move back and forth over these words for a full minute, thinking of all the possibilities there are with this skill.

The Sector 2 leader's armor must have been a product of a Mythic Grade Craft. Something that scrambles my perception skills while eating up all mana-based attacks with ease, as well as taking on Demonic Energy without much issue either.

Just as we break through the cloudline for the trees and mountains of wolf dungeon below to come into view, my eyes catch hold of another exciting number on my status.

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Proficiency Points(PP): 262

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"First I get a Mythic grade skill, now I even have enough points to upgrade the skill I've been saving up for this whole time. I've waited a long time for this moment."

A grin comes across my face, and my eyes practically glimmer as I scroll down and immediately use 250 points to click [Upgrade] on my very first skill.

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Absorption

Info: This is a unique skill. Upon dealing the final killing blow to any creature, the caster has the capability to absorb its skills. Absorbed skills will be adapted to fit the caster's biology.

A [Special Grade] hidden ability: After defeating opponents of considerable strength, there is a chance the caster will be able to absorb 5% of their opponent's highest stat points. This will

permanently increase the caster's status. For every 5 levels that the opponent surpasses the caster's own, the probability of triggering this passive ability increases by 1%.

Skills acquired using absorption will now increase in grade class up to [Legendary Grade] upon casting. Old skills already obtained by the caster can now be upgraded to [Legendary Grade] after defeating an opponent with the same skill.

After an opponent is defeated, their Mana Control Proficiency(MCP) may be absorbed. For all opponents below 80% of the caster's level, 0.1% of MCP will be absorbed. For all opponents between 80% of the caster's level and the caster's level, 0.25% of MCP will be absorbed. For all opponents between the caster's level and 120% of the caster's level, 0.5% of MCP will be absorbed. For all opponents above 120% of the caster's level, 1% of MCP will be absorbed.

There is a 5% chance that any opponent above the caster's current level will allow 1 Proficiency Point(PP) to be absorbed.

Grade: Legendary

[Upgrade]

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The smile on my face grows and grows as Ember touches down to the dungeon ground. The new upgrades only made possible from my last battle make the opportunity ahead feel endless.

So, to make things simple... 120% of my current level just means adding 20%. If I were at level 500 and fought a level 600 or higher monster, I'd absorb 1% of their total mana control upon defeating them.

In addition to this, I finally have a way to upgrade my skills faster. I won't have to only rely on 1 PP per level up, I can farm them from monsters that are at my current level or above.

On top of all of this, I don't have to be cautious about absorbing [No Grade] skills anymore. With this new perk, I'm able to upgrade skills up to [Legendary Grade] as long as I absorb them from a newly defeated monster.

I sense the exit portal nearby, and want to check out one more thing before we leave.

Instead of just 1 from ranking up, there are now two permanent buffs in my status. One is the Emperor's Domain, and the other is the Red Hydra's Rage.

I haven't yet used my Emperor's Domain because my body double wasn't ranked up when I previously attempted to use it.

This is the ability that allows me to share my own skills with party members who are loyal to me within a given range.

The skill is a passive one, that I don't even notice is on unless I concentrate. Previously it pushed out about 10 meters on all sides, now after the whole ordeal I just went through it just barely touches 13.

"This one will take quite a while to upgrade."

There's no way to level up its effectiveness at the moment other than getting stronger. Although 13 meters of range is a neat trick, it won't be very useful in battle just yet. I still have to run a few tests with my team once I get back to Solara.

We make our way through a few patches of trees and finally make it to the blue swirling dungeon exit portal. I open up my item storage for Ember to get inside, but he hesitates and speaks through our link.

"It seems you've made another soul bond, haven't you?"

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With my white Spatial magic portal slowly spinning next to the light blue humming exit portal of the dungeon, I answer Ember's question.

"I... guess I have."

Thinking about it further, the process wasn't the same, and the rewards were different too; but this soul bond does feel very similar to the one Ember and I made back when he first hatched from his egg.

I continue again. "Is there any problem with being soul bonded to more than one entity? It's not like I can talk to the monster physically, we bonded through a soul stone."

A grin forms across Ember's face. "Oh, you bonded through a stone... That makes much more sense, the aura I felt link with your main body was a familiar one, who was it?"

The Black Scaled dragon looks up into the sky, trying to remember something, but I reply before he can come to the conclusion on his own. "It was a Red Hydra, I only bonded with 1 of the 7 stones."

A loud laugh erupts from Ember through our link. I've never heard him speak so loudly or show this much emotion about anything. It was not the expected reaction, the surprised and confused look on my face shows this clearly.

After a moment, Ember responds between chuckles. "That old beast really went and got himself killed, didn't he. Well, I have to say, he was one of the strongest back in my era. What ability does the bond grant? I'm curious, It has to be a good one."

Again, this isn't the reaction I was expecting either. "It's a stat-boosting ability. While active, all of my movements and mana-based attacks are aided by a red aura. It's called the Red Hydra's Rage... but what do you mean by the beast was killed? Back in your era? Could you explain what exactly this soul bond is."

Ember's laughs finally cease, but a toothy grin is still present as he goes into detail. "There are two types of soul bonds that can be made with certain monsters that have made it to level 1000 or higher once in their lives. Once a creature reaches this stage, another rank-up process happens and often strong monsters become Immortal Labyrinth Guardians on the 40th, 60th, or final floor. Even after death, most are reborn or reincarnated once their energy is completely gone."

I nod, piecing together his words. "So, just like you? You were reborn as a level 1, still holding all your memories... Does that mean there are tons of immortal monsters roaming the Labyrinths?!"



"No, no... Only a select few are chosen by the King after the second rank-up process. New members are only chosen after incredible feats. Last time I was alive there were only 9 of us, I doubt many changes have been made in just 50 years."

I interject. "So... I'm bonded with you and now the Red Hydra. What's the difference between a living bond and a dead one."

"There are many differences between every bond, living or dead. Some grant buffs, some give instant level experience, some share attributes. It's impossible to predict, as every Immortal has slightly different powers and knowledge after each rebirth. The fact that the Hydra was split into 7 parts is definitely a unique trait, he was strong enough to do so. Therefore I'd assume there's even more to the ability once all of the stones are bonded. The only difference between a living bond and a dead bond is that the creature being bonded cannot be reborn until their soul energy is fully dispersed and free."

Ember laughs again, continuing. "So that means I can keep that old beast dead for as long as I'm alive."

I assume there's a rivalry between these two, but it's not one I care to pry about now. Ember seems to be having fun boasting about it to himself.

I speak up again, pointing toward the portal and my spatial magic. "This all makes sense, but we have a much more time-sensitive matter on our hands. Let's at least get in the sky before continuing this talk."

Ember lets out a final chuckle before jumping into my item storage.

I step out of the dungeon, making my way through the cave system beneath the desert from the start of our mission in the Dark Continent. It would have been much easier to Dungeon Walk into one of the dungeons in Solara, but for some reason the one we used earlier is not showing up in my mind's eye.

The only logical explanation I have is that my body doubles are able to teleport to points where my main body has been, but my main body is not capable of teleporting to a point where a deceased double has marked.

Whatever the case may be, I make it out of the cave system unnoticed and let Ember out free for us to soar high up in the sky.

For the first time ever, I use my [Rising Emperor's Domain] hidden ability buff on Ember once we get high enough in the air.

A blue text box fills my vision.

[Use Rising Emperor's Domain]

Range: 13.2 Meters

Skill: [Stealth]

[YES][NO]

I click yes, and Ember is able to conceal his entire body, making him invisible while soaring through the blue sky above the desert. I'm surprised at how seamlessly it works. Now every time I look in Ember's status [Stealth] shows up like it was always there.

In his newly ranked-up form, our flight speed is even faster. We should make it to the city in no time, a few hours at most. Much quicker than our flight from here to the Labyrinth break previously.

This reminds me of one last question I had. "Hey Ember, is it possible to wield Demonic Energy and Mana at the same time?"

The memory of switching back and forth between states followed by the violent sparks fills my mind. This reaction has happened two times now, as well as with every enemy I defeat through the ability.

Demonic energy is incredibly powerful, but dangerous and volatile at the same time. It's one of my much-needed trump cards against opponents stronger than myself, but I can't keep putting my body and life at risk just for 1 simple attack.

Ember responds. "Of course, now that you have a body double ability to test it out with, I'd be glad to train you once you're ready. It won't be easy..."

Ember starts to fill me in on the details, but says it's better for us to go in-depth once we're in a secluded dungeon and able to train. There are so many new abilities for me to try out soon, I'm excited to test them all.

Time passes in the air, and the beginning of another sunset can be seen as the City of Solara finally comes into view. We made it here just before dusk.

We touch down just outside Chester's home, and the eerie silence that fills the air along with a lack of people on my enemy detection radar inside the home are not the signs I was hoping for. Ember gets into my spatial magic portal before we get too close.

Even with a ton of questions spinning through my mind, the presence of a familiar briefcase with a slowly leaking containment field can be sensed inside.

It's not in my item storage, so my only guess is that it fell from my body double with all the other real physical gear upon my death.

This means someone must have brought it back...

I knock on the front door a few times, then decide to turn the handle once there's no response.

\*Click\*

It's already unlocked...

The house is in much different condition than when I was here last. Most of the magic items, paintings, and valuables are all stripped from the walls.

The curtains are closed, and the smell of Chester's cooking no longer fills the air.

All I see in front of me is a long wooden table with a paper note and pen.

It's in Maria's handwriting, so I begin reading.

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Dear Jay,

We're all safe, and we saved Lydia. If you're reading this, come meet us in Valor City.

There's a lot we didn't know about the-

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Before I can finish reading, a slight whistling sound becomes louder and louder in my right ear. Out of instinct, I put up a pink mana barrier. The clang of a thin silver needle shattering into tiny pieces can be heard as an attack is blocked right before it hits my neck.

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The sound of shattering metal fills the room, and my gaze turns to watch the figure of a man dressed in all black disappear from my sight and out of the open door behind me.

"Not so fast..."

I activate my All-Seeing Eye along with all of my stat-boosting skills to feel a surge of power greater than anything I've felt before in my base form. It's not that my mana control is stronger, it's my base stats. The recent level-ups as well as the Arch Demon's core have definitely made a noticeable difference in my awareness and capabilities.

I was just careless walking in here... After seeing the note, now I'm on high alert.

The outline of three figures comes into my mind's eye, and I pull out my wind dagger to fight. Using my Flame-imbued sword would be a bit overkill for the levels I sense.

[Lv. 491]

[Lv. 477]

[Lv. 474]

They move quickly and all have a stealth skill activated. The one that threw the needle attack at me and ran outside is the level 477; they're circling the house with one other teammate. The highest level, 491, is upstairs, standing still.

I grit my teeth and activate my own stealth skill before running up to face the intruder.

He's crouching above the top of the staircase, unable to read or see my fast movements.

This team is skilled, an elite-level force in many people's eyes, but unfortunately, they're outclassed by my raw power.

I release a low-powered wind slash against the unsuspecting man's chest, throwing him backward over 5 meters to hit against a wall with a horrible wound across his body before deactivating my veil of invisibility.

"Who are you three? What do you want from me? Speak now if you-"

I stop mid-sentence with my dagger pointed forward, as I watch the man in front of me bite down on something hard in the back of his mouth. Before I can even ask another question, he's foaming at the lips and limp on the floor.

"Not one to talk, I guess..."

Reactivating my stealth skill, I run downstairs to face the two others circling the house. If their partner was defeated, they may set up a trap to take out the entire house with me in it. I don't know who these people are, but I need to take them out and get some answers.

The front door swings open as I zip out and catch one of them mid-stride with the same low-powered wind attack. His stealth skill deactivates and blood splatters in the sandy street as the man dressed head to toe in jet-black gear and armor tumbles across the road.

I air-step over to him in the blink of an eye and begin asking the same questions, but he's dead with the same white foam leaking from his mouth before I can even see his face.

"Fine. If you won't talk, I might as well get something out of all this."

The last concealed assassin is on the other side of the home I just left, but with the level and mana control difference, it looks as if he's standing out in plain sight.

I don't bother revealing myself or asking any questions this time around; I just release a full-powered slash.

The enemy is cut in two before he realizes what hit him.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Stealth

Upgrade Perk: Legendary Grade

[YES] [NO]

I choose yes without hesitating. I didn't think I'd be using my Absorption's Legendary perk so soon, but this is a valuable skill to use it on.

A slight breeze rolls through the streets, and the sun glistens off the towers in the distance of the city as I let out a long sigh and power down my stat-boosting skills. I walk over to each of the fallen bodies and use the black flames of my advanced fire magic to incinerate them on the spot.

This may be a less busy part of town, but leaving as little evidence as possible is never a bad idea.

I walk back inside and read the rest of the note.

---

Dear Jay,

We're all safe, and we saved Lydia. If you're reading this, come meet us in Valor City.

There's a lot we didn't know about the Dark Continent.

Our recent meddling has affected the power balance much more than we ever expected, and we have teamed up with The Galeheart Mercenary Guild to set things right.

Once you return, meet us in Sector 1.

It's time to become much stronger, in more ways than one.

~Team Red Hydra.

---

I chuckle at the last line, thinking it's a fitting name. The Red Hydra's aura is a power we all share.

However, I am very hesitant to believe this at first sight. Even if it is in Maria's handwriting, why are they working with Lith? How did he even find them?

"How much time has passed...?"

I turn my head to the briefcase underneath a small table in the back corner of the room, then open it up on the table as well. Inside, there's just one crimson stone remaining. With it, is that same silver card with the Valor City Mercenary Guild address on it.

I nod, thinking to myself deeply while closing the briefcase shut again.

None of this makes any sense. The men outside that attacked me were too low level to be sent from the mercenary guild. If this is all a trap set by them after capturing my teammates, they would have sent a much stronger team to subjugate me too.

After placing the note and briefcase into my inventory, I clean up the final assassin's body and head into town.

Trap or not, I need to find out more information about Valor City and this mercenary guild; it's my only lead.

The golden sun falls lower, closer to the horizon as I walk into town. Palm trees and shops start to line the streets and the smell of food and drinks fill the air as the nightlife crowd rolls in.

While making my stroll, my perception skills are constantly on full blast. Another sneak attack won't catch me off guard again.

I could sit down at a nice restaurant for a good meal, but there's a much better place to find out information than this. An old-fashioned dungeon bar.

It takes quite a while to find through all the higher class, more modern places for common city folk and businessmen in Solara, but after walking for a while, I find one that suits my taste just right.

Before walking inside, I change my facial features with the conceal skill. Though, I doubt it'd matter much because I still wear the red hood of my cloak.

Upon entering, the sound of laughter and glasses clinking is all I hear. Levels 10-350 all line the wooden tables and share stories from the dungeons while getting ready for a long night of drinks and celebration.

There are quests pinned to a wall behind the bar, and a middle-aged, muscular, and tall bartender who looks to be a retired hunter himself at far past level 300.

I sift through my item storage beneath my cloak before sitting up at the bar, putting a silver coin on the counter.

"Your special, food and a drink, whatever you've got. Keep the whole silver on my tab."

He takes the coin and nods.

"Very well, coming right up."

I sit down and let out a sigh to let my gaze wander around the room, then back behind the bar to the quests. They range from just a few bronze to up to a few gold, mostly looking for mana crystals and specific item drops. Some of them are even bounties for criminals and wanted individuals.

My eyes widen in shock as I gaze at the wall a bit closer. Each of my teammates' faces are displayed on posters with red X's marked over them. The word "Collected" is written in the same red colored ink underneath each one.

A million thoughts start racing through my mind, then my eyes come across the final poster with the same red marks across it.

The face on this collected bounty is my own.

Chapter 325

Although a ton of possible negative possibilities cross my mind at first, the fact that my own poster with the bounty marked out as collected still stands on the wall makes me question the validity of the posters.

I doubt they'd put up a false collection notice; it wouldn't make any sense.

The odd string of logic that crosses my mind is that someone tricked the Solaran government or paid them off to get rid of our bounties. If my group is off the map, there would be a lot fewer prying eyes.

While deep in thought, the bartender comes back with a steaming plate of food and a tall cold drink. He smiles while placing down the order and speaks up as I'm eyeballing the posters on the back wall.

"Looking to accept some quests? Or just reading for the fun of it?"

He chuckles while giving me a nod, then showing off a charismatic smile.

I reply.

"No, no. Probably not. Though I do have a question, when were these bounties all collected? Do you remember?"

He stares at me with a curious gaze.

"Just 4 days ago. Can you believe it? A full Elite squad of 6 taken down by a single bounty hunter. He caught them in their sleep of all places. Makes the Association look pretty bad, doesn't it?"

His voice carries a mocking tone, but I only smirk back to play along.

If what he said is the story the city is going with, that only confirms my theory further; this is definitely a cover-up. My assumptions are leading me to believe the Galeheart Mercenary Guild owner has a lot to do with all of this. It also gives me a pretty clear idea of how fast my Hibernation time was sped up. Still, I need to get more answers.

I laugh with him and start to dig into my meal before taking the conversation any further.

"Say, what's the fastest way to get to Sector 1 from here? I need to meet a friend."

The bartender continues pouring a few drinks for another customer at the other end of the bar but turns to reply.

"Sector 1? You'll have to take the train outside the walls, it'll cost you a few silver at most. Ever since the surges started, the central terminal has been abandoned."

He grins and looks up at the ceiling, thinking of something. Then, turns back to me and continues.

"Where to in Sector 1? I've only been a few times in my younger years, but I've heard it's nearly 10 times the land mass as our 4th Sector here."

I remember back to the first time we entered the Dark Continent. The train we rode on to get here didn't seem to be at its last stop. It would make sense for it to continue running around the entire continent.

That's one possible option, but there must be more.

"There's a faster, more direct way to get there, right?"

He takes two tall glasses of brightly colored mixed drinks to a couple at the other end of the bar, then comes back to answer.

"Sure, if you don't want to spend a few days or even a week of travel time, I'm sure you could pay the Solaran government office a visit. They have some transport crystals available for sale, but they're far too pricey for the normal citizen to buy."

I raise an eyebrow.

"How much?"

He shrugs while taking another person's order.

"Depends on the season, and how high in demand they are. Usually no less than 10 gold for a one-way trip, but considering all the tension lately, I wouldn't be surprised if that price tripled, or possibly more."

I wince at the prices, considering I just spent a small fortune at the auction. It was well worth it, but burned all of my cash in one purchase. Right now, I don't have more than a dozen gold left over on me. It's more than enough to live off for a long time, but I'm sure a day or two of farming could net me enough to build up my stash again, plus have enough to buy a transport crystal to Solara.

"On second thought, I will take on a few of those quests."

He smirks, pointing at some of the newer-looking posters.

"I knew you'd come around to it. It's that look in your eyes. A man can't hide his ambitions from another man's gaze. What level are you at? I'll pick out the best ones for you."

I pause but take a sip of my drink to think in the brief moment of silence. Even without the transport crystal in mind building up my gold storages would be a smart thing to do. It never hurts to have more cash on hand.

"Whatever your top quests are, I'd like to buy that transport crystal soon. So, the highest gold in the shortest time. The difficulty doesn't matter."

The bartender soon turns around with a pile of papers, all with recommended level ratings on them, outlining the monsters that drop each item, their apparent drop rate, and finally, the total payout on each of them.

He speaks up again as I continue sifting through the papers.

"Here's a copy of all the quests recommended for level 200 and above; they'll get you the cash you're looking for in no time. Back in my prime, I remember profiting a few gold every month off quests like these. Once you've collected the recommended materials, you can bring them back here to the bar. It's much less crowded in the morning hours, so I recommend coming then."

He points to the far side of the long room. There's another counter, flooded with even more papers and quests.

"Either me or one of the newer recruits will be on duty. Most of the mana crystal quests and higher-ranking monster drops are backed by the city, so bring as much loot in as you'd like. As long as it meets the quest requirements, we can pay in full."

I look up from the papers, giving him a nod.

"Alright, if you say so. Don't say I didn't warn you when I clear you guys out of gold."

He cracks a smile, and we both laugh at my remark while I finish my food. The bartender thinks I'm just joking around, but I'm speaking the truth.

After finishing my meal and allowing my poison resistance perk of my self-regeneration skill to negate the effects of my drink, I make my way back to the dungeon hub with a few things on my mind.

I'm hoping to multitask while I farm materials. By multitask, I mean I'd like to get some extra training in while collecting the loot dropped from these low-level mobs.

What better way to do so than allow Ember to teach me how to wield Demonic Energy.

To make sure there's a source to replenish my stores, I wait outside the outer ring of the dungeon hub square intermittently turning my Demonic Energy Manipulation skill on and off to wait for a unit or two to show up.

The moment one finally does, I pinpoint the dungeon where it leaks from, and check it out.

There's at least 1 or more quests for every high-level dungeon here, so I'm in luck. It happens to be one of the level 250-300 dungeons.

The guard gives me a peculiar warning after I show him my concealed and edited status.

"Careful not to go too far northwest from the entrance, there have been some unusual disappearances from squads in that direction."

I reply but don't bat an eye.

"Understood."

Then, walk down the shielded steps and enter the dungeon.

It's very familiar to one of my old training grounds back in Vice City, a Minotaur dungeon.

There's multiple quests requesting minotaur horns from the mutants in this dungeon. Apparently, only 1 of 20 mobs are mutants, and just 1 of 10 drop a horn after defeat on average. That means only 0.5% of monsters I encounter will drop what I'm looking for. This is a low drop rate, but for the multiple gold being offered for just 1-3 horns per quest posting, it's one of the most alluring offers to take.

With flat ground and minimal patches of trees, I do a scan of enemy detection and inspect to make sure no other hunters are present before opening my spatial magic to let Ember come out.

Once he does, we fly deep into the dungeon, directly in the direction the guard warned us about. It's where the Demonic Energy is pulsing the strongest.



Although there isn't nearly as much as the Abyss, it will be just enough to train with.

Chapter 326

We make it to a clearing in the dungeon where the grass covered, rocky ground flattens out, and a small source of Demonic Energy can be sensed nearby.

It's releasing 1 or 2 units every few minutes, and the raw energy is floating high into the dungeon's sky. Some are dissolving into the open air, and other portions are floating toward the exit portal.

Still, over a kilometer away from the source, I'm confident the natural output will be enough to begin my training.

I look toward Ember and whisper under my breath.

"Body Double."

A second copy is created to look exactly like myself. The only difference is, one is slightly weaker and if killed won't affect my main body at all. Last time I did this, my main body was unconscious moments later. This time around, it does feel a bit odd looking myself in the eyes.

To make things even weirder, I can't simultaneously see what my double sees...

The copy of myself in front of me opens his status, opens his eyes wide, and looks up to me to speak with my own voice.

"It looks like the body double has a different ranked-up perk. I'm going to test it out."

Before I reply, the doubled version of myself air-steps away nearly 100 meters before glowing in a bright white light.

The double's movement speed increases drastically for a matter of seconds, then a flash of mana and a loud twang erupts from where they once were, blowing an enormous hole in the side of a nearby rocky hill.

A blue text notification pops up in my vision.

[You Have Died]

A flood of memories from the last 30 seconds fills my mind, as I feel as if I myself lived them.

The vision of opening my status, and seeing a brand new ranked perk on the double's status screen labeled [Instant Finale].

The sensation of every ounce of mana being used up in a matter of seconds, propelling the double's movement speed faster and faster until it explodes in a devastating self-destruct attack, is fascinating and unexpected...

This adds an interesting move to my arsenal but also confirms my theory that rank-up rewards are very dependent on the user's current circumstances and state of mind. The fact that my double's rank-up process occurred during a similar attack can't be a mere coincidence.

On another note, the notification will allow me to be notified and send another body double every time my current double fails in its process. At the same time, every failed attempt will fill my mind with the exact memories of what happened just like I was there doing it myself.

I smirk and look up to Ember.

"Perfect, are you ready to train?"

"Of course."

I create another double, then leave the Midnight Dagger behind before air-stepping off into the dungeon to start my Minotaur farming.

There were a few possible monster targets I saw on the way here, and luckily flying on Ember's back I've already set Dungeon Walker points all over.

I teleport to my first target and cut them down in a single slash.

A blue text box appears in front of my vision.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,281

[YES][NO]

I grin, accepting the 0.01% mana control from defeating a mob below 80% of my level, and carry on. If it weren't for my new legendary perk that absorbs small amounts of all opponents' mana control, I wouldn't bother fighting anything in here that isn't a mutant.

However, if I'll have to sift through hundreds of monsters, possibly thousands to farm what I'm looking for, there's no reason not to kill and absorb everything in sight. It will be great practice for farming higher-tier mobs later.

I look down at nearly a dozen Minotaur-related quests, asking between 1-3 horns each, and get to work.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,984

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 8,006

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,490

[YES][NO]

---

Meanwhile, back with Ember, another stream of consciousness is beginning training.

"I've only met a few Arch Demons that could wield Demonic Energy flawlessly through their cores while producing Mana-based attacks simultaneously. It's possible at your level, but will be difficult. So don't expect things to work out on the first try... or even the 10th try... or even 100th. This may be a long process. First things first, I'd like to witness the proficiency of your attack."

I sit down and take in a few units of energy from the air before showing off a few of my attacks.

The first few are just basic control from my fingertips, like I used to free myself from the underground prison, and the second style is imbuing the black dagger as well as powering up my movements and steps to access more speed while running and lunging to practice moves.

Afterward, I recall the events of each and every time I've used Demonic Energy. From training in the Abyss to defeating the Sector leader, I account for everything, not leaving a single detail out.

Ember gives a nod of approval.

"Very good. You've mastered the basic Demonic Energy techniques on your own in a short amount of time. Even with a manipulation skill, your speed and precision are impressive for a mana-born user."

I raise an eyebrow at the use of that term again.

"A mana-born user? I've heard someone say this before. What's it even mean? Are all monsters not born from mana? Are the monsters in the Abyss really that different?"

Ember replies.

"Yes, there's a very big difference. Those born from mana can only wield mana until they're proficient enough to feel and wield the energy around them with pristine focus down to the individual particles. Most mana-born users hit this breakthrough point somewhere around level 350 to 550. Once someone can wield mana, technically they're able to wield Demonic Energy too if they can perceive it. The same goes for Demonic Monsters and beings born from that realm. Not until they're proficient enough in their own domain are they possibly able to wield more than one energy source."

I nod, tightening my lips.

"Okay, so then once someone like me hits this threshold, how can they possibly learn to wield both at once? Every time I try, well- you've seen what happens."

Ember nods slowly, but I continue to speak.

"Demonic Energy is a great weapon against mana-based opponents, but my speed and power are very lacking when I can't use my mana-based buffs and gear. I'm sure mana would also be an excellent attack against Demonic Monsters too, but when wielding mana I can't even perceive Demonic Beasts."

Ember finally replies.

"Yes, this is a common problem in the beginner stages. One of the reasons Demons are chosen to protect Labyrinths is that they're the most likely creature to wield both mana and Demonic energy with the help of their cores. Other high-tier beasts are capable of manipulating Demonic Energy, but even one slip-up while practicing and the one wielding is dead. So, it's very rare to see anything other than a Demon wield both at once."

The black-scaled dragon closes his eyes and glows red. His entire body shimmers in a crimson aura, then he raises a single clawed hand.

The aura around it completely changes, shifting to a dark red, then finally jet black.

I activate my Demonic Energy skill to witness many units from the source fly toward us and they all begin swirling right above the claws of the dragon.

He turns his head, letting out a pillar of flames on a nearby tree, then shooting a black ball of energy in the same direction.

They collide and both erupt into an incredible display of sparks and flames, decimating the tree, not leaving a single flame or piece of wood remaining.

My eyes stay open wide and I look back and forth at the scene I just witnessed.

Ember powers down his skills.

"By the time we finish training, I believe you'll be able to do something just like this."

Chapter 327

"As you know, there's a large difference between raw Demonic Energy and refined Demonic Energy. Raw Demonic Energy is similar to the ambient mana around us in the air. It has the potential to be used as an attack but won't react or be easily manipulated unless compacted and filtered by the caster."

I nod slowly as Ember continues to talk.

"There are two ways of doing this. Two that you're already capable of, but only one that you use. The first is filtering energy through a Demon's core, and the second is naturally refining energy in your body. Demonic monsters refine energy since the day they're spawned. This is why you most likely sense their raw energy from a distance. Unless this energy is refined, it's as harmless as being struck by a gust of wind filled with thick mana. The air may feel heavy, but no harm is done."

I finally reply.

"Understood, now how exactly is this related to the training?"

Ember starts to glow red again, raising one talon-covered claw in the air, shifting it to jet black in an instant.

"I'm telling you this because for some beasts it may be instinctual, but you will have to learn the process of splitting your energy focus manually. Considering the events where you switched your control back and forth to defeat a sector leader, you're on the right track."

I raise an eyebrow.

"It can't just be as simple as swapping back and forth faster than the eye can see... that would be pointless, and dangerous to try with my main body."

Ember chuckles, releasing another plume of flames from his mouth and throwing the ball of darkness with it to display another explosion of sparks. Following this, he sends out another plume of flames and ball of darkness seconds later. Then, once the second barrage hits, he sends another. Then, another.

He sends balls of darkness and pillars of flames back and forth at the same charred tree until it's completely gone, and he's made his point.

"No, of course, it's not that simple, but it's a good start. The act of switching back and forth needs to be second nature, closer to instinctual muscle memory before we can begin to concentrate on wielding it on a concentrated specific body part."

I scrunch my eyebrows, beginning to grasp the odd training method. Ember's words make sense; every time I swap back and forth I do have to adjust my body and mind each time. It's far from being ingrained as muscle memory.

"Got it. Let's begin."

Ember points to a fresh tree nearby.

"To start off we'll just be using energy, no swords or special moves. Demonic Energy from your left hand and pure mana from your right. I want to see 30 attacks from each hand in under a minute, similar to the attack i just performed. You have 3 hours to complete this portion of training. There's no secret tricks, or specific techniques to use. You just have to practice and get used to it before we get to the hard part."

I nod and begin taking in the Demonic Energy from the source to build up enough for this first trial.

---

Meanwhile...

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,014

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,756

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 11,685

[YES][NO]

It only took me just over 15 minutes to find a mutant that drops a horn.

"One down, a few dozen to go..."

In total, the available quests for Minotaur horns are asking for about 25 horns. Outside, the sun is setting, and there aren't any other hunters in this dungeon with me. If I hand everything in tomorrow morning, all of the quests are as good as mine.

While I'm at it, 25 Minotaur horns mean I'll be farming thousands of mobs. I'm absorbing minimal MP from the crystals I gather from drops, and the more I teleport around and air-step to new monsters, the more vast my dungeon walker range becomes.

I collect these crystals in my item storage too. The time lag between the mobs dissolving and the actual kill is a bit of a time suck, but I go around and collect all of the drops after defeating every few dozen mobs to make it as optimized as possible. There are quite a few quests for raw mana crystals. Although the price varies per quest and is far below the usual market price, I'll be able to get a similar amount of gold from the mana as I do the horns.

On top of all of this, every few defeated opponents give me a minuscule boost in mana control. Each individual monster may not give me much, but they will make a fairly noticeable difference over time.

---

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

Every 10 to 20 minutes, I absorb enough Demonic Energy to attempt Ember's test, but switching 60 times in just 60 seconds is much harder than it seems.

I push through the pain, and allow the sparks that build up in my wrists, shoulders, and chest to grow across my body to engulf me every attempt, continuing to switch back and forth through the certain demise.

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

Each time, new memories of my attempts flood back to my main body, and my understanding of the training becomes clearer. Each time, I spawn a new body double and they teleport back to where Ember is waiting to continue.

As well as the swaps between Demonic Energy and Mana Control becoming a bit more natural, the fact that my body doubles are being destroyed in front of my eyes is not much of a big deal either. At first, it was jarring to die and trust that it's not really the end. Something in the back of my mind questioned it the first few times.

However, as I carry on, the ease of destroying a body double for the sake of progression gets easier and easier.

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

[You Have Died]

By the 10th attempt, I've learned to use less Demonic Energy per attack, limiting the output to fractions of a unit, for the sake of the exercise. It allows me to retry every few minutes.

At first, the constant swap back and forth felt more tiring and disorienting than anything else, but now after a few hundred swaps, and almost a dozen body double deaths, the transition is feeling much smoother.

Unfortunately, every time I use a mana-based attack, my whole body flares up with energy, so no matter where I push the Demonic Energy, it still reacts every time while I'm switching back and forth at such fast speeds.

However, not starting the reaction is not part of this training exercise. Just speed and usability is what I'm aiming for. So, this is what I focus on.

---

Just under 3 hours pass and I've conquered the entire Minotaur dungeon. About halfway through my farming, I collect more than enough crystals to fulfill the mana quests, so I focused on mutants only for the remaining hour.

Every 10 or so drop a Minotaur horn, so I only have to farm 150 more to complete all the Minotaur quests as well.

Along with all of these drops, a few hundred swords and axes drop too. They're all 200-400+ additional strength buffs. Worthless to me, but it won't hurt to ask if anyone wants to buy them while handing in my other quests.

After placing all these items in my storage, I take a look at a handful of other quests. There's only two other dungeons of comparable rewards, the Steel Tortoise dungeon, and the Giant Rats.

There's half a dozen quests for Tortoise shells in asks of 2-10, 36 are needed in total and payout similarly to the Minotaur Horns. Apparently, they're high defensive buffs used for crafting. The drop rate is about 1 in every 50, and it's a very stable dungeon. There aren't usually any mutants, so this ask is just for the normal mobs.

This is a new type of dungeon, with a monster I've never fought before. I'm looking forward to seeing if they have any interesting skills for me to absorb while farming.

The Giant Rat quests ask for their claws. The drop rate is 1 in 20 mobs, and there are 3 quests asking for 200-450 claws each. Each pays out just under a dozen gold per 200 claws. Rats are low-level mobs, usually below lv150, and they travel in packs. This should be a breeze.

I Dunegon Walk back to Ember to let him know the plan. Once inside these other dungeons, I'll be able to move freely between all 3.

Simultaneously, my body double dies on a nearby hill in a flash of white and golden light. I form another, to replace it and Ember replies.

"Perfect timing. Your 3 hours are up. Let's see how well the practice is going so far."

Chapter 328

I stand back with Ember to watch my body double attempt to complete the 30 Demonic Energy attacks and 30 Mana-based attacks in just 60 seconds.

With a minute on the clock, I watch the small streams of dark black Demonic Energy as well as pure pink mana both collide to erupt into sparks against a nearby tree. Just fractions of a unit are used in each projectile, and a few dozen MP at most per mana-based attack.

The swaps back and forth are almost seamless. From an outside perspective, it almost looks as if the two attacks are being thrown simultaneously. But of course, at closer inspection, I can tell there is a switch being made every second.

The gold and white lights engulf my double expanding from the arms and chest until it takes over entirely.

[You have Died]

The memories of the test fill my mind, and I smirk while turning to Ember.

"66 swaps, that was 33 attacks from each hand. I passed."

Ember nods slowly.

"Very good, now we'll move onto the next portion of training; concentrating your energy to a single portion of the body. Once this is mastered, you'll be able to launch multiple attacks without even having to switch. Both Mana and Demonic Energy will be able to be wielded at once. This shouldn't take more than 3 hours at your rate of improvement, with enough practice it'll click."

I acknowledge this claim and make another body double before leaving the dungeon to go farm the other quests.

After paying a guard and asking around I enter a lv100-150 Dungeon and a level 300-350 dungeon to make Dungeon Walker points on both of them and begin my hunting. One of them is a Giant Rat Dungeon, while the other one is a Steel Tortoise Dungeon.

The Rat Dungeon is similar to the other old rat dungeons I've been in before. With rolling hills of dark-colored dirt, and eerie grey skies above, it feels very familiar. The scratching sounds of dozens of claws come over the hills in packs and the horrific odor comes along with it too.

In the past, I'd be disgusted, but right now it just sounds and smells like money to me.

With a grin across my face, I begin obliterating packs of rats with advanced fire magic slashes while air-stepping and teleporting across the dungeon.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 1,016

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 842

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 909

[YES][NO]

The Mana control absorption is incredibly low, but the pure crystals they leave behind I collect to put in my storage for an emergency later. Having extra mana in my storage leftover for potential fights outside of the mana-rich dungeons is a smart thing to stock up on while I have the chance. Each group of rats drops 1-2 claws on average. It will be a slow grind, but a profitable one.

---

After creating a few body doubles to send back to Ember and collecting a few hundred rat claws, I decide to take a breather and test out the Tortoise Dungeon too.

The landscape inside is very different than any dungeons I've been to before. The ground consists of chalky red-colored dirt and similarly crimson-colored shrubbery growing from it. Above these, there are short but thick trees every few dozen meters that go on as far as the eye can see.



Large rock formations and boulders obstruct the flat land, but other than that it looks like a flat clay desert.

I air-step in to explore and set more Dungeon Walker points, soon finding the native monster; a Steel Tortoise.

It looks like a normal tortoise, just enormous in size. Standing on 4 sturdy legs it's almost 5 meters long nose to tail. The only thing that gives away why the locals may call it this is its single skill at the bottom of its status.

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

As I get closer, Its shell shifts from the desert-colored reddish-brown to a shimmering silver, producing a slight white aura around it, almost as if the creatures are on the verge of unlocking their potential to wield mana control.

Nevertheless, I swing my blade across my body to let out a single fiery strike and cut the monster in two. I'm not using my full power, but the slash leaves a deep slit in the rocky ground after the mana crescent goes all the way through.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 15,336

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Body Hardening

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

I choose yes on both before moving on deeper into the dungeon.

In the past few hours, after upgrading my Absorption skill I've already obtained 2 new legendary grade skills. Stealth and Body Hardening. On top of that, millions of MCP are being absorbed with ease.

By the time morning hits, I may even be proficient in Demonic Energy Manipulation.

However, a thought resurfaces in the back of my mind as I air-step across the desert sky while looking for another tortoise to defeat.

"My new Crafting Skill, I wonder how exactly it works..."

The moment my mind thinks of the skill, a blue text window pops up in my vision.

[Use Craftsmanship][Mythic Grade]

[NEW] or [Upgrade]

I raise an eyebrow, and click new just for the sake of my own curiosity.

Raw Base Material: [NONE]

Item Type: [NON]

Raw Imbuement Material: [NONE]

Skill or Special Attribute Imbuement: [See Available]

Bonding Ingredients: [NONE]

Stat Bonus: [NONE]

Name: [Input Name]

Complete: [YES][NO]

My eyes shift up and down the menus provided.

I even take out a few old items from my spatial magic to begin testing to see what all of the labels mean. I'm able to place all kinds of raw dungeon materials into the [Raw Base Material] slot. This includes the horn of the behemoth I've been saving, the Minotaur horns I just farmed, and even old weapons and item drops. They can be repurposed into base materials to begin a new craft. All of the possible options for a craft show up in the [Item Type] menu once a single base material is added.

Next, the Imbuement Materials. I'm able to put the leftover firestones from the Volcanic Salamander break in my inventory into this slot, and can even stack multiple of them. I already have a sword with a fire aspect, so there's no reason to waste these on a new craft.

Once I click into [Skill or Special Attribute Imbuement] my entire skill list pops up, allowing me to attach the properties of my skills into whatever item I'm crafting. I choose one, and all of the other attributes become greyed out. So it seems only one attribute can be imbued at a time.

"Even a mythic grade skill has its limits..."

Then, for bonding ingredients, the only thing that shows once clicked in is [0/500mL]. In my previous crafts, Bri back in the Vice Region always needed a portion of my blood. This makes sense.

Nothing shows up in the [Stat Bonus] section. This may only show results once the crafting process begins.

Lastly, [Name] Is self-explanatory, I can name whatever I craft anything I'd like.

With a tightened gaze, I switch over to [Upgrade] instead. A similar status shows up.

Upgrade Item: [NONE]

Additional Raw Imbuement Material: [NONE]

Additional Skill or Special Attribute Imbuement: [See Available]

Stat Bonus: [NONE]

Complete: [YES][NO]

Immediately, this gives me an idea as I place my Flame Emperor's sword into the Upgrade Item Slot.

The moment I do, the [Additional Skill or Special Attribute Imbuement] goes from lit up to dull.

"So if an item already has a special attribute like the fire aspect, and I can't add any additional ones."

With a nod, I start sifting through my items to see what can be placed in the sole slot remaining. My eyes widen once I attempt adding a Firestone to the sword.

The slot changes to [Additional Raw Imbuement Material: Firestone 1x], but it continues to glow, signaling there's more room for additional items. The more I place in, the higher the number climbs. I add over half a dozen stones, even the larger boss's stone before looking down at the [Stat Bonus] tab with wide eyes.

Before thinking twice, I choose [YES] to complete the transaction and a series of notifications fill my vision.

The Firestones dissolve into the sword in a flash of white light, and I'm left in awe.

[The Flame Emperor's Sword has been Upgraded]

[Fire Aspect]->[Advanced Fire Aspect]

[Additional 29% Strength Buff Added]

[Additional 26% Mental Strength Buff Added]

[New Stat Bonus Added]

[+100% Defense]

[+100% Speed]

[+100% Agility]

The long black sword in my hands glows red hot as a black and deep red aura slowly fades from it and the blue text notifications leave my vision. All I see are its improved Stats.

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Advanced Fire Aspect][+188% Strength][+152% Mental Strength][+100% Defense][+100% Speed][+100% Agility]

Another Steel Tortoise comes into my line of sight moments later, and I cut it down with ease from the sky. However, still using the same powered-down strength I was using before to hunt these low-level mobs, the size of the black crescent that erupts from my blade is over three times its normal size. This leaves a crater in the ground larger than anything my full-powered attacks have ever produced previously.

Black flames flicker burning away dungeon mass, slowly making the crater even wider even after the attack.

Grinning while collecting the MCP and twirling the blade in my hand, I continue air-stepping forward to find more mobs to farm. One of the top things on my mind are the possibilities of new items I can craft if I find even better materials in the future.

I'll definitely have to go farming in a Labyrinth or higher-grade dungeons once I find my team and get the chance.

—

Meanwhile, after a few hours of farming and training pass back in the Minotaur dungeon, I throw a line of Demonic Energy out from my fingertips while the pink light of a pure mana blade comes from my right hand.

Ember speaks up to my body double once they collide and erupt into an explosion similar to the one he showed me earlier as a reference.

"You catch on quick. Over 10 successful attacks in a row without a single negative reaction. Pick up that dagger and one of your swords. This will be the last stage of training, imbuing weapons and fighting real monsters. I think it's time you test this new ability on a few fast-moving targets. If you can manage to fight the Minotaurs here with ease, I say we venture out to the Demonic Energy Source. You may be surprised at what you find."

## Chapter 329

The next 3 hours of training pass, bringing this session deep into the middle of the night. My real body has just finished up the Steel Tortoise and Giant Rat quests, and has moved onto some of the lower-level dungeons with easier tasks for lower rewards.

There aren't many left now, so I might as well try to speed-run the rest of the quest papers I took with me before the sun comes up. Each one will net me a few more gold, so even if it seems like mindless farming; in the end, it's worth the effort.

Back in the Minotaur Dungeon, I get ready to test out my technique with a dagger in my left hand and a copy of my newly powered-up Flame Emperor's sword in the other.

Ember speaks up as we begin venturing further into the dungeon to find a group of Minotaurs to hunt.

"I'd like to see 100 kills in a row, then we can go check out the rift."

Ember's wording of a so-called "rift" instead of just the "source" he called it before does raise some interest in my mind, but I decide to focus on the task he's given me first. With a tight grip on both weapons, my mind is absorbed in the mission ahead. Over the last 6 hours, the process of using both Demonic Energy and Mana has become much different than before.

Previously, trying to activate both at once would be as impossible as attempting to ride a bike for the first time balancing on a thin tightrope across a kilometer-wide canyon.

Although it was possible for me to brute force my way across this canyon with the metaphorical bike in my hands and disregarding the tightrope entirely. Learning how to systematically succeed in this task by mastering each step drastically improved my capabilities.

Learning to ride the bike is the first step, that is just like the action of switching the energy sources back and forth.

Then, focusing these sources of energy in certain portions of my body is like balancing atop a wire. It took lots of focus, but with my manipulation skills in both Mana and Demonic Energy, this process was expedited.

Putting both together is the final step, it's like moving forward while balancing on that thin wire. With enough practice, it will be as easy as breathing.

As long as I leave the process to my subconscious mind, and only focus on the energy itself, it is possible to feel and separate the sources. My left eye, arm, and singular pathway leading from my Demon's core are able to focus on channeling and visualizing Demonic energy, while the rest of my body continues to wield mana.

This keeps my buffs active, while allowing me to wield the Midnight Dagger and see both sources in split vision.

It took many failures before it was possible to not accidentally intertwine the two. Isolating the Demonic Energy to just a portion of my body and a fraction of my mind is the key. The less I think about it, and let the energy flow just like it did while training, the more successful each attempt becomes.

Putting these two talents of focus and balance together, it's now time to put it into action.

"Let's go fight some monsters."

I airstep forward with my black dagger coated in purple and black aura, while my sword glows dark red with flickering black flames glistening around its sides. Even though it's not the real version of the Flame Emperor's sword, the upgraded power still emanates from it at 90% of its base stats.

The first Minotaur comes into sight, and I swing my sword from a distance. A wave of flames splits it in two.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,929

[YES][NO]

A window to absorb the monster's MCP shows up following its demise, but once I accept it, the notifications that follow are surprising.

[Attempting MCP Transfer To Main Body]

[MCP Transfer To Main Body: Failed]

Still, the usual mana crystal drops once its body dissolves.

Moments later, I turn to air-step toward another, as the commotion makes nearby mobs charge in my direction.

I air-step up close and slash the beast with the Midnight dagger and it tears through the mana-based flesh like butter. A violent explosion of sparks erupts from the wound, and it's annihilated in an instant.

Unlike the previous mob, not a single crystal or item drops once it's defeated. However, the MCP Absorption window still shows up.

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 7,304

[YES][NO]

After choosing [YES] I'm struck with the same messages.

[Attempting MCP Transfer To Main Body]

[MCP Transfer To Main Body: Failed]

My thoughts begin to race as I continue practicing with my dagger and sword for a few hours all throughout the Minotaur dungeon.

It seems training in my body double comes with its own set of odd rules and boundaries.

As tested previously multiple times, I'm able to kill monsters at a higher level than myself and the levels gained transfer to my main body. Skills and buffs gained in my body double form are able to transfer over as well, but after the tests carried out here it seems like mana control is not transferred over.

There may be more conditions I need to meet, but for right now it seems to be impossible.

The last thing I've noticed is that every time I take out a monster using Demonic Energy, I'm still able to use my Absorption skills on them post-death even if the body is completely gone, but there's a near-zero chance of them dropping any mana crystals or physical items. They all seem to be eaten up in the reaction of sparks and destroyed with the body itself.

This has been a very enlightening training session so far. I only had a few slip-ups where a new body double had to be sent over and continue the training, but now it's starting to feel very natural. I'm still not confident enough to try this method with my main body, but a lot of progress has been made.

I grin and yell out to Ember as I slice the final Minotaur in two.

"100! There we go, 100 in a row without messing up!"

The Black-scaled dragon comes over, flapping his wings with a grin across his face, then points back in the direction to where we started training.

"Very nice. Then I think we have one last thing to do before leaving this dungeon; it's time to get rid of that rift. Although it's a great source of energy for training, I don't think leaving one around in a dungeon without any guardians nearby is a safe idea. This could cause quite the incident."

I raise an eyebrow at this, being the second time I've heard the word rift today. This time with a much clearer and focused mind.

"The rift?"

My gaze points toward Ember, then up to the sky as I try to think about when other than today I've heard this term being used before.

I murmur under my breath.

"The rift... where have I... oh-"

An ominous feeling washes over me as I realize exactly when I've heard this term before.

"Titans?? Are there Titans in this dungeon? Or- Void Creepers, whatever you call them?!"

My heart skips a beat as I remember back to my experience in the Great Plains. We never actually went to the source, so I'm not sure where these beings came from. Although, the one thing I do remember is Ember telling me that Titans were the weakest of all these creatures...

Ember chuckles at my paranoia and replies.

"No, no. I doubt there are any of those mana-hungry Void Creepers around here. Although, the rift we'll be checking out works in a similar way."

I immediately let out a sigh of relief at these words, then raise an eyebrow moments later.

"A similar way? How so... explain..."

"Rifts are the term used for gates to other worlds. Just like the titans come from their own small pocket of mana-dense space, many Demonic Creatures spawn from pockets of Demonic Energy in the Demonic World."

My eyes widen, but Ember continues.

"It's like a Dungeon Portal, but into a Demonic Realm. The Demon you defeated that ran the Labyrinth around this city must have opened it up for some reason. It takes an immense amount of Demonic Energy and permission from the King to do so."

Ember shrugs, thinking to himself for a moment before finishing his thought.

"Or not... This rift could be a coincidence. With all the Demonic Energy nearby from the Abyss, there is a chance it could be a natural phenomenon. It's hard to tell. All I know is if it's not dealt with, this could end very poorly. Demonic Rifts are far more unstable than Dungeons, so if left to its own means a break will surely take over this dungeon given enough time."

I nod slowly to myself, then power down all my buffs and place a hand on Ember's back before Dungeon Walking back to the spot where we first started this training.

"A Dungeon, but with Demonic Monsters? So like a pocket dimension with a landscape similar to the Abyss? I'm interested to see what a Demonic Realm actually looks like."

The two of us begin flying in the direction of the rift.

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The closer I get to the rift, the more Demonic Energy fills the air nearby. It's all coming from a single area near the furthest point in the dungeon where the guard previously warned me not to enter.

Even the minotaurs steer clear of this area, and the lush green grass doesn't glow as bright. The closer we get to the source, the more dull the dungeon mass around us becomes. Less and less trees grow and the mana in the air gets much thinner as well.

Finally, as we fly over a small hill and look down, the rift comes into view. My eyes open wide at the sight of it.

"This isn't what I expected to see at all..."

What seems to be a large tear in space itself ominously floats right above the ground. It's jet-black in color and looks like someone tore a hole in the open air with a massive knife. It's nearly 3 meters wide and over 10 meters tall.

The top and bottom edges narrow in to make points and the middle is the widest. Small amounts of raw demonic energy leak out from its edges, and it gives off a pressure unlike anything I've ever felt before.

It's similar to the abyss, but sends chills down my spine with every step closer I take.

Ember stops in place as he touches down about 40 or so meters away from the tear in space. He opens up his link.

"I won't be following you through the first time. It would be wise to leave that Dagger behind as well. We don't know how strong the monsters in that rift are yet. Demonic Realms can be very unpredictable and volatile, so it's best not to go in with anything you don't want to lose."

The Midnight Dagger is the one item in my item storage that doesn't duplicate when I create a body double. It also isn't affected by the sparks produced from the mana on demonic energy reaction. I haven't done enough tests yet to understand why either of these phenomena occur, but now isn't the time to test it out.

I reply while throwing the dagger into the dungeon floor by Ember's side.

"Understood, I'll leave it behind."

While continuing to take steps forward closer to the rift, the pressure it gives off increases. It feels similar to the thickness in the air I felt while in the Abyss, but with every step, it's becoming multiple times greater; like boulders are being stacked on my shoulders.

"Is there anything specific I should be looking for, or any important details I should know before entering this realm? Although this is just a test with a body double, all the information I can get would be a great help."

Ember immediately replies through the link.

"Refrain from using any mana-based skills when you first enter. Depending on the rift strength, even the simple use of a buff could cause a problem. The first thing you should do is get a feel for the terrain and scope out the average level of monster inside. Once you do this, report back and I can give you more instructions on what to do and what kind of Demonic Realm we're dealing with..."

I take another step and the pressure intensifies even more.

My heart rate increases, and a grin that only comes across my face in the heat of a life-or-death battle creeps upon my lips.

"Finally, something really interesting."

I take another step forward, coming within 10 meters of the black tear in the open air with my eyes practically sparkling. I deactivate all my mana-based skills, just like Ember said to before taking a moment to stare into the darkness.

Then, after taking a deep breath in and out, I sprint forward and take a leap through into the rift.

My vision goes black, and the immense pressure around me increases even more. My head starts to ache with all the pressure, and I tighten both my fists while the feeling of weightlessness takes over.

I float in a sea of darkness for a few seconds as the pressure continues to grow in my head, and compress all parts of my body. Eventually, the weightless feeling turns into the sensation of falling, and my vision slowly returns. Purple and Black energy swirls around and I brace for impact as my feet hit the solid ground.

A loud crunch follows, but surprisingly it's the rock beneath my feet that breaks, not my bones.

Although the invisible pressure that pushes down on me is intense, the raw Demonic Energy in the air is so abundant it feels like mana in a regular dungeon. Without wasting even a second, I begin absorbing as much as I can, maxing out my core at just over 50 units.



With no reason to hold back, I let the energy flow through my pathways while constantly absorbing more. At full core and pathway saturation, letting the energy seep from my pores to power my footsteps and extra Demonic Senses feels like second nature.

After doing this, my vision adjusts to the landscape, and I'm equally surprised at what I see.

The raw energy in the air swirls around me in all directions, limiting my range of vision to a few dozen meters ahead. It's like a very foggy morning mist covering everything in sight. That mist just happens to be purple and black.

The ground is made of what feels like hard rugged stone but its covered with wet shrubbery that's tinted red and purple. The sound of light trickling and dripping water is nearby in every direction, and my footsteps echo making it seem like I'm in some kind of vast cave system.

The ground below my feet rises up and down in jagged and uneven pathways with awkward sharp pillars of stone-like stalactites jutting up from the ground and down from a ceiling far above me in random places. They range in size from my own height to the size of multiple-story buildings as the cave structure expands outward.

Through the mist, I can make out small streams of what i can only assume to be water, and the smell of iron fills my nose and lungs. The surroundings are so odd and foreign, that it's difficult to even walk straight. If I don't take careful steps, I could easily pierce myself with something sharp, step into a pool of mystery liquid, or fall headfirst into a ravine.

Even with the odd environment, my curiosity of this new world has my eyes wide and senses on full alert. The only real goal of my venture in here is to find out as much information about this realm as possible before coming back to Ember. I'd also like to know what treasures it potentially hides.

At the thought, I turn around and my heart skips a beat when the rift I entered to get here is completely gone.

Boss rooms in mana-based dungeons work in a very specific way. Once a hunter enters, they need to kill the boss before the transfer magic activates. This is the only way to get out. My guess is this rift works in a similar fashion... Some kind of condition needs to be met before I can escape.

I let out a sigh and begin walking forward while expanding my Demonic Energy senses.

The dense swirling energy in this cave makes it very hard to see what's in front of me, but I can tell there's an opening and a pocket of much less dense air nearby.

I carefully walk forward to search for this opening.

Although I'm able to feel every bit of raw energy around me for almost a kilometer on every side due to my skill, the atmosphere is so dense with it that it's difficult to tell if there are monsters nearby or if they're just thick pockets of energy.

I continue up and down small hills and pathways within the cavern, dodging spiked pillars of jagged stone, and making sure not to touch the streams of running liquid to try and get a better view of what's at the end.

Once I finally reach what feels like the exit, I step through a final layer of mist into the outside world and stare down into a valley while taking in a breath of fresh air. The exit of the cave leaves me stranded on the side of a tall mountain's cliffside, looking down into a shadowy world below.

