

D. Diver 431

Chapter 431

The wind speeding by my sides is powerful as we fly above the clouds. Ember slowly flaps his wings, and we get faster and faster with every strong gust, soaring higher into the air and further into the Dark Continent.

Every few minutes, clusters of tiny lights fly by below us, and I try to picture what kind of city we're passing by.

From Fisher's descriptions, I'm picturing small towns and villages, but as we get further in, the lit-up cities get much larger.

After just under an hour passes, a straight line of bright lights catches my attention, and I take a closer look, boosting my perception skills and staring down into the darkness of night to make out what seems to be a massive wall separating the mountainous, rocky, and grasslands region of Sector 1, and on the other side, an arid wasteland of long-stretching desert leading to Sector 2. The wall looks just like the one my team climbed over to get into the Dark Continent, and with one long-range scan with my All-Seeing Eye, I can tell it's imbued with mana to keep people separated.

There must be gates, or some regulation to allow travel between sectors, but it seems like limiting crossing is a big thing in this specific section of land. However, at this height, no one's stopping us.

After crossing the border here, we'll be changing our flight path from east, to more southbound, back in the general Direction of Sector 4. However, the Abyss is the only thing separating the bottom half of Sector 2 and the top half of Sector 4, as the massive cloud of darkness sits and grows in the middle of the Dark Continent.

Once we cross over into Sector 2 territory, the smell of burning wood and other building materials begins to fill the air, filling pockets of the sky with smoke and smog.

Ember flaps his wings, changing directions and soars even higher, dodging the pockets of pollution that float up in the air, but the farther in we travel, the harder it gets to avoid them.

More towns below are destroyed, left in cinders and letting plumes of smoke into the sky while others are still half occupied with lights shining through the smog.

The large clusters of light get closer and closer together the further into the Sector we travel, and eventually, the hint of a rising sun peeks over the horizon at the same time the far tips of my All-Seeing Eye's senses pick up on an absurdly high mana reading.

Or, to be more precise, over a hundred of them.

I've fallen into a calm state, resting on the warm glossy scales of Ember's back as he glides through the sky, but as I perk up, his voice jolts me back to reality.

"You can sense those too, Master?"

I reply, nodding to myself as hundreds of dungeon portals show up in my mind's eye far down below us.

"Yeah, I can sense them alright... it looks like we're here. This is the canyon Fisher was talking about. Dive down lower, but keep your Stealth skill activated. We're a good distance from the canyon, but I still sense some life right below us too."

We dip down through the cloud line, and the orange morning sun illuminates a wide landscape view of desert.

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It looks like we're right back in the Sector 4 territory with rolling hills of sand and small mountainous rock formations with no wildlife in sight for kilometers all around.

Far in front of me, there are three prominent details that stick out to me.

A settlement, a canyon, and an Abyss.

The first is the black plumes of smoke coming from what looks to be a large developed area of what used to be a city.

Tall buildings tower above the desert, but none of them compare to Valor city at all. At most, the tallest tower I see is 10 stories in height. From so high up in the sky, it's hard to see exactly what's going on, but there seems to be a 2-kilometer-wide section of village with a few high towers, densely packed lower-class housing, and the remnants of merchants' shops and restaurants.

Surrounding this central village about 5km outward connected by dirt roads, there are smaller individual houses and even little neighborhoods, but each of them is connected to large rectangular warehouses scattered all over the desert. Some are blackened and burned to the ground, while others are still silver and look as good as new, but their doors are broken into and raided with minimal exterior damage.

I do a general wide enemy detection scan and sense about 400 people scattered around the town below. None of them instantly stand out as a threat capable of seeing through my cloaking defenses, so I don't bother mentioning it to Ember.

I look up from the town and turn my gaze to the canyon visible past the city; this is what caught my senses previously, so this is what I'd like to look through first.

I point to the massive hole in the desert that's barely visible to the naked eye and speak to Ember through our link.

"The town can wait, our first order of business here is to mark teleport points for my dungeon walker perk and also..."

My gaze tracks back up to the canyon, then further into the distance to look at the thick dark cloud of dense Demonic Energy sitting stagnant in the desert.

"I want to do a quick survey of the Abyss. I haven't been around energy like this in a while."

"Of course."

Ember soars over the destitute remains of what I can only assume was the production town run by the previous Sector 2 leader. It looks like it was built around farming the dungeons in this canyon and transporting the materials to the small villages to mass produce items at scale.

Multiple roads branch out from the city through the desert and wind their way to the canyon, but once I do a full enemy detection scan to see if there is anyone nearby, the sensation of dozens of level 100-130 readings hit my senses.

I would assume it to be just rogue hunters out here trying to farm the open dungeons, but the fact that they all have body hardening skills makes me think otherwise.

As my enemy detection perk shows visuals of my enemies and Ember descends down to the edge of the canyon, I see a horde of mutant cyclops monsters violently fighting each other and trying to make their way out of the depths of the large desert ravine. Nearby, a D-Grade dungeon portal glows red and lets out more and more of these mobs.

As we get even closer, I register a few more similar bizarre lower grade dungeon break events even deeper in other parts of the 20km wide canyon that seems to dip down so low I can't visually see to the bottom.

There are rocky winding paths, and multiple levels and ledges that make for a very interesting array of cliffs, valleys, and even small amounts of plants and flowing water down in the lower regions, but the darkness and shadows hide most of these parts to the naked eye.

However, my All-Seeing Eye and enemy detection skills are able to do a full scan.

"Looks like 6 breaks, 143 Stable Dungeons, and 2 oddballs. I can't tell if those last two are just really strong dungeons or Labyrinths. I'll have to go down and check them all out for myself."

Ember and I come to a stop at the edge of the canyon, looking down into the darkness to see a few blue glowing portals light up portions with mana as the morning sun finally fully breaks over the horizon.

The hot desert sun hits my skin while I activate my item storage and let Ember hop back inside.

"Summon me back if there's an interesting battle to be fought. You don't need me for dungeon exploration and skill farming."

I nod and comment back before he disappears into the white spatial magic.

"You're right. Over a hundred new dungeons to explore... They may not all give off strong readings, but there must be some unique items and skills I haven't found yet in here. I'm about to have some fun."

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"Body Double."

I create two clones and have them appear on both sides of me. Then, speak up as we all look over the edge of the canyon.

"Alright, I want approximate levels, loot type, and monster names etched in stone using an earth magic skill marked next to every single one of these dungeons."

I look at the clone to my left, reaching into my item storage and pulling out a teleport crystal.

"Once the sun comes fully up, I want you to use one of these and go bring Arie out here. He's clearly very focused on learning about Demonic Energy and making it into the Abyss, so I might as

well teach him a few things and figure out what he knows that makes him want to go in there so badly."

My double nods and catches the crystal as I turn to the other.

"You, stay in stealth while marking the dungeons. I don't mind if wandering hunters see our labeling, but I don't want to be seen dipping in and out of every single dungeon. Your main job is to absorb every unique skill in monsters you find in these dungeons. Just like when I killed the sector 2 leader, the craftsmanship skill transferred to my main body, so farm every last one of them."

"Of course."

"Also, don't clear those 6 breaks. Loot any unique mutant monsters, and keep any hordes from leaving the canyon, but don't beat their boss rooms. I want to see what happens if they're left unattended for long periods of time."

I turn around as the faint sound of a small explosion hits my enhanced hearing to see plumes of black smoke rising from a warehouse that was previously unvandalized. I cross my arms and look back to my doubles, deactivating my stealth skill, but putting my Qi barrier all the way up to maximum and using my cloak to turn my appearance into that of a low-level hunter carrying a steel sword on my back and leather armor on my chest and legs.

"In the meantime, I'm going to check out the city undercover. Whatever is in those warehouses sure is making quite the commotion. It shouldn't take more than a few hours for me to figure out exactly what's going on."

At this, my two doubles jump down into the darkness of the canyon and I turn to start walking down a dirt path back to the settlements. It only takes a few minutes before I make my way closer to one of the newer warehouses being raided.

I keep my distance but use a light inspect and appraisal scan to see hunters level 20 to 150 all rummaging through crates of E and D Class gear stacked to the roof in these warehouses.

They all wear small green pieces of fabric hanging from their belt with an emblem that looks like a diamond on it, but the hunters themselves look very different from each other. Some wear hunting gear, while others wear more casual apparel, some even look as if they're fresh out of a business meeting in suits and ties.

The odd crowd and even more peculiar systematic pattern of rummaging and passing items down in a line to load up on a cart as it's hauled out somewhere else confuses me even more.

I walk by with an eyebrow raised, but don't go near the opening of the warehouse where they're loading and entering so none of them even bat an eye as I stroll on past.

Another 5 minutes of quickly walking goes by and I see another group of 10 or so men wearing the same green flags on their waists doing the same thing on a smaller storage unit that seems to be half burned down on the other side. They're foraging for the goods that haven't been destroyed.

Again, no one cares to turn their head as I walk by in the bright open light of day.

Once I make my way into the center of town, I'm surprised to see no one outside.

There's a center square with a large fountain that doesn't flow anymore sitting dry in the center of a nicely tiled walkway. Surrounding it on all sides are vacant shops and small markets that look like they used to sell clothes and food.

Above some of the stores are what look to be apartments for the shopkeepers, and behind most of the shops, there are residential areas and even small parks where many people must have once lived.

However, there isn't a soul in sight.

It's not even the case of it being too early in the morning either, it's just that the whole town has been evacuated.

Using a wide perception scan, most people are located only in the outer regions and sticking to a few select places. No one but me stands in the center here.

I walk forward to the other side of town where I haven't ventured yet with a puzzled expression on my face, but soon sense two figures walking toward me that pique my interest.

A level 296 and level 313 come out from behind a narrow street and make eye contact with me immediately.

I sensed them the moment I left the center of town and made my way in their direction because their presence is the only one not moving away from the center of the settlement, and it doesn't seem like they're occupied in foraging for materials.

One of them is a large man that towers over the other. He would be more intimidating if his size was purely muscle, but even from here, his rounded face tells me it's not all pure strength.

The man next to him is completely the opposite, lanky and thin, and barely making it up to his partner's shoulders. Based on the gear he wears and the daggers on his waist, I can tell this guy relies on his speed. Sporting a fresh scar across his left eye, it's clear he's not afraid to fight either.

Both of them are far below my league, but the red fabric hanging from their waists with a curved knife emblem on it makes me curious.

The deep tone of the larger man's voice rings out through the empty street.

"Who do you think you are walking onto the Crimson Dagger's territory at a time like this? Do you have a death wish, man?"

His skinny partner chuckles and pulls both the daggers from his waist, spinning them in his hands, and reflecting a red glow off the morning sun on the tips of the blades.

He adds to his partner's words while eyeing me up and down.

"You aren't with the Green Mist, are you? Explain yourself, because we're going to have some problems if you don't start talking right now!"

As I think about what to reply, my All-Seeing Eye picks up on the presence of a skill activating. The visual of a dark purple, mana-imbued, shadowy hand erupts out of the body of the dagger wielder and comes shooting my way.

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My eyes track the odd phenomenon, but the mana reading coming off it is so low I don't bother trying to dodge.

I just continue walking forward with an innocent look on my face, responding out loud to the duo.

"I'm not sure what you're talking about. I'm new to town. I just ventured out here from a village up north. Heard there was opportunity to snag some free loot now that the Sector Leader went missing. Was I correct?"

As I finish these words, the shadowy hand expands and makes a motion to grasp around me, but the second it hits my Qi barrier, it disintegrates and disperses on the spot. Nearly invisible black and purple energy sizzles away and gushes out to the sides, evaporating into the air.

However, I don't bat an eye and walk forward like nothing happened.

The larger man still looks at me with a menacing glare, but the skinny dagger user's eyes widen and he steps back.

"W-What was that-"

As his hand of mana mysteriously disappears, I activate appraisal to see exactly what just happened. The readings that meet my eyes are quite interesting.

The large man has an [Extreme Strength] skill at the [Special Grade] rating, and his partner has a skill I've never seen before called [Bind] rated at [Legendary Grade].

From the look of these two, I never would have expected such high-grade skills, my only theory that comes to mind is they stuck their noses in an upgrade crystal storage locker of some sort to artificially boost these ratings. The gear they're wearing is shiny and unused, plus there is practically 0 mana control aura coming off of them. At level roughly 300 each, they should be putting out at least a little bit of aura.

This is what a prime example of artificially power-leveled hunters look like.

As I'm thinking this the lanky man continues to speak, turning his head to the larger fellow.

"Raze, hold onto this weakling while I make sure he gets a good taste of my daggers. He's wearing some kind of protection item, my Bind attack was reflected..."

The taller man smirks, turning to me and begins to glow bright gold.

"You got it, Fin. Let's see how he handles this."

He stomps on the ground and makes large cracks in the nicely stone-tiled road, then comes charging toward me.

I roll my eyes as he opens his arms to try and bear hug me with his strength alone, and put up a light wind barrier around my Qi to give the man a chance to run if he wants, but he doesn't slow down at all, grabbing a hold of the outer layer of the invisible twisting mana barrier, yelling to his partner as it begins to rip his outer layer of armor to shreds.

He has no grip on me at all as he just hugs violent wind magic a few centimeters above my skin, but doesn't back off and just bares the pain. I don't bother moving

"I got him! Do it now!"

Fin runs in, attempting to slash my midsection with the two blades soaked in red liquid.

My appraisal skill gets a reading on these as he gets closer.

[Stainless Steel Dagger Set][+300 Speed][+250 Agility]

[Elixir of Suggestion]

I activate my All-Seeing Eye as the daggers get closer to my thin barrier of wind and their in-depth description intrigues me.

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[Elixir of Suggestion]

Grade: C+

Info: If this elixir is ingested or injected into the bloodstream of an enemy, their senses and cognitive reasoning will be dulled for up to 12 hours. Orders will be followed without question and care for one's own life and wellbeing will be forgotten.

Crafter's Note: This elixir's effects tend to lessen greatly above level 400 hunters, and are negligible to those who have Ranked-Up. Excessive usage may lead to dependency, small dosages are suggested.

Just like my low powered wind shielding slightly comes out from my Qi barrier, I allow a large portion of my cloak to flutter out of the barrier on my other side where the dagger user is attacking.

In my perception, it looks like just pure black fluttering mana-manifested fabric is peeking out.

However, to the rogue with one eye approaching, my concealment abilities make it look as if my entire right side is wide open to an attack.

He lets out a victorious yell and slashes through the weightless swirling black energy, but in his field of view, he's made two deep gashes on my side and sunk the red elixir deep into my bloodstream already.

"Let him go Raze, we got another one."

The golden glow of the giant man fades and I decide to play the part, falling backward to the floor and holding my side.

At first, I was just going to kill both of them, take the scrawny one's skill, and move on with my spectating. But the fact that they're just trying to sedate me piques my curiosity. I'll hold off on my initial plan for the time being.

Fin puts the daggers back on his waist while breathing heavily, and looking straight at me. He throws a red cloth with a dagger logo on it down toward me.

"Stand up, put this on, follow us, and don't say a word. You've got yourself a new job."

They both start to chuckle, and the tall man named Raze pulls out an HP potion to heal his wounded arms, muttering under his breath about how he needs to get new armor after that.

Both of them don't even turn back to check on me, it seems like they've done this quite a few times before and have confidence in the elixir's powers.

I stand to my feet and let out a sigh, following them through the streets without saying another word. If they're going to take me right to the action, I won't try and make things any more difficult than it has to be.

The sun continues to rise overhead as we walk through this other part of town.

Teams of about ten to fifteen are all working to clear out random warehouses and homes scattered all over the desert. Assembly lines are set up and none of their faces show any emotion.

Hunters, Businessmen, and average villagers all work together to load up large carts and haul them off to random locations. Everyone on this side of town has the same red fabric attached to their waistline.

It's becoming a lot more clear to me that all of these people are under the influence of this Elixir of Suggestion, but the fact that there are two rival gangs doing seemingly the same thing on opposite sides of town makes my mind wander.

As I bite my bottom lip and look up at the blue sky and white clouds, the Dagger user calls out to me.

"Watch your step, we're going down."

We walk into a small tavern that seems to be abandoned from the outside, but after walking through the front doors it's clear what this place really is.

The inside of the old bar is completely emptied out, and right in front of the bar is a wide-open staircase down into the basement that looks like an awkwardly placed storm cellar in the middle of the wooden flooring.

The two men disappear down into it, and I follow right after.

I can sense an abundance of magic items down below us, High D and C grade items line the walls in piles and some decent E and D grade items are even worn by about 20 people all between level 20 and 200 standing still in two single file lines.

As I make my way down the flight of steps, this is exactly what I see.

The room is dimly lit with no decorations on the grey stone walls. Lines of men and women in new shiny gear all stare blankly in one direction.

The scrawny man points to them and speaks to me.

"Get in line behind the closest person and don't move a muscle before we get back to give you orders. We'll be heading out in two squads to raid a newly discovered warehouse soon. I have to go check some things with the boss."

I walk over to the nearest line and the two men walk off back up the stairs to leave the room in silence.

I let out a sigh the moment they leave, disappointed at how easy it was to infiltrate their ranks. It's clear these two aren't professionals, but they're definitely using some heavy duty magic items here. Anyone below a Ranked-Up status is at risk of falling victim to its spell.

Whatever skill or item was used to imbue this elixir, its no joke. I tap the middle-aged man in front of me on the shoulder a few times, but he doesn't budge or react at all.

I step out of line and wave my hand in front of his face too and he doesn't move or even blink. Then, proceed to do the same for every other person in these two lines.

After none of them seem to be conscious or able to think for themselves, I shrug and begin appraising all the gear and items left around in piles in this underground safehouse.

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As I continue to pace inside the small stone room, I expand my All-Seeing Eye and enemy detection perks to follow the path of the two men that just left.

To my surprise, they head back to the center of the city.

It doesn't take more than a few minutes for the duo to make it all the way to the fountain square where I stopped not too long ago.

Once they do, a large reading of dense mana erupts from the ground in that area for a few seconds, then both of the men are completely gone from my radar.

I raise an eyebrow at this, and think about using a much higher percentage of my mana control to do a deep scan of the city to see where they went. But doing that would be like putting a signal of my own out, probably much more intense than the one I just witnessed.

It may not be a bad idea, but I'd like to scan my surroundings bit by bit first before I go all out with a scan that could give up my own location to someone with exceptionally keen eyes.

However, while pondering this situation, a system notification rings in my mind.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Screech][Legendary Grade]

My attention turns to this, and I open my status to see what kind of skill my body double just farmed.

Using my All-Seeing Eye, I read over the description a few times to conclude this isn't a skill I'll likely be activating often. It allows the caster to let out an ear-shattering screech up to 50 times louder than an average yell.

Some of the special and legendary grade perks here state that this skill can be used to increase the volume of a normal voice over long areas, but this kind of skill isn't useful for a stealthy situation like this.

Still, I'm happy there are some unique dungeons in that canyon, and by the look of how fast a new skill was farmed, this shows good odds that this one probably won't be the last today.

As I close my status, the large influx of mana from the center of town comes back, and the two men show up in my enemy detection radar as clear as day.

I get back in line, and once a few minutes pass, they come back down the steps inside the tavern, Fin, the dagger user, crosses his arms and speaks up.

"Alright, I'm taking the team with the new guy. All of you follow me, we're doing the first 6-hour shift right now."

The man at the front of the line I'm in perks up and begins to follow Fin. Then, everyone else in line does the exact same thing, following in an orderly fashion, so I do the same.

As we leave up the stairs, the larger man says a similar thing to the second group, and they all begin following him too.

We walk out into the open air and begin making our way further away from the center of town toward an empty small section of village. Fin speaks up from the front of the line as we approach a sturdy-looking locked steel door on a large wooden barn.

"Here's one of the irregular warehouses. There may be something interesting in here. Hunters with skills, crack that door open. Weaklings, stand back and take note of what's being hauled away. We need records kept of all items sorted."

The one-eyed man pulls out a large wheeled cart from an item box around his waist, using the invisible ghost-like hands to gently place it next to the door as two men begin to bash it open with body-hardening covered fists.

It opens with a crash, and everyone floods inside to begin their work, getting into lines and sorting through the piles of meticulously marked untampered goods lining the walls of the warehouse.

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I do a full appraisal to find there must be at least two thousand items of decent quality in here. Some E grade, mostly D, and a few are even C.

The dagger user speaks up again.

"C-Grade gear goes in the cart, E and D will be sorted and left to pick up at a later date. Get to work! I'll be surveying the area for any Green Mist intruders. If you see anyone with a green flag on their waist, you're ordered to kill them on sight."

He turns away as the last of us make our way into the wooden barn and begins moseying around the streets nearby. I walk in and pretend to be productive, but in reality, I'm just doing a bit of shopping for myself.

Some time goes by, and I slip a few crates of C-Grade HP and MP potions into my storage along with interesting looking unmarked crates with higher mana readings coming off of them, but overall most of this gear is just common low-grade goods.

It's just items that would be sold to guilds training up new recruits, mercenaries for their armies and workers, or local shops in any Hunter-friendly city.

None of the mind controlled worker do or say anything when they witness me acting differently than them, they just carry on with their tasks as usual.

I would be bored out of my mind, but the constant ringing in my head is keeping me very occupied.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Phantom Step][Legendary Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Flare][Legendary Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Confusion][Legendary Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Blast][Legendary Grade]

Four new skills come in, and they're much more interesting than the first one I received. Phantom Step is a movement technique that creates multiple phantom-like visuals, confusing the opponent so they're unsure of which direction the caster really went.

Flare summons an incredibly bright light used for blinding an opponent to escape from battle or use a sneak attack. The Legendary grade perk allows it to be ejected from the caster, with mana control strength varying its distance of the shot.

Confusion has similar properties to my Intimidation skill, but it leaves the ones afflicted in a dazed state only until the skill is deactivated.

Lastly, Blast allows the caster to explode anything they make contact with. It is a self-destructing skill, so if the user activates it on the wrong portion of their body or channels too much mana into it, it could be a fatal move.

While studying the intricacies of these new skills and wondering how to add them to my usual battle strategies, I continue to keep a close eye on the dagger wielder that patrols the streets around this block.

He keeps doing the same routes, going in circles and staying within 200 meters or so from the warehouse. His [Bind] skill is sporadically activated every time he rounds a sharp corner like he's on guard and ready to fight.

Interestingly enough, the further I let my detection range go out, the more fascinating this city becomes.

At first, it seemed random and unorganized, but after about 3 hours of studying the movements of everyone within a 5km radius from myself, it's clear to see there's many teams of level 250-350 guards handling small sectors of land.

There are warehouses being raided systematically, and the C-Grade and higher items are all being separated from the E and D grades brought to different safe houses.

This would be very standard behavior, if it wasn't for the fact that both this Crimson Dagger gang and the Green Mist on the other side of town were doing the exact same looting strategy.

The systematic process that both of them loot and separate their gear is identical to each other, and it doesn't make any sense.

On some of the spare material in this warehouse, I begin writing down an exact mapped-out system of where every guard is located, and which warehouses are currently being looted while also marking ones I pick up on my perception skill that have seemingly not been found or messed with yet.

I slowly let out more of my mana control once I'm positive no one in this general vicinity is capable of detecting me, and the only mystery that still remains is a large rectangular bunker I find on my radar beneath the fountain in the middle of the city.

It's hidden well, but once I begin using over one third of my mana control solely on perception skills, it begins to appear to me.

However, even if I can sense that it's there, it doesn't mean I can see inside. The mana shielding covering this bunker is incredibly strong. The more mana control I use up, the more I believe it's possibly on par with the shielding back in the walls of the Galeheart Tower.

For some reason, I can't see through them at all. That's exactly where Fin and Raze left to go meet their so-called Boss earlier this morning. This is exactly where I'd like to go next.

Fin comes strolling back toward the barn on his routine route, but this time stops in front with his hands on his hips and calls out.

"Alright, 10-minute lunch break. I don't want all of you dying on me, so stop working for a moment so you can eat and drink these."

He pulls out bars of food and dried meat that look like they've been sitting in a storage locker for years along with cases of water bottles tinted light pink.

Immediately, I pick up on small traces of mana in the liquid, and my Appraisal skill detects traces of the same [Elixir of Suggestion] in the drinks.

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Everyone around begins to line up and take the rations, then Fin speaks up again, looking through the people that approach him.

"Alright, who was it keeping notes this time? I forget who's who sometimes, you all look alike to me, it'd be a lot easier if I asked your names before you all went under."

He chuckles to himself and makes a light remark under his breath.

"Oh well... the ones that aren't useful are just going to be left to die out in this desert once we're done clearing this town out anyway."

Then, turns to a woman who approaches him carrying a stack of notes.

She has tan skin, dark black hair cut short just above her shoulders, and looks to be no older than myself. Possibly 20 or 21 if I had to guess.

Despite the eerie lifeless stare everyone has on, her eyes look a bit different. They're light blue, so light that they almost look white, but there seems to be a hint of consciousness underneath them.

Still, the young woman gives the stack of notes to Fin without saying a word.

He takes them in a quick and aggressive manner, turning away, and reading them on his own, muttering under his breath again for everyone to hear.

"Damn, another dud warehouse. A few gold worth of C-Class gear, but nothing too special. Oh well, it's good enough to give as a mid-day report to the Boss."

Then, turns back around to face everyone while stuffing the papers marking down all the tracked inventory in his back pocket.

"Alright. Drink up, eat up, then back to work! I want to see everything cleared out of here before we move onto the next warehouse of the night shift. You got it?"

He looks at the woman that's standing still right in front of him, and a single tear falls from her eye. I watch her lower lip quiver as well, and curiously do a full scan to find she's a fairly high level with a skill I've never seen before.

[Lv. 267]

[Moonlight's Gaze]

The man grits his teeth at the sight of her small bit of defiance, then yells in her face.

"That means you too!"

He gets closer to her and a moment of realization hits him.

"Oh right, you're that girl... One of the only ones still useful from that wandering group of villagers we captured in Sector 4, weren't you? Your leader sure put up quite the fight against the Boss."

He scoffs.

"It doesn't matter now though, does it? You know you'll just be a mindless pawn for the rest of your life, so drink up and get back to it."

He uses his [Bind] skill to grab an extra bottle from the pile, making it float in the air over to her as she accepts it without question. Then smirks and yells at her again.

"You know what, no food for you, just a double dose of Elixir. That'll teach you. Drink these and get back to work."

He grabs his daggers from his waist, pointing them at her while forcing the drinks into her hands using his bind skill. Then uses the same dark hands to push her elbows to bring the pink bottles closer to her trembling lower lip.

I watch in disgust, but as soon as the bottle touches her mouth, I decide to act.

"I wanted to stay here and watch how things worked a little longer, but I've seen enough."

I point a single finger at the man from over 10 meters away and let out a blade of advanced wind magic so dense and thin it'd be impossible to see without Ranked-Up perception skills.

It slices through both of his arms and severs the floating purple hand in the air in an instant.

The drinks fall from her grip, hitting the sandy desert floor beside the grunt's severed arms still gripping the crimson daggers.

He yells out in pain, looking around to see who cut off his arms, falling to his knees as a puddle of blood begins to form.

"H-How? How did you do this? You-"

With eyes full of rage and confusion, he turns his head side to side, trying to find who did such a thing to him.

I walk through the small crowd of workers with my arms crossed, staring right at the man who's begun to bleed out on the floor. Then, stand over him and begin asking some questions while activating my telekinesis skill.

"How long have all of you been in business here? Seems like quite the operation you've got, huh?"

I pull the paper notes from his back pocket before they get stained by the pile of blood forming in the sand. He activates his bind skill at the same moment, but I use Plunderer to drain every last drop of MP from his body before the dense purple hands can fully form.

"Come on, tell me something. I was having fun spying on all of you. At least tell me your leader's name. Or am I going to have to find that out for myself when I give him a visit?"

He grits his teeth, and I hear a small crack of glass coming from inside his mouth, then the sour smell of poison hits my nose.

"Oh no, you don't..."

I use the same thin wind slash to cut the man in two.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Bind [Legendary Grade]

[YES][NO]

I choose yes and shake my head.

"He was not in the mood to talk at all... At least I finished him off before he killed himself."

Using very condensed advanced fire magic, I burn his remains to ash, even the sand stained with blood melts away beneath him, and all that remains from this entire interaction is a hole in the ground burnt black and the woman with light blue eyes still staring straight ahead, with tears streaming down her cheeks now.

I wave my hand in front of her face a few times and call out to her.

"Hello? Hello...?"

But there's no response. I can see sporadic movements in her small black pupils, but nothing more.

"Stop moving your eyes if you can hear me."

They stop.

"Now, move them again if you can."

They move again with even more vigor than before.

My gaze tightens.

"How did you all get in this situation...?"

Her eyes don't stop moving, but she doesn't say a word.

"Hmm."

I realize she isn't going to be able to answer any complicated questions for a while. So, it would be a better use of my time to go search things out myself. If that elixir lasts for up to 12 hours on people with low mana control, pretty much everyone here will be running on fumes for quite a while.

I turn to all the other drone-like workers and give a command.

"Whatever you do, do not drink another drop of the water given to you by this man..."

I pull one of the crates of E-Class potions out from the storage locker and use telekinesis to empty them all out into the sand. Then, use my new water magic skill to summon pure drinking water into the emptied glass jars and containers. I make a pile of corked clean drinking water.

"Drink from this pile only if you're thirsty."

As they walk over to the clean water, I use advanced fire magic to destroy every last diluted elixir in the area, then turn back to the woman with the wavering eyes. I give her some leftover food from my item storage and a potion bottle full of clean water for herself.

"These are for you, drink and eat up. Go rest inside the warehouse until you come to your senses."

I look up at everyone else drinking clean water one by one in a single file line.

"All of you will do the same. Stay inside this warehouse and rest."

Most of them drank more elixir when Fin told them to moments ago, so they're in for another 12 hours of mindless wandering, but this woman should have far less time under the influence.

"If I'm not back before you come to your senses, listen to her. She'll be in charge here, understood?"

I point to the black-haired woman, and all of the hypnotized workers do exactly as I said, slowly walking back into the empty barn.

The woman turns too, walking back into the barn without saying a word.

As the door shuts, I let out a sigh and use my conceal skill to shift my cloak and appearance into an exact replica of Fin, the Dagger user.

Gripping the notes from the day's work of labor, I smile and turn in the direction of the fountain in the middle of town.

Nearby, I sense the presence of Raze, Fin's partner, making his way toward the middle of town already. Then, expanding my enemy detection skill's range, I find readings of about 8 more people all making similar routes.

No one from the Green Mist changes their formation, but everyone on this side of town in the Crimson Dagger does.

I begin my walk toward the hidden base in the center of town just like everyone else.

"It's time to meet the Boss..."

Chapter 436

The closer I get to the center of town, the more consolidated the groups of hunters become, approaching the dry fountain.

I properly adjust my Qi barrier to the level of mana output I felt around Fin and test out my new [Bind] skill a few times just to see how it works and get the hang of its abilities.

The hand I'm able to summon is much darker and denser with mana. It seems like it's similar to my mana manipulation skill, but with the sole purpose of holding things in place. The legendary perk that shapes it into a movable and adjustable hand gives the skill a bit more flexibility, letting the caster hold and move objects, but overall, it is more of a defensive or utility skill than anything else.

I'll most likely only be using this on far lower mana control levels than myself, using it in full-out battle would not be optimal usage. However, if I make the mana dense enough for hunters to see, it can be a very intimidating floating purple hand.

I think about testing out my other 5 skills my body double obtained from the dungeons, but they may be a bit too flashy to use in the center of town while I'm in disguise.

As the center square comes into view, I put these ideas to rest and meet up with all of the other grunts that serve this Boss. At first, I'm a bit worried I'll have to talk to some of them and am not sure if Fin was friends with any of these other grunts in particular, but the odd scene I stumble upon puts my worries to rest.

Three of the men are already here, but they stand with their hands by their sides and look at the fountain with solitary stares, and none of them say a word to one another.

Raze pops out of an alley nearby and gives me a nod with a grin, but doesn't say a word, keeping his head down and finding a place to stand next to the fountain in silence.

Hesitantly, I do the same, standing about 3 meters away from a random level 334 man dressed in shiny armor and an assortment of colorful magic rings with a legendary swordsmanship skill. He sports a bright red flag on his waist.

I know full well how unique and powerful a skill like this is. It gives the user exact critical hit lines if used right, but again, this man's mana control is nearly non-existent. He's recently been given an upgrade crystal and power-leveled too.

As all of the other higher-level grunts of the Crimson Dagger show up, they give off the same readings. Every one of them has max upgraded skills and are all nearing or over level 300, but don't seem as strong as they should be.

Once the final grunt gets in formation, the entire square is filled with 10 of us surrounding the fountain on all sides. No one says a word; they all just stare straight ahead. Some have stacks of papers in hand, while others have them in their pockets.

A few look nervous, while some look excited, and others just don't show any emotion at all.

Then, I feel the ground begin to shake, hear a mechanical noise, and the center of the fountain begins to glow white.

The mana shielding below the fountain cracks open, and I can finally begin to sense what's inside.

After a few seconds, it looks as if it's filled with white energy, and the center of the fountain disappears in the white glow.

The mana-imbued energy is very immense, and it feels just like what I sensed last time Fin and Raze disappeared from my radar.

As the bright white light dims, what is left in its place is equally as intriguing. A spiral metal staircase has opened up in the center of the city and it leads down into the mana-shielded bunker I sensed before.

Stolen story; please report.

Portions of the shielding are now available for me to sense on the inside and outside, so I take this opportunity to do a full scan with my All-Seeing Eye. It's incredibly dense, similar to that of the Galeheart tower's shielding, so it makes sense why I'm unable to see through it.

However, I'm positive it's not unbreakable. With enough Qi infused in an attack, I'm sure I could break this barrier down with ease if necessary.

One by one, the Crimson Dagger Grunts walk inside. The tunnel goes down about 30 meters and is well lit with bright white lights.

I follow in line without saying a word in the middle of the pack.

Once the last person in line follows, I hear the same mechanical mechanism close the fountain above and a wall of mana shielding cover it up from the surface.

It's thick enough to block all my senses from the outside world, but I'm not too worried. My curiosity is more piqued than ever now that there's this much advanced security here.

We all make it to the bottom of the stairway and find ourselves standing in an empty white box of mana shielding. It looks very similar to a replica of the inner portion of the Titan's Domain, just about one quarter the size, and there's hardly any ambient mana in the air. Only a small amount coming off the mana-shielded walls.

There are the metal spiral steps at the back of the room that lead up to the now blocked-off surface, and nothing else in the room at all.

The men begin to line up against the side wall, so I follow and play my role, taking out the notes from my back pocket just like everyone else does. We all wait against the back wall and stare forward, waiting for something to happen.

There are 4 grunts to my left, and 5 to my right. Raze is two spots away from me on the right, with only 1 other man in between us. He's closer to the stairs.

Almost 5 minutes of silence goes by, only to be drowned out by the low hum of the energy in the room before something finally happens.

The back wall we're all staring at opens up in the shape of a rectangular door, and a figure in a large suit of red armor walks out.

Printed on the chestplate is an even darker crimson logo of the knife that is on everyone's sashes. Locked to his sides, he has two bright red daggers in holsters ready to use.

Head to toe, the figure is completely covered in heavy gear, and I can't help but do a full appraisal, inspect, and All-Seeing Eye scan.

[Lv. 589]

Active Items:

[Crimson Daggers of Speed][Blood Bonded][+130% Speed][+122% Agility][Poison Attribute] [???
Access Denied]

Active Skills:

[??? Access Denied]

Bufs:

[??? Access Denied]

The armor he wears is fully imbued with the same analysis-blocking enchantment that Lith and many of the Sector Leaders wear.

At the small amount of mana control I'm letting out, the only thing I'm able to see is the figure's level and the daggers that are seemingly not affected by the protection enchantment. He wears them as a prize for all to see, it seems.

I'm positive I could see through his defenses entirely if I boosted my perception but don't want to give myself away just yet. This figure is high enough level that I assume they'd be able to sense if I let out any extra power.

A deep echoing tone calls out from the red armored helmet as he turns his head to the guard closest to the stairs, then carries his gaze over everyone else in the room for a few seconds before landing on the last person.

"Good. Everyone's here. One at a time, let's see the morning results."

He walks over to the man closest

to the stairs very slowly, then comes to a halt just in front of him with outstretched hands to accept the papers from the shaking hands of the grunt.

Then, takes almost a full minute flipping through the sheets of papers before nodding one time.

The moment he does, the man in front of him lets out a relieved sigh, and he begins to walk up the stairs.

Echoing footsteps trail down as he makes his way to the top, and the Red Suit of armor takes the notes from the next man in line. As the footsteps stop, I sense the man just waiting up above at the top of the stairs looking up at the ceiling, but it doesn't open up.

A few more seconds pass before the Boss nods again, and the 2nd man in line moves to the exit.

It repeats exactly the same for the 3rd in line as the boss gives him a nod, and he makes his way up the stairs to wait with the others.

Next, Raze confidently gives his papers to the Boss with a slight grin on his face as the armored man reads them up and down. Moments later, he responds while reaching into a small compartment on his waist.

"Quite the interesting find there, Raze, good work."

A gold coin flips in the air toward him as the armored man nods and continues to walk to the next man right next to me.

Raze catches it and hurries up the stairs in the same manner as everyone else.

Just a few moments pass before the guard to my right is sent up the stairs, and the Red Armored man looks at me.

I hand the papers over and immediately get a response before the Boss even looks at the notes.

"No ghost hands today? Fin, what's the special occasion?"

Chapter 437

I look up at the man and shake my head a few times in response.

He looks down at me but doesn't say a word.

We stand in silence for a moment, and I notice the grunt to my left has shaking hands. In the moment of pause, I can hear the papers flutter together. The red armored Boss notices this too, turning his head to him for a moment, then back to me, then shrugs, flipping through my papers quickly and eventually nodding just like the last 5 men.

I activate my [Bind] skill with very little mana control seeping through my Qi barrier to manifest a weak purple hand, bringing it to my forehead to salute the Boss while walking away up the stairs.

To everyone else, it looks as if I just walked off, but to the man under the suit, his response tells me he's capable of sensing this skill.

"There it is," he mutters to himself.

As I walk up the stairs, another grunt in line has his paper processed, and the moment I step onto the cold metal steps, a scream comes out from the shaking man's mouth as he hands over his papers.

I sense an ominous aura coming out from the Red Suit of armor and watch the two men using the legendary perk of my enemy detection skill from a distance as I carry on up the stairs at an even rate not to draw suspicion.

A thick cloud of red mist comes out from the Boss' armor cracks and enters the grunt's eyes, mouth, nose, and ears like it has a mind of its own.

As he screams out in pain, his body is lifted above the ground and blood begins to ooze out of every point that the mysterious mist entered.

However, none of the blood hits the floor. It all consolidates into a crimson orb between them both.

My mind races as I detect an absurd amount of mana flowing through the blood orb; it gives off an interesting aura. One that I have never felt before exactly but seems oddly familiar...

The armored man lets the blood seep in through the small crack in his helmet, then my reading of the mana gets covered by the analysis-blocking enchantment. In the same instance, the floating grunt falls to the floor, breathing heavily, drained of mana almost entirely, but is still alive.

The Boss speaks while he moves onto the next in line.

"That's a reminder for all of you. If your warehouses aren't producing any higher-grade items, move onto the next one. Don't waste your time sifting through trash. We need to get out of here before any Sector Leaders show up."

The grunt coughs and dry heaves on the ground but eventually brings himself to his feet and walks up the stairs to follow as the next grunt hands in his paperwork.

The following interactions go smoothly, and the last man in line even gets a gold coin just like Raze for finding something valuable.

The door at the back of the main bunker opens up again and the Boss walks through. He yells out for all of us to hear before disappearing behind the thick mana shielding.

"See you all in 3 hours for the mid-day reports! Get back to work!"

As his door clicks shut, the mechanical sound starts up above us and the fountain opens to show us the sunlight of the outside world.

We all step out into the square, and many of the Crimson Dagger men scurry off in opposite directions back to their posts. Even the man that was attacked with that odd blood magic skill limps off back to his station pretty quickly.

Raze waves me down from the other side of the fountain and speaks up as he turns to leave down the alleyway I first saw him pop out from.

This tale has been unlawfully lifted from Royal Road. If you spot it on Amazon, please report it.

"I knew the Boss would like what I found. I managed to dig up a whole new crate of those Elixirs he likes, jackpot."

He laughs to himself then speaks up again.

"Well, see you for dinner tonight. Another two long shifts ahead of us. Good luck with your new guy."

I give him a wave but don't speak, and the entire square is cleared out in under a minute...

I look around curiously, then start to walk back toward the workers I left in that barn. Maybe with the clean food and water, that woman has come back to her senses.

However, the moment I begin walking back is the same instance I detect every single one of the Green Mist's members on the other side of the small city start to break their usual formation.

I stop in my tracks and expand my perception's range a lot more to see every last one of them start moving toward the center of town in the exact same manner the Crimson Dagger men did less than half an hour ago.

I slip into a side alley within visual range of the center square and activate my stealth skill, curious to see what happens next.

Less than 10 minutes later, 13 men in shiny new gear all between level 250 and 350 make a circle around the fountain. They wear green flags on their waists just like the workers I saw when I first entered the village. Moments later, the fountain erupts in a display of white mana, and the members enter one by one down the steps.

I watch with a curious gaze for a few seconds but decide to check things out for myself and follow the grunts with my maxed-out legendary-grade stealth skill activated.

My footsteps are silent, and my aura is completely concealed as I watch all 13 men line up against the back wall of the bunker, waiting for their boss to show up. The exit to the surface closes, and I make my way down onto the ground level as well, standing next to the stairs on the far right side of the room.

Once the back door opens, a nearly identical suit of armor walks out, only this time it's bright green with a black diamond on the chest plate.

My baseline appraisal and inspect skills activate, but not much shows up other than the towering figure's raw level.

[Lv. 606]

Active Items:

[??? Access Denied]

Active Skills:

[??? Access Denied]

Bufs:

[??? Access Denied]

I stand unseen as each of the Green Mist members hands in their papers and gets nods to leave up the stairs. Some receive gold coins, but it isn't until the second to last grunt until anger starts to flare up in the Armored man's tone.

"How many times do I have to tell you men? If a warehouse has nothing of value in it, move to the next!"

He pauses, turning his head to the staircase and yelling.

"I hope you all hear this. I want results, and I want them fast. No more lazing about!"

He glows green, and a mist similar to the other boss pours out from his armor.

The last man that has nothing to do with this mess backs away and covers his nose and mouth.

In the same moment, I see dozens of green needles form around the armored Boss, and they all fly forward into the grunt, and he yells out in agony.

I watch his skin change color from light tan to dark green in a matter of seconds until he shrivels up on the floor, and the yelling stops.

There's a moment of silence before the Boss walks over to the last man and takes his papers, nods, and speaks up in a calm tone pointing back at the shriveled-up man on the floor.

"It looks like we've had an accident here. Dispose of the body and take over his work team. We don't want to fall behind before we leave in a few days."

The grunt nods quickly and picks up the body without hesitating but still holds his breath while hurrying up the stairs.

The Boss walks to the back of the room, and the rectangular door opens up while he yells for all to hear.

"I'll see you all in 3 hours for the mid-day check-in. Do not come until you get my call. Get back to work!"

He disappears behind the door, and it shuts, then the mechanical doors back up to the outside world opens too.

A few thoughts go through my mind as I decide whether or not I should leave with the Green Mist Grunts or stay inside and try to figure out what's going on here further. The Green Armored Boss' voice sounds very similar to the man in the red armor. But there's a hint of extra experience in his tone, and their levels are different, plus the fact that they have very different skills debunks my initial suspicions that they were the same person.

I nod to myself as I make my decision.

About a minute later, the fountain door shuts, and I'm left alone in the mana shield room.

I'm about to do a deeper scan of the underground fortress with my All-Seeing Eye, but another mechanical noise makes me stop and listen closer.

The entire back wall begins to slide down into the floor, revealing another full portion of the bunker that doubles its size, making this space more of a square rather than a long rectangle.

However, it's the sight that I see on the other side that leaves my eyes open wide.

Crates of High C and B grade gear line the back walls of the hidden room, and in the center of it is a large handcrafted table and chairs. There is a large expensive looking bottle of champagne on its center.

The clinking of two glasses hits my ears, and I see two helmets beside the large bottle. One is red, and the other is green.

Chapter 438

Clink

The man in the red suit of armor has spiky ginger hair and bright blue eyes.

"Brother, we're finally going to break into the big leagues after this one! I can't believe the entire stash of that old Sector 2 leader was left out to rot in the desert."

The man in the green armor sports a buzzcut, and his black eyes match the color of the short trim. His facial features make him look a bit older than his orange-haired brother.

"It only took us a few days to get this town under control, and the progress today will clear out most of the surface warehouses."

Their analysis enchantment is still active despite their armor helmets being off, but just by the sound of their voices and levels, it's clear that both the leader of the Crimson Dagger and the Green Mist sitting together at a table are celebrating their success.

This revelation was definitely in the realm of possibilities that I was thinking up, but the fact that they're brothers, and so blatantly manipulating their grunts to do their dirty work is surprising.

Both of them drink their entire glass of alcohol, and the man in the green armor pours them both another.

He speaks up as they clink glasses again.

"So, how should we go about moving forward from here? This distribution city is by far our most profitable plunder yet. I say we play it cool after this one, don't want anyone getting too hot on our tail."

The ginger man nods and replies after taking a drink.

"Agreed."

He thinks to himself for a moment, and I reach into my item storage to pull out a glossy blue gem as he does.

Still under the protection of my stealth skill, I channel MP into the recording crystal Lith gifted me before I left. The information that's about to be shared seems like details that these two don't ever want escaping this bunker, and I intend to use it to my advantage.

The crystal creates a recording array around the whole back of the room, encompassing all of the stacked riches, fancy bottles, and most importantly the two undisguised gang leaders openly conversing.

The man in the red suit of armor finally makes his point.

"We both picked up quite a few members over the last couple of months. I think it's about time for a thinning, what do you think?"

They both grin slyly to each other, and the older brother responds.

"I was thinking the same thing. A gang war to keep only the strongest handful of guards moving forward is a fine idea. It's not like we need those weaklings anyway. Any new city we go to will have more grunts for us to choose from."

He shrugs and lets out a chuckle.

"We might as well kill them all ourselves before we leave. Sharing the riches we've found in this town would be a waste."

They both laugh to themselves and pour out another drink.

Over the next half hour, they get more and more drunk, even to the point of opening another bottle. They recount the events of different towns they raided and other times they betrayed and manipulated their gangs to fight each other under different aliases.

My eyes widened at their words, and I get some interesting insight on how they run their scheme.

Ever since both of them Ranked Up, it seems their power gap among weak hunters in the Dark Continent has blown their ego far out of proportion. However, their crime tactics are pretty smart.

They scour the edges of the Abyss, and wait for towns and villagers in need that have been driven from their homes, giving them food, work, and most recently after they stumbled across a certain Elixir of Suggestion, the two of them have been making systematic teams of high-level grunts and low-level workers to raid and pillage small towns all over.

However, every one of their drunken tales ends with them killing a majority of the people that have helped them. Especially the mindless working slaves.

My anger builds as I remember the tear falling down that woman's face as she tried to disobey the grunts' command but failed due to the elixir. It makes me want to challenge and kill both of them on the spot. But as I look around the room even more, I come to an even better plan.

On the back wall, resting on top of one of the crates full of High-Grade items, I see a small silver tablet with three large buttons on the front side. The distance isn't far, and my advanced eyesight is more than good enough to see [Middle Door] [Middle Wall] [Exit Door] as the options.

I stop channeling mana into my recording crystal and stow it away in my item storage. In the same moment, I begin to leave the large open room and hide halfway behind the stairwell, looking up at the closed door above.

With a light activation of telekinesis, I flip one of the small silver enchanted rings out from a pile of loot in the back room to fall directly on top of the button that says [Exit Door].

Immediately, both men's heads turn toward the fallen item and stand from their seats, activating their red and green mist abilities.

At the same time, a mechanical sound opens the door above to the outside world.

I activate [Extreme Speed] and zip out of the opening crack in the ceiling as both men yell out, "Who's there?" and "Show yourself!" facing the back wall of their bunker.

Once out into the street, I can already see the fountain closing shut again as one of them pressed the button to do so, but I can't help grinning to myself as a plan to bring this operation to the floor comes to mind.

I reach into my Storage and pull out the black mask I used at the arena in Valor City and put it on. After that, I use the concealment attribute of my cloak to turn my outfit into what looks like a black business suit, but add a unique touch to make it look like it is constantly flickering with black flames.

I allow the perception of flames to change colors beneath my mask, so it looks like golden-yellow light comes out from the eye holes of the mask.

On top of this display, I put up my Qi barrier to the max, so even though I look like a walking businessman on fire, my presence is completely concealed, so it feels as if I'm not even here.

Once this is done, my hunt for every single grunt in the city begins.

Whether they're from the Crimson Dagger or Green Mist, this is not my concern.

The first one I decide to go after is the familiar man that helped to get me into this whole mess. As I round the corner, the round face and tall stature of Raze comes into view. I allow just enough of my intimidation skill to pour out of my barrier to make it noticeable, but don't want the range to spread too far or knock out the grunt here.

The moment his eyes meet the flaming man walking toward him, his gaze turns to one of fright. Earlier when he faced me, he ran into battle without thinking twice, but just by looking at my new form, something deep within his intuitive battle instincts makes him turn to run without questioning me at all.

I calmly walk down the empty street and activate my new skill, [Confusion], to send out a weak wave through my Qi barrier. Just enough to stop him in his tracks and fall to his knees holding his head.

A few seconds pass as I walk to stand in front of him, then deactivate my [Confusion] skill to watch his mental torment immediately cease, but the second he looks up to meet my fiery gaze, his skin turns pale and his eyes glaze over.

I speak in a calm and professional tone.

"You may call me the Flame Emperor. I am not here to harm you, so don't try to kill yourself. I'll be taking over this town and giving you an opportunity. I have much to show you, so please follow me."

I get ready to use more of my intimidation aura, or even ramp up the flames a bit to stop him from using the poison capsule like Fin tried when I attacked him, but the man's eyes just open wider and wider, and sweat begins to pour down the sides of his face.

I turn around without saying a word and begin walking slowly toward the warehouse his team was working on organizing.

None of them react to my presence as they're under strong hypnosis magic, but they follow my orders to rest for the day, and to wait until my return to follow any other orders.

After this, I move toward the next closest Crimson Dagger grunt.

As we turn the corner and my fiery eyes lock with his, a very similar interaction plays out.

Seven more just the same all tremble before my aura and presence. However, a few start whispering to each other the longer I let them walk behind me unharmed. There were two that needed a little convincing, so I dropped them to their knees with my intimidation skill combined with confusion, one of them even tried to run away using a [Special Grade] Extreme Speed Skill.

However, just to make it clear that I'm not playing around, I point a finger at him from over 20 meters away and send a pea-sized advanced fireball wrapped in dense wind energy in his direction.

The instant it makes contact with his back, the man explodes into a ball of flames that tears down half of a small building in the aftermath.

After this display, no one says a word or steps out of line.

I make my way to the other side of town and the visual displeasure of the Crimson Dagger grunts grows. The first man of the Green Mist goes into full attack mode the moment he sees a group of Crimson Dagger's. However, I make it very clear I'm in charge and no extra fighting will be going on.

One by one, I collect every one of the Green Mist's lackeys and only have to burn one of them to a crisp that runs away to prove my point to the new guys.

They separate into two groups, but hold themselves back from fighting each other in fear of facing the same fate as the others that have disobeyed.

Once I finish my march around town collecting everyone, I bring them inside one of the large abandoned warehouses that has already been raided and take out my recording crystal to turn it on against a large blank wall. It begins to replay the conversation of their leaders.

"Watch this. Don't move a muscle or say a word until it has completely finished."

Chapter 439

The conversation between brothers, bragging and laughing about backstabbing their men countless times for profit, plays in its entirety for every member of both gang to see.

There are 20 of them in total. 12 from the Green Mist remain, and 8 from the Crimson Dagger. Their eyes widen more and more with every word said on the recording. I stand in silence behind them, watching closely while I think about exactly what I'll be doing next.

As the video hits its end and starts up again from the beginning, I stow it away into a pocket of my burning suit that leads to a small item storage portal.

The grunts begin to get restless as they sit on the hard floor of the warehouse, so I speak.

"Stand up and speak your mind, whatever you say for the next minute will not have any repercussions."

Instantly, a series of mixed remarks come my way in the form of yells, solemn silent stares, and questions about how I got that footage.

Some question its validity, while others believe every word and are having moments of clarity, cursing out their leaders because they suspected something like this was going on all along.

Overall, anger and mixed emotions fill the room, and I let them discuss it amongst themselves for a moment before speaking up.

"Good. Now that you all understand what's really going on, it's time for me to confront your leaders. You're all going to watch."

They all nod in silence as I let the black flames around me grow slightly bigger and the golden-yellow glow from my eyes shine brighter.

"After I'm done with them, we'll talk about the future of this town."

I turn to face the door.

"Follow me."

We all walk out from the warehouse and the stern looks and overly negative attitude toward me have faded. Now the men are only fearful and questioning their decisions in life.

I bring them to the center of town and order them all to stand back in a group in front of one of the abandoned shops in the square. Far enough away not to be within the range of whispers, but close enough to see me stand right in front of it with my arms crossed in a relaxed stance.

We wait in the square in total silence for almost half an hour until I feel an eerie presence watching. The moment I shift my gaze in all directions, then finally upward, it disappears and the fountain opens up with a bright white flash of mana-imbued light.

I'm unsure if I felt this the last time I witnessed the doors of the bunker open, but I wasn't this close up to it. I brush off the feeling, but stay on high alert moving forward.

It's about time for the Crimson Dagger's check-in meeting, but their leader is going to get quite the unexpected surprise.

I turn back to the grunts and speak.

"I'll be back in a minute. If you even think about running before I come out, you're dead."

Then, walk down the spiral staircase into the mana-shielded bunker with a confident and steady pace.

Once I get to the bottom, the middle door opens and the man in bright red armor comes charging out with both his crimson daggers already in his hands.

Red fog comes seeping out from his armor as he lunges closer.

"Intruder! What have you done with my men? What is the meaning of this?"

I sidestep using [Extreme Speed] to dodge his incoming strike and move to the far side of the room.

Upon seeing my agility, the man's anger rises and even more of the red mist plumes out from the crack in his armor.

It begins to drift toward me in a wave of energy impossible to dodge, but I just tighten my Qi barriers' density, and not a drop makes its way through.

Half of the room is filled with his red mist, but it is blocked from touching me with a barrier of invisible energy just a few centimeters above my skin and clothes. I stand ominously in the back of the room, not putting out a drop of aura while flickering with black and golden flames.

The narrative has been illicitly obtained; should you discover it on Amazon, report the violation.

"Brother! Come out here! We have a pest to get rid of!"

He yells in a stern tone. Still filled with confidence, I question what other tricks these two have up their sleeves.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man in the green suit of armor comes charging through the open middle door. He has a large silver warhammer in hand that I didn't see before.

Once both of them lock their gazes on me, I make a run for the exit.

I could have easily used maximum buffs and speed boosts to zip out of the bunker in an instant, but I limit my mana control output to about 1/8th of its full potential beneath my Qi barrier to make them believe they have a fighting chance.

I narrowly dodge two red dripping daggers covered in poison and a hammer that hits the ground right behind me, sending vibrations through the entire shielded structure.

I run up the stairs and out onto the surface, yelling to the grunts.

"Get back and watch closely. We're about to have some company!"

I speed off to the opposite side of the square where the grunts aren't waiting, and two glowing suits of armor follow me filled with rage, aimed to kill.

I jump up on top of one of the 1-story shops at the edge of the square using wind magic and turn around, drawing my flaming sword that now flickers with dark flames to match my suit while smiling wide underneath my mask for no one else to see but myself.

The two armored Bosses pay no attention to their henchmen and jump up in the air to attack me. Mid-flight I see a thick red barrier of what looks like mana-imbued blood forming around the Red man's armor and daggers.

Simultaneously, dozens of tiny green needles all manifest around the green armored man while two clouds of mist trail both of their in sync and powerful strides.

They both jump high above me, making my high ground useless, stepping off of mana imbued barriers summoned in the sky to lunge down at me and attack. I release more of my mana control, now letting 1/4 of it out so my Intimidation skill can hit both of the men as they jump in the air toward me.

However, they bear the pressure and release their attacks.

I block the red daggers with my sword in a swift strike. The Qi surrounding my blade evaporates the poison covering them and shatters them to pieces. My sword pierces through the red barrier made of blood that covers his body and pierces a hole right through the Crimson Dagger Logo on his chestplate, sending him back down toward the ground where he came from.

In the same instant, I stop the spiked hammer aiming for my left shoulder with an open palm, and its momentum halts. The miniature green needles that rain down on me are all stopped by my invisible barrier of Qi as well.

To the perspective of the men that cannot sense Qi, it looks as if my black flames have eaten their attacks and fallen into an endless fiery abyss, doing no damage to me at all.

With a tight grip on the Older brother's war hammer, I release a wave of advanced fire magic flames that engulfs his weapon and spreads to the rest of his body while throwing him downward to the road below following his partner.

There are two loud earth-shattering thuds as each of them hits the stone road and cracks the pavement, making craters.

I jump down to get between them and the fountain, holding my blade upright and waiting for the dust to settle.

Surprisingly, they both get up from the ground pretty quickly.

The Green Mist Leader's armor protects him from the Dark Flames that eat away at his enchanted gear for the time being, and a red glow and swirling orbs of blood enter the Crimson Dagger's wound as he stands to his feet.

I let out more of my mana control, allowing them to perceive just over of my true strength for a moment, and focus on activating my intimidation skill directly in their direction.

They both fall to their knees again, but I see clouds of green mist and red liquid energy escape their bodies and trail off behind me in the direction of their subordinates that witnessed their utter defeat and are now backing away to avoid the release of excess mana in our clash.

I realize what they're trying to do and let out my natural mana control even further, letting out just under without any buffs activated other than intimidation to bring them from their knees to face planting down in the pavement.

The green needles and deadly crimson liquid hit a pink dome of mana that I summon using my mana manipulation skill on the other side of the fountain to stop them from harming their men.

"I don't think so..."

I feel their powers dampening and their minds slipping away as they're being overpowered by my aura alone, and their last-ditch effort to kill their lackeys and leave me with nothing fails as well.

The last thing they hear before they pass out on the cold ground is my slow footsteps toward them and the swift swing of a fiery sword cutting through their helmets.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Bloodweaver [Legendary Grade]

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Poison Mist [Legendary Grade]

[YES][NO]

I choose yes on both options, and absorb a few million MCP from my legendary absorption perk too.

Then, turn around to take the pink barrier down around the men that watched me kill their bosses without any trouble.

I peer down into the open underground bunker in the center of the square and mutter to myself while doing a routine scan with enemy detection and my All-Seeing Eye while my mana control is already being released at such a high rate.

"I was hoping for a more interesting fight... but I guess that will have to wait for-"

Mid sentence, my gaze turns to the sky off in the direction of Sector 1. I feel the same sensation of being watched as I did when the bunker opened.

I sense 6 figures approaching.

Five dark suits of armor that look just like the Royal Guards fly through the sky in a triangular formation. At their front is a suit of jet-black armor almost twice as large as the rest. Its gaze is pointed directly at me from over a kilometer away.

I feel a wave of telepathy hit me and a familiar static voice enters my mind that I haven't heard since talking to one of the 12 remaining Dark Guards in the Arena back in Valor City.

"The Dark One missed you in the arena last night. We were wondering where you went off to hide."

Chapter 440

The static voice echoes in my head as the six black armored guards float in the air closer toward me.

"It looks like you've begun to clean up the Sector 2 Leader's mess for us. How thoughtful."

As they get closer, I'm positive this is the exact same guard that talked to me in the Arena. At that time, its speed and power far surpassed mine.

The mental image of it blipping in and out of existence faster than my eyes could see, and it telling me that the Wraith I defeated was the weakest of the 13 Dark Guards is a memory that has not left the forefront of my mind. It has been lingering in my subconscious throughout all of the training inside the Titan's Domain both times since I fought one of these monsters last.

Even while using my full strength and even the help of my Red Hydra's Buff, I left that match in a very weak state. However, I'm a far different fighter now than I was then. To them, it has barely been 2 days, but to me, I've been training and absorbing more Mana and Qi for almost a year.

I feel the telepathy link get severed between us, and the largest Guard motions a hand forward toward me.

One of the more human-sized sets of armor comes floating my way at over twice the speed of the others behind it in the rigid formation.

The eye slit in its armor begins to glow orange, and I see two orbs of familiar black energy forming in both of its hands. As it plummets down toward the town, I make the split decision to jump high into the sky using air-steps to put distance between everything below me.

Before I even get 20 meters into the sky, the black orbs that gave me so much trouble in the Arena come shooting my way.

I manage to get a full inspect and appraisal reading on only the approaching guard. Everyone else is too far away and their concealment items are too strong for me to get any kind of efficient data.

Everything on the approaching Corrupted Royal Guard says [??? Access Denied] other than its level rating at [Lv. 835] and a [Curse of The Lich King] mark in its buff section.

My eyes widen, and I immediately activate all my buffs that don't overly consume mana while imbuing my sword with Qi.

This is a higher level than the Wraith that was the so-called weakest Dark Guard... With the reappearance of the same kind of magic, as well as the identical Soul Energy Buff, I'm assuming this is at least the 12th in line.

Once I reach the height of about 100 meters above the city square, the Approaching Dark Guard's two orbs of energy curve downward and accelerate even more as its wielder already begins to form two more attacks in its hands following close behind.

I grip my blade and watch the orbs approach, but can't help but to smile beneath my flaming mask as the Orbs look like they're traveling in slow motion to me right now.

I want to laugh out loud while Easily Airstepping around the motion-tracking orbs, activating extreme speed and using my immense increase in mana control and wind magic upgrade to easily swerve and glide through the air to avoid the two attacks.

I still have my Qi barrier on, limiting my mana control to 50% of its full strength, and the ease at which I'm able to dodge and keep an eye on the approaching Black Armored Knight is quite surprising.

The last time I faced these orbs, using 100% of my mana control with my Red Hydra's buff activated, It was barely enough for me to slip away. Now, it's hardly a warmup.

It lets out two more orbs of dark energy my way, and finally gets close enough to me that I can see it hovering and watching me dodge without having to use my enemy detection perk to see it from afar.

Once four orbs are chasing me through the skies, I speed up my air-steps and make my dodges slowly drift in the direction of my enemy.

I'm well aware if one of these energy balls is pierced open the orange energy inside that leaks out is not pretty. I remember feeling it burn through my soul energy buff, armor, mana shielding, and skin with ease.

A repeat of that event is not what I'm aiming for here.

I lock my eyes onto the chestplate of the Dark Guard that is now beginning to conjure two more orbs and focus all my active perception skill's strength into my All-Seeing Eye.

A wave of energy pierces through the dense black material and I sense the presence of an orange beating heart.

Taking a deep breath, I aim my sword directly at it, then concentrate on channeling the majority of my available Qi to surround my blade rather than using it for defensive measures. I'm confident that I'm fast enough to dodge its orbs of energy, and I'm not getting any particularly strong barrier readings from its armor other than the appraisal blocking perks and a high B Grade Mana Shielding attribute.

So, I airstep forward and make my move.

Making full advantage of the crimson thread of my Swordsmanship skill, and activating surges of intimidation building stronger with every stride, the new orbs of black matter get larger in its hands that it holds above its head, but my perception of reality is far quicker than it has the ability to process.

In what feels like just the blink of an eye, I cut the distance between us down to less than an arm's length and swing my sword white hot with Qi directly through the creature's upper torso.

It doesn't even have a moment to react.

The blade slices through its armor like butter, and I feel trace amounts of my Qi being burned away as it sinks into the black veil of energy beneath that makes up its body. However, it's not near enough to stop the sharp edge of my sword crack its rib cage and puncture the orange beating heart.

The instance I feel the blade comes out the backside of its chestplate, I follow through with vigor and activate extreme speed to dash past to its back side cutting all the way through. I channel the majority of my Qi back to defense once my blade leaves its body and turn my head to watch all six orbs of energy twist out of control and explode without anyone to hold them.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I hit level 692, but let its armor and body fall to the city below as I have more important things to worry about right now.

My attention shifts back to the formation of approaching guards, and see that they're less than half a kilometer from me now. In the gaze of my enemy detection perk, I watch the leader give the same hand motion to attack as before, but this time all four of the remaining guards fly forward with energy orbs forming above their hands.

Their speed is a bit more impressive than the guard that just attacked me, and once all four of them get within about 100 meters of me and release 8 orbs of explosive Soul Energy my way, I manage to get a reading on their levels.

Two come curving around on my left and right sides, clocking in at [Lv. 847] and [Lv. 871].

Then, one comes soaring through the air right toward me down the middle at [Lv. 901].

Lastly, a final attacker floats upward, preparing to make an attack on me from above while I'm busy with the other three. It's at [Lv. 944].

I smile even wider, using the same style of dodging and swerving to take on the barrage of explosive orbs while they get in formation.

The attacks from the two Guards that come at me from the left and right aren't hard to dodge, however, the middle and upper guards' orbs' speed is noticeably quicker and the energy output on them is much more intense than the ones before it.

I let out a bit more of my mana control, now using 2/3 of my true strength to use my extreme speed and buffing skills with greater ease.

As I twist my body, and the first round of orbs flies by, the Guards on my sides are now less than 10 meters away.

With my All-Seeing Eye on full blast, these Wraiths' skeletal structures and glowing hearts are all as clear as day to me.

The two closest guards release another round of orbs, while the higher levels ones wait to make their move while closing in.

I control my breathing and activate swordsmanship. A crimson thread forms from the tip of my blade in a wide crescent formation that aims straight through two of the monsters' glowing hearts.

Again, I shift my Qi Barrier's density to the striking portion of my blade and glide through the air full of confidence.

While dodging each orb that comes my way by a hair, my sword slices through the armor of both Dark Guards on my left and right side with little resistance, destroying their hearts and setting off a chain reaction of explosions in the air, detonating every single orb of energy including the ones sent by the two remaining Guards.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I gain 15 levels, hitting level 707.

However, the two remaining Dark Guards don't mourn their fallen partners one bit, and use the clouds of disappearing soul energy to their advantage.

The highest-level guard that hovers above me holding both hands above its head, charges up a single orb of dark energy. The moment I notice it, the creature lets it go and rockets down at me.

I can hear it buzz and crackle, sensing well over four times as much raw soul energy as any other orb I've seen today in a single attack. Swirls of hot yellow-orange light come out of small cracks as this orb was created as a finishing move designed to take me out in a single hit. I increase my speed and airstep quickly out of the way, hoping to dodge.

However, the only direction I think to move in is the direction of a cloud of fading soul energy where the other guard comes out holding two highly charged orbs of energy itself while it stares me down and increases its forward momentum toward me even more.

With a hot ball of mass curving downward from above, trying to hit me in the back and a hyper-focused Dark Guard at my front ready to take me out with any means necessary, a plan comes to mind.

I take down my entire Qi barrier that suppresses my mana and make sure to only channel this excess energy into my movement speed, increased soul energy senses, and the attack power imbued into my sword.

Then, take a moment to allow the orb of energy to get closer to my back, while lunging forward to make it seem as if I'm running away at full speed.

I burst into a flashy display of advanced Fire magic to ramp up a distraction, and airstep forward right at the Dark Guard that points its two hands with orbs of energy fully charged and ready to release at close range my way.

The closer I get, the more I slow down, but prepare to use 100% of my mana control and buffs at the last moment to make my move.

I can feel the heat of the orb on my back through my lowered defenses, and the sight of the guard in front of me is less than 5 meters away.

"4... 3... 2... 1..." I count down under my breath.

I activate stealth the moment I'm less than half a meter away, then duck down and use extreme speed to fully conceal myself and slice through the creature's armor, rupturing its heart myself to get the level gains. Then, focus on my swordsmanship while airstepping upward in the direction of the remaining guard with a magnificent explosion of supercharged Soul Energy below me.

I stab my sword straight through the last Dark Guard's heart and deactivate stealth right in front of it staring into the slit in its helmet while its glowing orange energy fades away.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

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[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

My level reaches 737, and the guard's armor and bones fall to the city below.

I want to see if they've all dropped the same Essence that I got after destroying the heart of the wraith in the arena, but I know I'll have time for that once the danger is gone.

My head turns to the final Dark Guard as the remnants of soul energy fade, and the scratchy static telepathic voice hits my inner ear from less than 300 meters away.

"I'm impressed. All I asked them to do was to bring you to me, but it seems you were holding back quite a bit in the Arena, weren't you?"

There's a pause and a stillness in the air as the remaining Dark Guard floats my way, but doesn't increase its speed at all.

More than 10 seconds pass, and I try to use my inspect and appraisal skill on its armor, but nothing comes back. Even using my All-Seeing Eye at its full power, I still get glitched numbers and letters back that are on the verge of changing, but never show me their true value.

It speaks again.

"You may have bested the lower 6 Dark Guards, but I'm here to bring you back to the Dark One. You are still no match for the Upper 7. We have all Ranked-Up more than once; you cannot defeat me in your current form. Come with me now, or I will assume you have chosen death."

As the Black Suit of armor gets within 100 meters of me, it reaches for its helmet and begins to take it off.

A bright orange light shines out from underneath, and my inspect skill finally registers a number.

[Lv. 1082]