

D. Diver 331

Chapter 331

As far as I can see on both my left and right is the cliffside of other mountains, all sloping downward into the same deep valley.

Although the air is less dense with Demonic Energy up here, I can sense there are large pockets of close to zero energy down below in the shadows of the ravine. Above me, dark clouds fill the sky, and the iron smell is even stronger out here than within the cave. After careful consideration, I've come to the conclusion that the water is what gives off this odd smell.

With eyes full of curiosity, I start walking down a winding mountain path toward the bottom.

My feet crunch against the uneven ground, and the soggy red and purple shrubbery that grew inside the cave becomes even denser the further down the mountain I climb.

Every link between Ember and the outside world is completely severed right now. I don't dare activate any mana-based skills until I'm sure it's safe to do so, but just feeling the pressure around me, all my senses are screaming not to.

Almost 30 minutes pass as I slowly make my way down the mountain, the whole time I'm on high alert, but I've still yet to see a single monster in here.

"How odd..."

Usually, I'd be met with at least one monster mindlessly charging at me by now, but not a single one makes itself known.

The swirling purple and black energy thins out more and more the further down I get until eventually, it's non-existent. I step onto the flat ground to take in the world below with the ominous towering mountains I just left behind me.

There are streams of water that smell of metal that twist off into the open plain-like environment as far as I can see. The only plant life grows along the water's edge in small clumps.

There are awkward jagged mounds of dirt and rock that rise up tens of meters in the air with the occasional tree devoid of leaves. None of them grow much higher than 5 meters in height.

An invisible pressure very similar to the one I felt when entering the portal returns as I continue taking steps forward to explore.

The ground becomes softer the further in I travel, and the smell of iron starts to turn sour. The landscape stays exactly the same as I leave the dark mountains behind. The air is still, and the only noises I can hear are my own heartbeat, wet footsteps, and the trickling water of the streams that have separated off in many directions.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I finally see something out of place.

A large tablet rests out in the open. It's made of a lighter grey-colored rock that contrasts the purple and black landscape.

The closer I get to it, the more questions I have.

Three holes are chiseled out in the large stone, and once I'm close enough, its size is much more impressive. The tablet stands over 3 times as tall as me, and upon further inspection, each of the holes looks like they can fit a key.

The closer I get, the louder my heart beats in my chest. I place a hand on the cool stone, then run my fingers up and down its smooth surface, but nothing happens.

I'm left in silence, and take my hand off the tablet with a disappointed expression.

However, the moment I do, it immediately pulses light purple one time before going dormant again. It was so sudden and without warning or any consequence that if I blinked, I could have missed it.

I start to circle it with a tightened gaze, questioning if that purple pulse was my imagination or not. My eyes scan the tablet again and again, looking for any other markings or clues, but come up with nothing.

I let out a sigh and look off deeper into the open plain and talk aloud to myself.

"Is this place abandoned...? I must be missing something."

Less than half a minute later, I start to feel the ground rumble beneath my feet. At the same time, dozens of black figures appear on the horizon.

I try to use my manipulation skill to tell how strong they are, but being so close together, it's nearly impossible to tell.

Nevertheless, I step forward to meet the wave of incoming monsters. I was starting to think this place was really empty, so some signs of life inside is a good thing.

"Better late than never."

The ground shakes more, and water that soaks the wetlands beneath my feet starts to ripple and splash around the closer the figures get. I stand in a fighting stance, channeling demonic energy through my body and squinting to get a closer look as they continue to approach at a steady speed.

"A stampede...?"

Once within visual range, the black horns and the muscular bodies of dozens of bulls on all fours charge toward me. Their eyes are glowing red, and their minds are set on one task: attacking me.

Now that they're within my manipulation range, I can feel that each of the charging bulls has around 30 to 40 units of energy inside them. So, they'll most likely have the average strength of a level 350 monster.

Fighting without a dagger in hand is tough, but with opponents of this strength, I'm a bit more confident.

I run forward with energy coursing through my body, leaving a faint trail of purple and black refined energy behind me.

The bulls don't flinch at my sudden charge; they continue their rampage forward until we finally meet in the center of the wide-open wetlands. Now that we're closer, I count 44 of them in total.

"Let's do this."

Quickly and carefully, I bob and weave through the charging beasts. They have a very hard time changing directions, so as long as my movements are fast and unpredictable, I'm not worried about getting hit by their horns.

A demonic energy-imbued punch to the side is enough to knock one over, and even send blood flying, but surprisingly it isn't enough to kill the first couple that I launch attacks at.

"Tough ones, aren't you..."

Seeing this fail, I resort to releasing streams of black energy from my hands in thin blades, just like I attempted the first time fighting against wolves.

These monsters are much stronger, so I up the strength on my energy blades just a bit. Roughly 5 concentrated units in a slash are just enough to cleanly cut a bull deep enough in a vital point to kill it. There's only one downside. I have to be within about 3-4 meters of range for these attacks to be dense enough to do any damage. When further away, the refined energy disperses into ineffective mist before it hits the target.

With my natural agility and speed advantage, this is not a crippling problem to have.

The pack starts to grunt loudly and roar as their members are picked off one by one. Absorbing the fallen bulls' demonic energy isn't a simple task while dozens are still charging at me, so I resort to punching those that come near while I refill my core.

Just 3 minutes pass, and the entire herd is dead on the damp floor, and the excess energy dissolves into the sky.

I breathe heavily and stare down at my bloodied fists and wait for the monsters around me to completely disappear.

As they do, small black glossy stones are left behind. I try to use all my senses to figure out what's so special about these stones, but just like the last few times, they appear to be just tiny obsidian-colored pebbles with no unique attributes.

Once I begin picking them up, a roar echoes through the wetlands, and the air pressure completely shifts.

A single figure comes running toward me from the same direction as the bulls. It has the same black horns, bulky body, and red eyes. However, this one stands on two legs, wields a long sword, and around its neck, there's a glowing purple key.

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The silhouette of an enormous Minotaur draws closer on the horizon. Its skin and fur are jet black, and its horns glisten with their obsidian-like gloss, reflecting the crimson light from the demonic creature's eyes back at me.

My gaze is fixated on the glowing purple key around its neck. It's most likely linked to one of the conditions to unlocking whatever is behind this stone.

I lunge forward with my fists ready, and every step trailing energy behind me as I pick up speed. As we draw closer to each other, I finally manage to get a good reading on the monster's strength as well.

"55 units, looks like this one may not be that easy..."

Although it's nowhere near the goliath of a worm I ran from in the abyss a few days back, it's no mere wolf or raging bull.

This time around, I'm in their domain, without a weapon, and at a lower level as well.

Fighting a monster this size and power could actually be quite the challenge, but it's one I'm ready for.

The wind in my face picks up as we both accelerate, and once finally within range, I jump to my right side, narrowly avoiding its sword and hearing the roar of battle commence.

I don't bother attacking, nor do I try after it turns to run at me again.

For the first half a dozen exchanges, I'd like to gauge its speed and movement patterns. Just from the run over, I can tell our base speed stats are similar, and from the near miss of that sword swing, our agility seems to be nearly on par as well, though I have a slight edge.

I land a single punch to its hind leg after dodging, and it feels like I'm hitting a brick wall layered with meat. The muscles and flesh ripple, but the monster hardly moves or reacts.

The next exchange ends with a demonic energy slash leaving my right hand filled with double that of the bulls I fought earlier. 10 units of refined energy hit the Demonic Minotaur at point-blank range in the same place behind its left leg.

A deep gash opens up, but it doesn't even hit bone, and it's not nearly enough to slow its movements. This only angers it more.

While watching the beast turn around, getting ready for our next exchange, I channel my manipulation skill to absorb raw energy from the atmosphere above, but only manage a few units before I have to cut my concentration and dodge its next strike.

This happens three more times before I'm back up to my full stores, but the slash on the back of my opponent's leg seems to have closed up while I've taken the time to restore my energy. A scar is left behind but is quickly covered by a few wisps of purple and black energy and the previously injured flesh looks as good as new.

I smirk and run forward.

"Looks like you have some tricks of your own too..."

As time goes on, the grunts get louder, and the movements get sloppier. I manage to land 4 hits of 10 demonic energy strikes per full core, using up almost 10 units to power my movements while dodging and building up enough speed to place attacks.

Every time I take the time to restore all 50 units of my own raw energy from the atmosphere, the wounds on the beast somehow heal on their own.

However, every time it heals a wound, the energy in its body depletes further and further down. This is what gives me the spirit to continue my seemingly meaningless attacks. It may look like the battle is going nowhere from the outside view, but I know it's only a matter of time.

Two more full cycles of my 50-unit core get drained and used, and the Minotaur continues to get angrier and angrier, swinging its blade at me. The crimson eyes glow so bright with rage that the beast doesn't even realize its energy stores have nearly run to zero, and the slash marks stop healing.

Its movements slow, and my barrage of attacks eventually bring it to its knees.

I use four final 10-unit slashes on the same area at close range to slice its head clean off. It doesn't budge easily, but eventually, I free the heavy chain necklace from its chest. The purple glowing key lands in my grasp before it can hit the muddy ground.

THUD

The corpse of the Minotaur falls behind me and slowly starts to dissolve.

Letting out a satisfied sigh, I start to catch my breath and slowly recharge my core while twirling the key around through my fingers.

It glows bright purple and gives off an intense pressure around it. My gaze switches from the key, to the dissolving corpse, and to the stone tablet off in the distance.

The sound of something splashing into water sounds out as my eyes turn back to where the fallen Minotaur was before. In its place, a black stone remains. I step over to pick it up and examine it.

Unlike all the other demonic stones I've collected before, this one has a light purple glow to it. Wisps of energy circle around it and it gives off a pressure just like the key in my other hand.

I grip both the stone and key tight, then start walking over to the tablet again.

Once standing in front of it, my heart starts beating louder, but I don't hesitate to stick the glowing key in the bottom hole and twist.

As I do, the tablet pulses purple just like before. Then, in an instant, turns dull along with the key.

The same rumbling is felt beneath my feet just a few seconds later.

"Just as I thought."

I place the glowing stone from my last battle at the base of the tablet.

"I'll be back here with another one soon."

I smirk and begin running toward a stampede of bulls.

In a matter of minutes, every last one of them is defeated, and their small black gems are scattered across the wetlands floor.

This wave had a few bulls that were pushing 45 units, a bit more than I expected, but not more than I can handle.

Once finished collecting all of these stones and restoring my demonic energy, the presence of another creature similar to the last boss enters my senses. The ground starts to vibrate and I feel its footsteps approaching quickly.

As I turn my head to see what direction it's coming from, the sight of it charging toward me at less than 100 meters away gives me a bit of a shock. I put my hands up, ready to do a similar long-lasting battle as the previous boss, but before I can even think of which direction to dodge in, it's already closed the gap.

"Too fast..."

A glossy double-sided axe swings my way through the air, and the only thing that fills my vision are the glowing red eyes and another purple key dangling from the creature's neck as I use all my strength and demonic energy stores to jump out of the way to dodge.

I can feel the razor-sharp edge of the blade tear the back of my red robe as I roll to the floor out of the way, but am hit with a heavy fist in the stomach that's easily 5 times larger than my own.

It came out of nowhere, the speed and power of this next boss are levels above the last one.

I cough up blood while analyzing the monster before me to contain over 65 demonic energy units.

Then, I get struck in the back before my vision goes dark.

[You Have Died]

My main body receives this chain of memories while burning a group of monsters in a far-off dungeon to a crisp.

I stop mid-fight and let out a chuckle before creating a new body double to send back to Ember to report the news. After this, I air-step downward to see if any more items have dropped while talking to myself under my breath.

"Looks like my training today isn't over just yet... There seems to be a few more things I need to learn."

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I teleport back to the Minotaur Dungeon and recall the events inside the Demonic Realm to Ember, who replies with a sly grin and eyes full of interest.

"So it's a trial realm. Once the three stages of tests are complete, the realm will collapse and bring you back here, I'm positive. I've seen these used before many times by newly ranked-up demons. They're usually used for combat training once you reach a certain point, passing level 500 or so."

I reply to this.

"Training? For what? Don't demons naturally rank up and gain levels as they guard a Labyrinth?"

Ember replies.

"Some do, some don't. Others practice with trials controlled by the King, preparing for a possible future when they're allowed back into the Demonic World. This one is one of the Tier 2 trials, three stages of waves with increasing difficulty. Rewards for trials like this would be items like the dagger you already hold, or the special Demonic Stones you mentioned dropped from the first boss."

I ponder to myself for a moment.

"So my dagger came from one of these realms?"

Ember shrugs and turns to the rift.

"It's impossible to know. There was nothing like the Abyss in my previous knowledge, so the source could possibly be different. Times are changing. What I do know is, you'll need to use mana and Demonic Energy to take out the opponents ahead if they're as powerful as you say. Use the training

we've gone through so far, but be mindful that contact with any outside Demonic energy with your active skills will cause a reaction. You'll have to worry about other monster's energy as well, not just your own."

I stare down at the dagger still half-sunken into the ground by Ember's side, then look up at the rift, deciding not to take the blade with me just yet.

"Got it. I need to do some more tests."

Without another moment to think, I jump through the rift and start trekking through the dark cave again.

The pathways and tunnels feel much more familiar this time around, and I make it out to the side of the mountain in a matter of minutes.

The climb downward is much easier as well.

Once the Demonic Energy-filled air clears up and the open field below comes into view, the stone tablet far off in the distance is visible to the naked eye. Not too far from it, a Minotaur almost double the tablet's size begins running toward me.

"Good. The trials don't restart. The second boss is still here. It can sense me from here too..."

I run forward and attempt my first mana-imbued skill attempt, activating berserker, bloodlust, and extreme strength to boost my movement speed and many other stat points. The red and golden aura that forms around me manages to stay active while I reach into my item storage and pull out the duplicated Flame Emperor's sword.

With each step closer I take, my anticipation grows.

My recent increase in speed and ability to use buffs allows me to perceive the enormous black creature in front of me. My left eye continues to watch the demonic energy swirling around the massive monster that runs my way.

I make it down the mountain entirely and begin charging my sword.

I decide not to air-step right away unless necessary because there's no mana in the air. Previously, I tested absorbing duplicated mana crystals on a body double, and it didn't work as well as I hoped. The crystals dissolve upon absorption and don't add any MP to my body or status.

My full bar is all I have to work with right now, so it's best not to waste anything.

Eventually, I come within attacking range and let a low-powered mana-based strike fly toward the demonic monster.

It's initially just a test to see if I can even launch an attack like this in here, but also I'm trying to gauge the new monster's real reflex speed and note down its movement patterns.

As the flickering blade of fire soars toward the monster, it ducks and sidesteps with ease, hardly changing its forward momentum one bit.

In reaction, I don't flinch either and keep running forward at its incoming double-bladed axe.

Just like our last encounter, I dodge its downward strike, but with much more ease this time around because of my mana-buffs, and let out a slash of fire at its back.

A smirk creeps across my face as I use a small pocket of air magic to propel myself away faster and watch sparks begin to form where my mana makes contact.

The loud roar of an injured beast rings out.

"In the end, you were no match."

I whisper under my breath as I turn around, but the sight before me doesn't match the sound of the roar.

A large gash is visible in the monster's hide, but the sparks are starting to fizzle out and there's no sign of my fiery strike ever being there. No burns, nor excess residue is visible on the beast. All that remains is a wound that barely goes as deep as bone, and the light crackle of a few sparks remaining before the reaction goes out entirely.

"W-wait, how?"

My mind doesn't register what happens at first, and I nearly get hit by the next charge by the beast but use another few dozen MP of wind magic to jump up high enough in the air to dodge.

I shake my head and get back into battle mode, releasing another mana blade with a few hundred MP worth of energy down at the Minotaur.

"I'll figure out your weakness soon enough."

Five more exchanges go by and I continue to land hits on the beast's blind spots as it tries to attack me.

The speed and power of this creature are quite frightening. Even when using my mana-powered buffs, our speed and agility stats are nearly even. My only advantage is the use of wind magic to get out of its way in a bind.

Pure strength and attack power, it's got me totally beat. As seen from our last exchange, one hit from that axe and I'm dead.

So far, I've landed 7 clean fire-imbued mana blades on the creature's chest and back, and the same thing keeps happening.

Upon impact, there's a huge explosion of sparks, but once all of the mana is disintegrated, the demonic energy swirling around the monster remains.

Unlike how even a tiny bit of demonic energy hits mana, it destroys everything it touches; when mana hits demonic energy, it only destroys enough to get rid of the mana itself.

"This is going to be a lot tougher than I thought."

With half a bar of MP remaining, I continue to wear the beast down. Its movements are getting much slower, but not at the same rate as me. I'm going to have to think of something new if I want to kill this beast in one shot.

In between my next few attacks, I try a few demonic energy slashes at close range too. The amount of damage one 10-unit slash causes is minuscule when compared to the destructive force of a 100-200MP mana blade. It's hard to get close enough for Demonic Energy to be effective, but I continue to try. The Demonic Energy in the air high above can replenish my core while I have no mana available to continuously charge this source.

However, on my last demonic energy attempt, the Minotaur catches on and turns its gaze toward me mid-stride.

Before I can think twice about changing my trajectory, its axe has shifted directions and is coming straight at my right side.

Thinking fast, I reflexively activate Dungeon Walker to teleport out of the way.

Air-step would not be fast enough, and I haven't tested a demonic blade on mana blade contact yet. I'm not 100% confident in its ability to block an incoming attack.

"Dungeon Walker-"

"Dungeon-"

"D-"

The moment it activates, there aren't any points to warp to. This skill doesn't work in here. My mind is blank, and I grit my teeth. The second-best option will have to do.

Reluctantly, I swing my sword up to block the axe before it comes crashing down on me while summoning a barrier of pink mana along its edges for extra support.

A loud crackle and twang ring out in the air as I drain my MP stores down to under 15%.

The explosion of sparks and immense pressure released blasts me backward over 20 meters, and I air step upward to get out of range from the mad monster's attack radius.

My expression is filled with frustration and a hint of anger, but deep beneath my eyes, there's a glint of pure battle-hungry glee.

Though, that shimmer in my eyes may just be the reflection of the sparks crackling off the tip of my shattered sword. Half of it has disintegrated in the blast and is slowly moving downward toward the handle.

My gaze points down to the monster's weapon that has suffered a similar fate. A large chunk of the black axe blade is missing, as well as one of its long glossy horns atop its head that got caught in the blast.

I throw the blade to the ground as it crackles away into nothingness and reach into my item storage to grab my wind dagger.

Using its special perk, I separate the weapon into two parts to grip one in each hand while quickly air-stepping back down to the ground to conserve the small amount of mana I have left.

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With only a few hundred MP remaining, I rush at my opponent with two wind daggers in my grasp. The remaining raw energy inside the monster I run toward is just over a third of what it started with.

If I continue using my mana at the same rate, with the same strategies, I'll surely lose. I need to get up close and try a more powerful technique. One that can finish it off in a single shot.

With this in mind, the next time I narrowly avoid the Minotaur's axe and air step away, I continue my upward trajectory to position myself dangerously close to the beast.

I haven't let my usual shot of energy off yet. I'm still charging everything I have into both my blades. This lack of attack notifies the monster that I'm doing something different, it instantly catches on.

I hear a grunt as it quickly turns my way with an upward swing of its axe.

With every last drop of MP going into my daggers, I swing down, pointing at the side of the demonic creature's neck while the sharp side of its axe slices me clean in two.

The final thing I see is an explosion of sparks, and the head of the beast topple off its neck.

[You Have Died]

The memories all come back to me as I finish up farming another quest in one of the level 100-150 dungeons. I chuckle to myself while making another body double.

"That's one way to do it."

At the same time, I reach into my inventory and take out about 30k MP worth of crystals to give to my double before it teleports back to Ember in the Minotaur dungeon. That's over 10 full recharges. If lack of MP is the issue, this should be enough for my next opponent

Then, I get back to farming. Only a third of the quests remain, and I already completed the hardest and highest paying ones. At this rate, I'll finish every one of them before the sun comes up.

I carefully separate the real mana crystals in my item storage, not mixing them up with the duplicate copies. To the naked eye, the duplicates look exactly the same, but under any amount of mana control or perception skills, it's clear they're fakes.

After reporting the events of my last fight to Ember, I jump back into the rift to see what exactly happened after the fight.

Less than half an hour passes before I find the second glowing purple key on the ground. It glows even brighter, and right next to it on a path of crimson-colored shrubbery is another Demonic Stone the size of my entire palm.

It glows the same purple color and gives off a similar invisible pressure.

With a grin across my face, I walk over to the stone tablet and place my winnings from the second battle next to the other one on the ground below before twisting the next key into the middle hole.

I have to hover about a meter off the ground to place the key inside, as it's fairly high up in the air.

Once I do, the purple pulse repeats just like before, then the entire tablet goes dull.

A rumble immediately shakes the ground, and a herd of bulls comes charging my way. From here, it looks and feels like nearly a hundred of them this time around.

I run at them and start the third wave.

No more than 5 minutes pass before every last mob is dead on the floor. Every one of them was between 40 and 50 units. I decide to use my wind daggers to make things quicker. I don't need to use much MP at all, and one wind slash can take out multiple.

The small black stones that drop to the floor without even a hint of purple glow after they all dissolve are disappointing, but at least I'm warmed up for the main event with over 90% of my MP stores remaining.

As I turn around while catching my breath, the presence of a single beast fills my senses.

"It's here."

With 75 units of raw demonic energy swirling through its body, the outline of a shadowy Minotaur appears on the horizon of the realm.

Before I can even grip my blades and prepare myself to fight, its outline disappears from sight.

I immediately turn on my mana senses and full buffs to jump in the air with my air-steps, then the overwhelming presence and pressure of a powerful being surges beneath me. It seemed to be using a teleport skill at first, but once I use all my senses to perceive it, the monster just ran at me too fast for my unaided eyes to see.

It stands over 10 times my height and wields two long black swords that reflect its glowing red eyes in their glossy shine. The final purple key rests around its neck.

Two enormous twisting horns come off its head, and the entirety of its body is pouring out refined energy. The monster before me came in aggressive from the start, using demonic speed buffs and swinging its swords in an elegant display.

If I didn't instinctively jump in the air with magic once the Minotaur left my vision, I'd undoubtedly be defeated already.

Gritting my teeth, I still let off two high-powered mana blades in its direction, but before they even make it halfway to its neck, the beast turns and makes eye contact with me before dodging and pointing its two blades in my direction.

To my surprise, the swords in its hands begin to glow purple, the same color as the key around its neck.

The next thing I witness is it swinging both blades across its body in synchronicity, and a purple crescent of light shrouded in darkness with black energy trailing behind it erupts from the Minotaur's weapons.

"An energy attack...?"

It looks just like my mana blades, but is clearly made of Demonic Energy. It's charged to glow bright purple, unlike when I release dark black refined energy straight from my hands. I've seen a similar effect take place in my dagger, but have never been able to send it flying from the blade like this before.

All I can think to do is send my own attack back and move out of the way.

With a large amount of my remaining MP, I air step away from the blast and send a white crescent of my air magic back at it to further propels me out of the way as I watch an eruption of sparks destroy my full-powered attack.

In less than a second, my energy blade is completely destroyed, and over half of the demonic energy blade's size still remains as it rockets further into the sky.

My gaze locks onto the Minotaur again, and I see it powering up another attack.

I'm nowhere near its speed on the ground, and I'm a sitting duck in the sky.

Taking a quick glance at my MP bar, it's already below half. I try to air-step further away to catch my breath and come up with a strategy to take on this new opponent, but there's no time to think.

The murderous roar of the final Demonic Boss echoes all throughout the realm and another full-powered slash comes flying my way.

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Thinking fast, I use up my remaining MP stores to combat the second incoming Demonic Energy blade.

There's just enough time for me to use the propulsion of my strike to move myself out of the way, and a similar display of sparks erupts in the sky.

"Not good..."

My MP remaining is at less than 5%, and using Demonic Energy against an opponent like this is pointless unless I can figure out how to charge my attacks like his swords do.

Bringing my dagger into this realm has its own risks. If I lose it, I'm not sure I'll easily be able to find another one. I have to be absolutely sure I can defeat this monster before gambling with a weapon so unique. The only thing I should focus on right now is the monster's movements, and try to land an attack to gauge its strength and see how many it will take to defeat it.

With this in mind, I air step into the air and open my item storage to pull out a few thousand MP worth of mana crystals to recharge my magic.

The moment the pink gems touch my skin and the absorption process begins, the crackle of sparks starting to form on my contact point makes my stomach drop. My gaze turns to witness my MP bar not budge even slightly, the roar of the Minotaur below me sounds for the incoming Energy blade to finish me off in an instant.

[You Have Died]

I make another double to send myself back to the rift.

Ember greets me before I jump in.

"Back so soon? I take it the final boss is more difficult than you thought."

My mind is moving in a million directions trying to come up with a way to actually harm the beast in that rift. I fill Ember in on what occurred, and my list of potential battle strategies for the next few attempts. He thinks to himself for a moment before replying.

"That does sound like a good plan. Have a few battles using every trick you've got to learn its attack patterns and look for a weakness. A 75-unit Final Boss is a difficult task, but I don't think it's impossible. Just be wary, monsters of this tier if left to their own means for long enough will get stronger on their own. I wouldn't be surprised if it tried to cause a rift break by absorbing the Demonic Energy inside and focusing it on a single point to make a tear if you don't keep it busy."

My eyes widen but Ember keeps talking through our link.

"It shouldn't be a problem as long as you take care of it today, there's plenty of time. Just, not an unlimited amount of it."

I turn back to the rift, but ask a final question before stepping forward.

"How about my mana problem, is there really no way to absorb it without setting off the reaction? It doesn't make any sense. Why am I able to use my buffs and regular skills without a problem, but the crystals I used immediately backfired on me?"

Ember replies.

"I for one have never attempted to absorb mana in a demonic realm, there's never been any need to do so. I have a theory as to why the realm can't handle mana in its purest form, and there is a way to mask it along with your aura. This may make the absorption process possible. However, there isn't enough time to teach you mana suppression before this rift breaks down. You'll need a much higher mana control to learn such techniques."

I let out a sigh and jump through.

"So it looks like I'll just have to work with what I've got for now."

Although this new technique of mana suppression sounds interesting, Ember knows my strength well. If I'm not strong enough to handle it yet, it can't help me for the time being."

I make it through the cave in a matter of minutes and jump down the side of the mountain using up tiny amounts of mana to safely make my way to the bottom. It may be a small waste of magic, but time is of the essence here. Burning through a few MP is worth it if I get a few more fights in against the enormous beast that's been patiently waiting for me in the open field.

The second I come into its view, the monster dashes over with blinding speed and glowing swords. I take out my wind daggers and attempt a few attacks.

The next two hours go by in a flash.

After 5 body double deaths and just over 20 slashes from the Minotaur, I've come to the conclusion that this is going to be close to impossible.

Its speed and power are too overwhelming. Every single base stat of the monster in front of me is higher than my own, even with my buffs activated. It's not that its using any unique skill I can't handle, it just has be outclassed on natural abilities in every category.

I attempt to use my Red Hydra's Rage, but it doesn't even show up in my status. This is most likely because as long as my main body is conscious, its mental strength stat will be higher and therefore the holder of the buff.

With an increase in stats like that, I may have a fighting chance, but as I am right now, it's starting to seem hopeless as I haven't even landed a single bit of damage, nor have I even fully destroyed one of its energy blades.

"Well, I might as well see if this will work."

On my next attempt, I go in with one mission: to land some damage by any means necessary. I want to see if I can make this monster bleed, and possibly wear it down more and more one battle at a time.

After running through the caves and jumping down the mountain, I aim straight for the boss with my [Instant Finale] ranked-up buff ready to use.

After narrowly dodging one slash, I don't duck for cover, I continue forward and activate all the remaining mana in my body to let out a flash of white explosive light.

I hear the monster roar, but everything goes black before I can see the aftermath. My memories are transferred back to my main body and I make another double to repeat the process. Quickly, I run back into the rift to see if my attack landed and have my buff ready for another just in case I need to use it again.

The burnt flesh and injured left side of the beast that I see once breaking through the Demonic Energy cloudline brings a smile to my face.

Although, the wisps of black and purple energy coming from the clouds above down to the beast and the slowly healing flesh is not at all what I wanted to witness following.

Still, I charge forward and manage to pull off another [Instant Finale], making the beast roar out in pain.

It got very used to my old attack strategies, making it impossible to land a hit. After a few attempts, it catches onto what I'm doing here too, but it's clear the beast does not comprehend how I've managed to come back to fight it again and again.

All it knows is it needs to avoid getting hit and heal as much as it can before the next energy blast comes to meet it.

Nevertheless, I come running through the rift and back down the mountain again for a third time to witness the scarring and damaged flesh on its right side from my second attack. This excites me. However, its left side from my first is almost healed entirely. I set off another self-destruct move again, aiming straight for its nearly healed side.

It's a success, but in coming back for a fourth time, I find that now its right side has nearly healed too.

Although I managed to land some hits, this endless cycle will only anger the beast more and won't end in its demise. I'm traveling as fast as I can and using my full power every time, there's no attack more powerful and mana efficient than this.

The time lag between each of my deaths is too long. I'm going to have to risk more than just a body double to win this fight.

Chapter 336

After being defeated a few more times, and even managing to land a few regular mana hits on the monster to gauge its strength further at the cost of valuable positioning that resulted in being defeated moments later, I've come to a conclusion.

I stand outside the rift with my hands on my hips in my true form, not bothering to make another body double just yet. I've finished every quest and have all the item dropped stored away in my item storage, and the only thing left to do is clear this rift. I recall the events of my last few battles to Ember, then let out a sigh.

"I won't be able to beat this monster in my doubled form if I want to take it out by sunrise. I'm not fast enough, nor strong enough, and don't have the means to defeat it with this nerfed strength."

My eyes wander down to my dagger stuck in the dungeon floor, and I hear a reply.

"Based on what you've told me so far, it seems like you just need a little boost. Your base form is much stronger and has access to the Red Hydra's buff. It may be a tougher battle, but I see you winning it, no question. I'll even join you inside the rift now that we know exactly what we're working with."

I nod while bending down to grip the black dagger.

"Are you sure the buff won't react in the same way mana crystals did when I absorbed them? This is the only part of all this that I'm hesitant on."

"Soul Energy cannot be destroyed by Demonic Energy. Whatever skills were safe before will be safe while using the buff as well. Plus, like I said, I'll come along and help if you need. We'll call this battle the grand finale of your training session today. I think you're going to be surprised at how far you've come."

I twirl the black dagger through my fingers, then make a body double before walking through the rift.

"I'll need all the help I can get. I want to see what reward I'll receive for winning a final boss match like this."

After this, I'm transported into the Demonic Realm with a body double on my left side and Ember on my right.

We begin venturing through the cave to face the final boss. Maybe ever since this labyrinth run, I've been too dependent on my body double. It is a great tool to use for information gathering and help with some leveling and item farming in the future, but there are some opponents that need my full strength.

I take my walk through the cave and down the mountain a bit slower this time around, and for the first time, properly channel demonic energy into my real body.

The sensation feels exhilarating. Unlike my double, this body allows me to hold over 55 units in my core. I can already feel the difference.

As we get down to the bottom of the mountain, and away from the dense clouds of raw energy, I begin to focus my own into just my left side like in training. With the rest of my body, I activate the full force of my buffs and perception skills as the sound of the Minotaur's roars fills our ears.

Ember flaps his wide black scaled wings, flying in the direction of our enemy, while my double charges forward to be a distraction.

My eyes stay locked on the beast as it comes forward.

Even now, with a small boost in stats, its movements don't look as unbeatable as they once were.

I take a deep breath in and out, then whisper under my breath.

"I only have one chance this time, so I have to make every strike count."

As these words leave my lips, a black wave of fire leaves Ember's mouth, and I watch him send a ball of black Demonic Energy from his right front claws.

I grin and activate my Red Hydra's Rage Buff, then run forward at the towering monster that begins throwing an energy attack at my body double.

The glowing purple crescent of charged Demonic Energy cuts through the air, but as the crimson power of my buff envelops my entire body, it seems like everything around me has slowed down almost by three times.

The blade soaring toward my double seems easy to dodge, but my copy releases an immense amount of MP to blast out of the way.

As soon as this happens, the wave of fire from the dragon in the sky rains down on the Minotaur, burning off a layer of its flesh with sparks and the Demonic Energy attacks that follow do a bit of damage too.

Ember's attacks from the sky do a similar amount of damage as my body double's self-destruct move. Strong, but it would still take over a dozen of them consecutively to put this beast in bad condition.

Seeing this, I run forward. The Demonic Minotaur does the same, bursting through a wall of black flames and sparks. It has disregarded the small amount of damage from the flames to focus on the real enemy before it.

Its glowing purple swords are both swung toward me, but it's now even a challenge for me to dodge. I easily change my trajectory with a side step and use a small amount of air magic to twist out of its way.

In doing this, I see the monster's blind spot for a split second and release a wave of mana-imbued fire wrapped in the Red Hydra's Aura straight toward the beast's back.

It slices through the air without a sound and cuts cleanly through the monster's hide without a single spark.

My eyebrows raise in confusion, then the explosion of flesh, flames, and sparks that follow exhilarate me more.

The soul energy covering the blade didn't react with the Demonic Energy one bit, slicing through the monster's flesh without causing a reaction at all, but once inside the energies escaped and an eruption of its full power could not be held within.

Another murderous roar from the beast shakes the very floor we stand on, but my body double has already sent a few more attacks in as a distraction for the monster to easily block with its purple blades.

As the residue clears, the creature turns to me. The look in its eyes tells me it won't underestimate me again. However, the Demonic Energy attempting to heal its wounded back will not be enough to heal it in time like our previous brawls. The attack it just took head-on expelled over 25% of the energy in its body.

If the boss is anything like the previous few, that means 3 more hits like this will end the fight.

I grip my dagger in my left hand and flaming sword in my right and run forward again, releasing a wave of flames straight at it.

Even with my stat buff advantage, at this distance, the monster has more than enough time to dodge and throw a counter, but that's exactly what I'm hoping for.

A blade of its own energy comes my way, but I jump high in the air and move to the right side as I see Ember coming up behind it on my left.

The dragon in the sky releases a wall of flames behind the beast so that when I come in close and dodge its next incoming swings, the creature has nowhere to hide.

I land another perfect slash on its blind spot.

However, this time around it pushes through the pain and throws around a counter with its swords alone at me.

I could burn through MP to air-step away, but I can sense its strength and decide to take it head-on.

Raising my Dagger in the air, I've had it charged to full saturation this entire time ready for a moment like this.

I hold the jet-black blade covered in a veil of red light above my head to block both of the enormous purple swords coming down toward me.

The pulsing light from the key around its neck and its two blades are strong. Much stronger than my own dagger, but with my vision tinted red by the buff covering my body, I let out a yell of my own to match its roar while pushing through and overpowering its slash. Raw strength, and the positioning of my blade out maneuvers its counter. The beast stumbles backward, and I take this opportunity to release a mana-based attack at its front side.

A black blade of flames covered in an ominous red aura enters its chest and disappears entirely for a fraction of a second.

Next, a golden glow comes from within, lighting up the slash mark like a crack in the earth and the rapid explosion of mana and demonic energy follows outward.

I air-step back while sending out more attacks straight toward the source, adding to the intense flames, sparks, and growing cloud of red aura residue. Despite this barrage, the faint purple glow of its charged blades at the explosion's center still remains.

Chapter 337

My eyes dart back and forth, watching both my body double and Ember on either side of the beast. The growing explosion of sparks and red aura from my last barrage of attacks is getting larger, and I feel an ominous pressure emerge from the Minotaur taking my hits head-on.

Gritting my teeth, and looking down at my MP bar that's just fallen below 30% of its remaining stores, I decide I need to finish this now.

I don't know what kind of hidden ability or special ending move this boss has, and I don't plan to give it time to show me.

I yell through my link to Ember as well as my body double while charging everything I have into my flaming sword.

"We're finishing this right now, everything you've got before it has a moment to recover."

The enormous black dragon in the sky releases a wall of flames over twice the thickness as before, and my double charges in, glowing white, to explode at the center.

I grin while swinging my flaming sword across my body and letting out a final slash with nearly every bit of MP left in me.

A glimmer of the beast's glowing red eyes can be seen through the debris, and the crossing of both its purple swords appear in the trajectory of my attack.

An earth shaking clash rings out and the two swords are shattered to pieces as my final wave of crimson and black mana-imbued fire slices the final boss in two.

Simultaneously, it flies backward into Ember's wave of flames, and the destructive force of my double adds to the magnificent display. The same golden crack in its chest like my previous strike starts to form, but this time it's followed by the release of a ball of energy that cracks the ground with a shock wave.

I'm thrown backward by the blast, and everything within 20 meters of the monster is decimated.

The streams of water are evaporated and the ground below is dug out for many meters down in a huge crater.

I still grip my dagger and sword tight, on guard for if anything happens next, but eventually see the dust settle and the burnt flesh and shattered blades all remain in a blackened pile.

Ember flaps his wings slowly, hovering in the air high above it all, and I creep forward after confirming there's nothing left of the final monster.

"We did it... just like that...?"

As the purple glimmer of the final key and a large purple stone make themselves known beneath the dissolving remnants of the beast, I let out a sigh and deactivate all my buffs.

The immense fatigue and pain throughout my body that follows is far worse than I expected...

I take a step forward to continue and collect my loot, but both of my feet feel as if boulders are tied to each of them.

My shoulders droop and my eyelids are so heavy that they shut on instinct as I drop to my knees and let the dagger and sword in my hands hit the floor.

I cough up blood and grunt but manage to stay conscious through the pain.

It's just the side effects of my Red Hydra's buff, but don't have Abby to heal me at a moment like this.

Ember flies down to meet me by my side.

"The battle is over, you did well."

I hear his voice in my head, and want to keep my eyes shut and fall asleep, but decide to ignore my instincts and power through.

"It's not over just yet. There's one last thing to do."

Pushing myself up off the ground with closed fists, I place my dagger and sword back in my item storage before walking over to the place where the monster was slain.

The movements feel like I'm lugging around so much extra weight that my feet have to be dragged and my bones ache more with every step, but once I set my mind on what I need to do, I put myself into a tunnel vision trance-like state to get it done.

I'm sure once out of this realm, I'll be able to heal myself without a problem.

I tighten my grasp around the key and enormous stone, and stare down at both of them.

Ember's voice echoes in my head again.

"Let me take you to the tablet. The hard part is done, we can leave now and you can claim your rewards."

Turning to my right, I see his black scaled wing and walk up to hop on his back.

We soar through the air for a moment before touching down in front of the tablet with a final keyhole remaining.

I pick up the two other stones from my previous fights, then Ember lifts me up to eye level with the final hole to insert the key and turn it in place. With a click, the curved stone glows bright purple like it has many times before. This time, however, it stays glowing for much longer and doesn't go out after a single pulse.

In this moment, my eyes don't have any trouble staying focused on the events taking place in front of me. All I see is the purple light grow brighter and brighter until it's almost white.

As the light grows, the area around me starts to fade from view. Eventually, I begin to feel the same weightless sensation I felt when entering this rift for the first time.

I hold my breath, and look back and forth over both shoulders as we're transported back into the grassy and rocky Minotaur dungeon we initially came from like nothing happened.

The moment mana fills my senses, I immediately begin to plunder it from the dungeon around me and activate my self-regeneration skill to repair the small amount of mana fatigue I can manage.

It helps a bit, but does not do much to negate the effects of this buff's aftermath.

Regardless, I stare down at the 3 purple stones that still glow bright on the rocky dungeon floor. They range from the size of a small fruit I could hold in my palm, to the final boss' crystal being larger in diameter than my entire open hand.

Each of them has their own unique shape, with jagged glossy black edges, but their cores all glow bright purple with a hint of white light deep within.

While fully consumed in these item drops, wondering what I'll be able to do with these stones, Ember brings two other items to my attention.

Off to my left, there's a small black key along with a ring of the same color. They both look exactly like they're made from the same material as my dagger, and they fell from the rift after it completely collapsed.

Taking these 5 items, I store them all in my item storage to examine once I have a clearer head. Now isn't the time to experiment.

I may be tired, but the grin across my face confirms that this mission is complete.

After attempting to use lifesteal for extra HP, but it having no effect because I'm already at a full bar, as well as my Hibernation skill oddly giving me no messages stating there is anything wrong with my body, the only other option on my mind is to sleep.

Without another thought, I hop on Ember's back and do exactly that. He flaps his wings and brings us high in the air above the dungeon's cloudline and out of sight. It feels like the natural thing to do before the sun rises. I'll need to be in better shape before I can hand in my quest rewards at the mercenary bar in the morning.

Chapter 338

I finally open my eyes after a long rest and am greeted by Ember as I do.

"Good morning, you've gotten back into your habit of oversleeping lately."

The white clouds and crisp air of the dungeon's sky brushes past my face at a calm speed.

I stretch to rub my face, but the feeling of pins and needles all over my body makes my movements much more difficult.

Even so, it's not nearly as bad as before I knocked out. Letting out a light cough and feeling the soreness in my abs squeeze tight as I sit up, I reply to Ember.

"How long was I out...? don't tell me it was longer than a day."

The grumble of hunger from my stomach and dry mouth tell a different story.

There's a chuckle from Ember, but he replies in a half-serious tone moments after.

"Just over three days... That Red Hydra Buff is more dangerous than I thought. It may give you power, but if we're alone on the battlefield, you're going to have to use it only when absolutely necessary. These side effects aren't something you can afford to deal with on a whim. If I were to absorb one, I'd wait until my next rank up before even thinking about attempting it."

I nod, biting my bottom lip. Ember has a point. His statement makes me rethink asking him to absorb the last remaining Soulstone. If even he thinks it's too dangerous, I won't push him to do it either. Ember is naturally powerful enough without it. I'll have to save it for when he's ready and really needs it.

Considering this fact, there are two other main things that are less urgent but still lurk at the back of my mind. The first is my trip to Valor City is delayed. Although my hibernation was cut short, I did tell my teammates it'd take over a full week, so this detour actually evens things out.

The second thing is I won't get to show off to the bartender that I cleared every quest in a single night. Three days will have to do, it's probably far less suspicious this way too.

I smile at the thought, then another comes to mind.

"The loot!"

With my eyes wide open in anticipation, I reach into my item storage and pull out everything that dropped in the Demonic Rift.

Sitting on Ember's back while clouds still pass me on both sides, I carefully examine the three obsidian-textured purple stones first, and place the small black key and smooth ring beside them to check out last.

I use all of my perception skills, but not a single detail comes up. When activating my Demonic Energy manipulation skill, I feel an eerie pressure coming off each of them unlike anything the regular non-glowing black stones showed before.

Even so, I can't absorb any energy from them, or even get a hint at what these rocks can do.

Letting out a sigh, I open my link with Ember.

"Do you know anything about these gems? You mentioned each boss would drop them before... but I can't figure out what they do."

"Tier 2 Demonic Stones? What can you do with them? Ha! All sorts of things..."

My eyebrows raise as Ember goes on.

"That is... if you were a true Demonic Monster. I don't think you'll have the ability to fuse with these stones without giving up your ability to wield mana as your base power source. So, I don't recommend it."

My excitement leaves me as fast as it came, but Ember keeps explaining.

"However, I have heard of master craftsmen fusing stones like these into armor and weapons. Similar to your Firestones and The Flame Emperor's Sword. Certain Demonic items are capable of being upgraded too."

At this news, I activate my Mythic Grade crafting skill and reach into my item storage to pull out my dagger.

Going through a process like this never occurred to me, but now that I think about it...

"My dagger can turn into a weapon like that Minotaur's swords."

The moment these words leave my mouth, I activate my Demonic Energy vision in my left eye out of instinct, and keep all my perception skills active in my right.

Instead of blue text, I can see faint system messages popping up over the dagger in light purple text as well.

It works all the same as the mana system.

The actions happen in real time. The item in front of me is re-named to [The Midnight Dagger] and a series of options to upgrade it pop up just like with my sword.

I pick up the purple stones, and just as Ember said, [Tier 2 Demonic Stones] pop up as their identity in the system.

Upgrade Item: [The Midnight Dagger]

Additional Raw Imbuement Material: [3x Tier 2 Demonic Stones]

Additional Skill or Special Attribute Imbuement: [See Available]

Stat Bonus: [+15 Units Capacity]

Complete: [YES][NO]

My eyes are glued to the text before me.

I don't utter a word, just read the system messages over and over to make sense of it.

I click into [See Available] and the only skill that pops up is Demonic Energy Manipulation. Seeing no downsides to this, I choose to accept here too. Then, pick [YES].

A flash of blue, purple, and white light glows bright in front of me and the gems in my hands start to fuse into the dagger.

I try to use my All-Seeing Eye to understand the process, but even to my refined gaze, it just seems like energy is swirling faster and faster until it stops.

Once it does, the white light dissipates, and all that remains is a weapon before me.

"It's different... but I like it..."

Grinning, I grip the new blade in my hand tight. It looks as if it's grown almost 30% larger, and its black color is somehow even darker than before.

I try to focus and find a pocket of demonic energy around to test it out, but to my surprise, there isn't a drop remaining in this dungeon.

It all must have left with the rift. Even the small amount of energy I had in my core has dissolved away as I slept.

Nevertheless, I still stare down at the new blade in awe, wondering how this rise in capacity will affect its use.

I know the previous capacity was 5 units, and when I wielded it fully, it allowed me to battle with 60 units total. Without the blade in my hand, my attacks and pool of Demonic Energy was a small amount less dense, making my use less efficient. With another boost of 15, making its capacity 20 in total, that brings my full wielding capacity up to 75 units. The same as the Minotaur I just defeated...

This leaves me with some questions.

With this new weapon upgrade, will I be able to send out energy attacks like the Demonic Boss? If so, does this mean my strength while using Demonic Energy alone has increased close to the strength of that beast too?

With these, and many other questions racing through my mind, I still place the Dagger back into my storage.

"There will be time to figure these things out later."

My eyes fall to the key and ring next.

I try a similar technique of using inspect and appraisal while activating my demonic vision on these items, but they don't show any signatures or readings back at all.

I throw them into my crafting skill, and still have no results either.

After a few minutes of tinkering, I decide it's a lost cause and ask Ember after placing them both into my storage too. He responds.

"The ring, I'm not too sure of. You may need to channel Demonic Energy into it to find out its power. That key on the other hand is definitely a Rift Key."

"A Rift Key...?."

"It's a sign that you've completed the Demonic Rift trial. If you hold onto it, that key may open up another trial if you channel enough energy into it."

My eyes light up at the thought, but Ember shuts me down instantly.

"Don't even think about it. Considering the strength of the one you just faced, the next trial will most likely be a Tier 3 rift. You'll need to get much stronger before trying something like that. I've seen a few Tier 3 trials in my day, but haven't met a Demon capable of passing the test. Don't lose that key, I can only imagine what kind of loot it'll drop."

This upgrade to my Demonic gear, and possibilities of future treasures puts a smile across my face. Both of us are in great spirits as we near the exit portal of the dungeon.

Once we touch down, I open up my storage for Ember to enter, then I step out through the blue exit portal with my next mission on my mind.

I'll be handing in my quests back at the bar.

Chapter 339

I walk out from the dungeon hub square, and the early morning sun shines down on Solara.

The guard outside gives me a nod, followed by a weird look as he doesn't recognize me. It's not unusual for hunters to stay overnight in dungeons. It's easy to assume I entered when he wasn't on his shift. He shrugs and continues on with his day.

With this, I look out at the city with a brand new disguise but still keep my red hood covering my face.

My muscles are pretty sore, but I manage to still walk down the streets at a moderate pace without signs of any limp or slowness. If I were to jump back into battle right now, it would be a bit more painful, but I'd be able to fight at 90% power without much problem.

Although I may feel a bit better, it doesn't mean I'm not exhausted for the time being. I drink some water and left over food in my item storage on the way. It perks me up a bit.

Minutes later, I walk through the front doors of the bar and see the same middle-aged bartender talking to a few lower-level hunters at the side table he mentioned to me a few days back.

The bar, once crowded with almost a hundred hunters and tables full of multicolored cocktails and drinks with flashing lights and full of laughs, is now completely empty.

As I walk closer, the man and woman turn away from the bartender at the side tables with a few handfuls of silver each and smiles across their faces as they pass me. A voice sounds out in the calmness of the morning.

"I recognize that quality of red cloak you've got there, son. You're the hunter that wanted to make his way to Valor City a few days back. I knew you were just messing with me when you said you'd show back up the next day with all the quests completed."

He lets out a chuckle, and I play along while reaching under my cloak to grab the quest papers.

"Yeah, something came up. However, I do have them all completed for you now. Three days wasted is still better than taking the train."

I smirk and place the pile of papers onto the counter.

His eyes widen with surprise, then tighten with suspicion. The battle-seasoned bartender sifts through each of the papers one by one, reading them and doing math in his head.

"Yeah right... These are quests for thousands of the highest-tier beasts in the city. It would take a team of our best fighters months to finish all these. There's no way-"

THUD

I begin pulling out the Minotaur horns first, stacking the black and red shimmering high-grade items in a pile on the bar's wooden floor.

It begins to creak under the pressure, and my thin smile grows the longer he's left speechless.

The man keeps his mouth open in shock, but doesn't say a word until I turn and start pulling out piles of rat claws and turtle shells next.

I can hear wood splintering under the weight, and he puts his hands up.

"H-Hold on a moment, let me get some item boxes from the back. We can store and count these for you in a moment."

The bartender runs into a backroom and comes out a few minutes later with a handful of small item boxes along with a kid no more than 16 years old wearing an apron. The dishwasher came out to help with the extra work.

We begin going through every quest from top to bottom. The highest paying ones like the Minotaur horns and bulk mana crystals pay out a few dozen gold each, while the middle-ranged quests pay tens of silver to a few gold coins, and lastly, some smaller ones are just a few silver.

Both the bartender and the dishwasher can't believe their eyes as I continue pulling more and more items from my cloak to match with every single quest paper.

It takes over 2 hours to sort and count everything, but finally, I'm given a total for everything by the man.

"That's the final one right there, your total after the 2% Solara Government tax on large payouts is 138 gold and 42 silver."

I nod, and the corner of my lips curls up as he starts stacking gold out from a silver safe with the Solaran Government logo on it.

This brings my total gold to just about 150, counting the leftover I had stored away from previous quests and missions back in the Vice Region. It's over half way up to where I was before spending it all on those soulstones. This time around, there's no emergency so I'll be sure to save and spend it wisely after purchasing the transport crystal.

Also, the fact that I'm capable of clearing out the quests in any city I go to and make a hundred gold a day if I please fills me with confidence. Maybe I'll do the same at the Capital in Sector 1.

"Great. Which way is the Solaran Government office?"

I grab stacks of the coins and put them under my cloak and into my storage as the man responds, giving me directions.

With that, I turn around and raise a hand in the air to wave.

"Appreciate it. Maybe I'll come back soon for some more quests."

Then, I walk out the door.

Both the bartender and the dishwasher lean back against the wall with looks of awe, but also nervousness on their faces.

I hear the kid speak under his breath as I turn the corner.

"Hey boss, that was all the high-grade quests the capital had to offer this month. The hunters aren't going to be happy about this. Who is that guy?"

He replies, but I only hear his last remark.

"Doesn't matter. Whoever hands in the quests, we'll get the same commission. It's better not to question the actions of a man who can pull something like this off in just 3 days."

I smirk and chuckle to myself. If only they knew I finished everything in a matter of hours.

If there's any backlash from me clearing all these quests, I'll be out of here before they even catch wind of it. Considering all the trouble this city has brought me, I hope I leave them with a little chaos.

With a single coin being twirled around my fingers, I finally make it to the government office and walk up the long rows of marble steps before walking through the front blue glass doors that slide open.

Chatter fills my senses as I'm met with the blinding whiteness of mana shielding on the floor and walls.

Cityfolk stand in lines behind 4 separate workers sat behind a curved white marble counter at the back of the room to look like a semicircle. Each worker has a small booth with the same clear blue glass as the door, covering their upper bodies above the counter.

Upon closer inspection, it's filled with mana too, similar to the walls, ceiling, and floor. Everything is protected by shielding in this office.

Ding

A green light pops up above one of the booths and a line moves forward. Once someone steps up to be helped, it changes to red just like the other three.

I cross my arms and wait my turn.

"How can I help you today, Sir?"

After less than 10 minutes of waiting, a young woman greets me at her booth with a smile. I reply.

"I'd like to purchase a transport crystal to Sector 1. Valor City, to be exact."

Her eyes widen, then her mouth opens but no words come out. She swallows, raises a finger, then looks down at a small silver tablet before tapping it a few times and looking up at me again.

"Of course. It's not every day someone comes here to buy one, but we still have a few left in stock. Usually, people just take the train."

She looks down at her silver tablet and taps it a few more times before turning it to me to show bold black numbers.

"The current going price is 24 gold and 11 silver."

I reach into my storage and place the requested amount on the white marble table without hesitating for a moment.

"That's perfect. I'll take one."

Chapter 340

The woman behind the counter takes my coins, then walks into a backroom before finally coming back with a small white concealment case. She opens it up for a moment just to show the white crystal inside, before closing it quickly and pressing a small button on her workstation beneath the counter.

A portion of the blue glass window slides open, and she pushes the rectangular case through. As I grab it, she speaks to me.

"I'm sure you know how these work. You don't need an explanation, do you?"

I nod while accepting the box, remembering back to the crystal I used after defeating the behemoth in the Vice City labyrinth a while back. It transported me beneath the Association building right before we headed off as a team to the dark continent.

"Of course. It's a one-time use transport spell. I just break the crystal and I'll be teleported to Valor City, right?"

She smiles and nods with a sparkle in her eye.

"Yes, exactly that. You'll be sent to a teleport platform right outside. Valor City is the City of Commerce, so keep an eye on your coins at all times. Those without them very seldom leave. Though, I don't think I have to tell someone like you that twice."

She gives me a thin smile, and I give one back with a quick nod. However, the atmosphere slightly shifts, and a hint of sorrow shows in her eyes.

Then, she gives another bright smile just like when I entered making me question if I imagined her brief change of tone.

"Anyway, is there anything else we can help you with today, Sir?"

I open my mouth to ask what she meant by that but decide to brush it off. Keeping track of your money is good advice for anyone.

"This is all I need, thanks. Have a good rest of your day."

I turn and walk out the door I came, then begin making my way down the marble steps.

The morning sun is about to come directly overhead to mark the middle of the day as I step into a less crowded street and take out the white concealment case.

"Well, there's no reason not to go right now. I've waited long enough."

After taking a deep breath in and out, the concealment container pops open with a light click and I waste no time in taking out the crystals and crushing them in my fist. A white light takes over my body and I feel weightless for a fraction of a second before my boots squeak against a glossy tile floor.

The desolate desert city street around me fades, and the chatter of what sounds like a crowded train station fills my ears.

Once my vision comes back to me, that's exactly what I see...

Looking down, I'm standing on a large circular tiled surface about 10 meters in diameter, with a large white sign above me on the wall just behind my head labeled [Teleport Platform]. In front of me, a subway system is moving like any normal city would.

Everyone is dressed in much darker clothing here; the red cloak I wear sticks out like a sore thumb. My darker complexion also doesn't match the majority of much lighter skin tones of the locals here.

My gaze travels over everyone and I quickly change my appearance to match the average person in the crowd before taking my hood down.

I slowly step off the raised platform and walk through the crowd. As I do, a small transport train pulls up, similar to ones used in the Vice Region. Its brakes screech to a halt and a flash of white light appears behind me as another man appears on the transport platform right where I left.

A long moving staircase is visible off to my right about 30 meters away, and that seems to be where everyone getting off this train is moving to. I follow the crowd and ride it upward.

The blue sky of the outside world comes into view as I step off the top of the escalator and breathe in the crisp and cold air while taking in my surroundings.

There are small shops that line the streets, selling all kinds of items. Not just hunting gear, but home appliances, food, and even children's toys and personal gadgets.

Everyone that gets off the train below begins heading off in all directions, but again, most head primarily one way.

I scan the streets one more time before deciding to follow the crowd.

The sidewalks are hard, and the smell of food from nearby shops fills the air. People of all background line the streets. Some are beggars, others are busy salarymen, and a couple stand outside shops yelling out deals while holding up signs to try and get people to come inside. Most of the storefronts rise up 1 or 2 floors at most, and some even have apartments above them. Off in the distance, I see a few complexes rising up to 4 or 5 stories, but nothing is close to the high rises in Solara.

I murmur under my breath.

"Is this really what they call the City of Commerce?"

It's hardly even as impressive as my hometown back in the Vice Region. It's definitely interesting, but not what I expected to see from the so-called strongest and richest city in the Dark Continent.

Still, I enjoy my time and stroll the streets, enjoying the sight of a new city. The crowds from the station start to disperse more and more to the point where I'm not quite sure who came off it and who is a native citygoer here.

I decide to fit in as well and drop into a hunters' clothing store that looks to be my style. Although I could use my conceal skill to make a disguise myself, I'd rather not constantly think about and use up mana on something I could just buy cheaply at a store. Keeping my face concealed is more than enough of a mental drain.

I'm greeted by a kind old man at the back of the shop with a wave as I walk in the door and begin browsing their selection. However, I'm soon disappointed by none of the items surpassing 20-30% buffs even in their most expensive sections of the shop. This seems apparent on my face. The man who greeted me speaks up again.

"Is there anything in specific you're looking for, Sir? You seem to be from out of town. That cloak is of incredible quality, I can see from here you may need to go into the city to find what you're looking for."

I turn to him and raise an eyebrow.

"If it's that obvious I'm not from around here, then yes, I'm looking for something to substitute for this gear. But--"

He finishes my sentence before I even realize it.

"But none of my items stand up to the buffs given by your current ones, it seems."

He gives me a sly smile.

"Well, if you're just looking to fit in for the time being, I have something that may suit your fancy."

He shuffles under his desk counter, and I walk over out of curiosity. This old man knows exactly the situation I'm in from a single glance, so whatever he has to offer must be worth a look.

He places a small silver ring on the counter, and I immediately use my appraisal skill to see what it is.

[Silver Ring of Appearance v16][72/72]

My eyebrows scrunch, and I don't know what to make of it. The old man speaks again.

"You've never seen one before. You really are new to town, aren't you?"

I nod, but he continues.

"Now before you complain about wasting an item slot on your status, I assure you this doesn't count as an active item. It's already infused with all the mana necessary to do its job."

He slips the ring on his finger, and his entire appearance shifts. The old man's outfit changes to a long black classy coat and formal pants and shoes to match. It looks just like what the business men in the crowds outside are wearing. My smile widens and I reply.

"A one-time use concealment item."

I think back to the time I wore contact lenses similar to what this ring does, but the fact that it's already infused with mana is another thing that catches my attention.

"And you said it doesn't count as an active item? It's already infused with mana?"

He takes off the ring and places it back on the counter.

"That's right. This model lasts 72 hours, and it comes in 20 different versions. This one is version 16."

He smiles wide while pulling up a case of identical rings from beneath the counter.

"Feel free to try as many on as you'd like. Just don't wear them too long, I don't want future customers to have too much time missing. They're just a silver each, by the way."

I nod while picking up the ring he just took off and sliding it on a finger.

Nothing changes at all in my eyes, and when I check my status, nothing pops up at all. I move over to the closest mirror, and sure enough, the same black coat and outfit is on me now, fitted perfectly.

However, less than a minute goes by before the [72/72] on the ring ticks down to [71/72]. I let out a sigh as I realize this is the customer copy he shows everyone. I roll my eyes, but then smirk as an idea pops into my head.

Using my mana manipulation skill, I infuse a few dozen MP into the ring, and the bar turns back up to [72/72]. I let out a chuckle and think to myself. It looks like I don't have to buy more than one after all.

I reach into my storage and put a single silver coin on the counter.

"I'll take this one; that's all I think I'll need for my time here in Valor City."

He quickly takes the coin off the counter but looks up to me with a concerned impression.

"You're really going up to the City? What business do you have there?"

I look back at him with an equally confused and concerned look.

"I thought I was already here...?"