

## D. Diver 441

Chapter 441

The black helmet comes off, and underneath is nothing but a glowing orange, handsome man's face. It drops the helmet, letting it fall to the town below.

One by one, the large figure slowly takes off its gloves, boots, chestplate, and heavy leggings to reveal the shape of a bright orange form of energy in the shape of a 3-meter-tall man with short hair and smooth skin, still floating, moving toward me at a constant rate.

I do another full scan, now that I can see it clearly.

[Lv. 1082]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

[NONE]

Bufs:

[Curse of The Lich King]

Its status looks no different than any of the other Wraiths that attacked me moments ago. Even the Ghouls back in the Arena had the same status details.

The only difference is I can sense the intensity coming off of this soul energy is on a whole other level. It feels like the air pressure all around me has shifted, and I'm looking at a being that is far stronger than anything I've ever seen before.

The soul energy reading that came off of all its subordinates combined moments ago doesn't even compare to the strength of the energy flowing around this creature. It has a Soul Energy barrier surrounding every inch of its body, making it seem like it is a bright orange entity.

It comes closer and closer until the gap between us is less than 15 meters.

Then, speaks through the static telepathy link.

"I am on another level than those weak Wraiths, this heavy armor may improve their defenses, but it only slows me down. I told you already, you stand no chance. Give up now, or die trying. It's your choice."

I don't say a word, still analyzing the being in front of me, trying to figure out what exactly it is...

"Are you... a human?"

There's a slight pause, then the orange floating man clasps his hands together. They glow brighter orange, giving off a nearly yellow shine, then as he separates them, an incredibly large long sword materializes from thin air. It's well over half the man's body length, and almost 4 times as wide as my own sword.

It looks extremely heavy and awkward to wield, however, he swings it a few times through the air so fast it's hard to track and the graceful swings leave trails of orange energy in their wake that shimmer and linger in the air.

He replies to my question, and I see a black number 7 printed like a tattoo on his right wrist right where he holds the sword.

"This is my human form, yes. You know too little, and have stepped too far into the unknown to continue any further without proper guidance. The Dark One wishes to make you part of the Dark Guard. We needed a new number 13, but now it seems we need five more. Your friends in the arena will do just fine as substitutes."

He pauses, and the only thing that fills the open link between us is static.

"One last chance to comply, or your journey ends here and now."

A mind-bending wave of energy ripples out of the floating Dark Guard that feels like a natural aura version of my intimidation skill.

It makes me sweat and grit my teeth just bearing it, but I look him in the eyes while activating all my buffs and channeling Qi into my sword.

"Not happening... If you want to fight, bring it on-"

Before I can finish my last word, a flash of orange light comes rocketing toward me. The only thing I'm able to do is swing my sword up to block.

I come face to face with the oversized man and his orange blade made of soul energy collides with mine wrapped in Qi, mana shielding, and a veil of flames.

An eruption of energy comes out of the collision and an ear-shattering crack that sounds as if the sky is splitting in two is released into the atmosphere.

Next thing I know, I'm propelled backward at speeds faster than I've ever traveled before.

Half of my barrier around my sword is eroded away instantly by the collision, but so did a nearly equal portion of the Dark Guard's. Even so, the pure strength and force behind this frontal attack sends me on a crash course for the city below.

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I activate wind magic to slow my fall so the impact with the ground won't be as bad, but in the back of my mind, I can sense dozens of people below me all standing together in an abandoned warehouse.

The orange sword wielder watches from above, admiring his own work, concluding that the battle is already over.

At the forefront of my mind, the first thing is surviving, but the town below me is still a very valuable asset I'd like to keep in good condition. The people in it, and the thousands of brand-new items don't need to be destroyed for no reason.

So, less than 100 meters above the ground, instead of using all my air magic to lighten my landing, I use it to change my course and make impact with an abandoned neighborhood of small homes off to the side.

The ripple of stone, dirt, and mana that flies in the air as my feet make impact with the ground disintegrates everything around me for over 20 meters.

As I stare back at the sky and replenish the Qi that was destroyed from our clash from my core back into my sword, I see the same streak of orange light come soaring down my way.

Waves of energy attack my psyche and the static telepathy triggers in my mind again.

"Tougher than I thought. Maybe it'll take a few more hits."

The Dark Guard shows a smile across his face and the lifeless eyes of his human figure begin to glow. The energy from all around his body starts to thin, lowering his overall defenses, and the density of the Soul energy around his sword grows to be far greater. It shines yellow like a second sun in the sky as I look up at him.

However, there are a few points on his body that remain fully guarded. The area around his neck and heart do not have soul energy drained from them to create this strike.

My perception skills are sensing hundreds of innocent workers all around me on every side. If I want to go all out without holding back at all, I need to get away from this town.

I activate stealth and jump away in the opposite direction of the falling swordsman aiming for the outer edge of the village that leads to the wide-open rolling sandy hills of the desert.

Even when fully concealing my presence, the eyes of the man follow me.

I hear an loud crack of the ground below me, then sense the intense energy and heat of a supercharged sword swinging up at me.

I deactivate stealth and focus all my energy on blocking with a downward swing of my own, but my eyes widen as the dense hot energy of its attack overpowers my full strength Qi barrier this time around.

It pushes through, sizzling away the protective layers and hardly taking any damage itself. As a last-ditch effort, I channel the remaining Qi and mana shielding that surrounds my body into my sword. The resulting explosion of released energy throws me high into the sky, and pushes the Dark Guard back to the ground.

I open my item storage to let thousands of MP worth of mana crystals out to plunder, rejuvenating me on the spot, while swallowing a Qi pill to bring my core back up to full while I soar at full speed into the open desert.

Those two attacks may not have done any physical damage to either of us, but it definitely gauged our strengths.

This guard knows I'm capable of blocking its attacks now, so he isn't going to hold back any longer.

There is a positive note that follows this though, I believe I spotted a fatal weakness and plan to exploit it once I confirm its true.

Less than a minute pass as I fly away at my top speed, but the flash of light outpaces me easily.

Once the city is out of sight, I finally turn to face the creature again as it storms toward me with a focused gaze and glowing sword. I charge thousands of MP worth of fire magic into my blade to test my theory.

I swing it across my body, letting a crescent-shaped wave of dense flames fly through the air and collide with the Guard's sword.

As expected, its eyes track it perfectly, and its sword slashes upward to easily destroy the flames.

I get a telepathy link in a taunting tone.

"Giving up so soon? That must have been your weakest attack so far."

I smirk and activate my Red Hydra's Buff for a split second to send another crescent of energy its way.

The wave of fire ripples through the air, covered in a dense red aura of borrowed energy, but the same exact result follows this attack too.

The Dark Guard swings its bright orange sword through my attack and it's dispelled and evaporated with ease. This time, there are some resulting crackling reactions of Soul Energy, and a small amount manages to sizzle away its own, but the energy is replenished instantly and doesn't make a dent in its own Soul Energy stores.

"A little better, but is that all you've got? Your energy was rather strong when we started, I won't lie. Even your borrowed energy can't save you now. Did those two attacks really wear you down this much? So long, Flame Emperor."

I deactivate all my mana-based combat skills and focus on my Qi alone.

There is still one technique that I manage to awaken in my last few months inside the Titan's Domain.

These two tests confirm to me that its time for me to finally try it out.

I channel all of the Qi in my body into my sword, continuously replenishing my barrier from my core, and channeling more into the blade until it becomes oversaturated.

Held tight in both my hands is a sword glowing so white it is dripping with Qi. Every moment I waste staring down at it, there are large percentages of my core's energy that fall away into the air.

I focus on my breathing and stare straight ahead at the incoming confident man.

I swing my sword across my body and let a crescent of pure condensed Qi erupt from my blade.

The contents of nearly my entire core are released from my sword's edge and rocket toward the glowing orange guard.

It takes less than a second to make contact, and my opponent doesn't even see it coming.

His eyes widen as I swing my blade, but the corners of his lips curve upward as he watches nothing come out.

Just like me back in Valor City, when I was relying on the Red Hydra's buff for all of my power, I could not sense the Qi in Monk's' attacks when we were fighting in the Arena for the first time.

Now, this ignorant warrior is learning that same lesson for himself.

My invisible attack slices through his left shoulder that isn't protected by a dense barrier of soul energy like his right holding the sword.

Moments later, his whole left arm slides off his body and falls down to the desert below.

The man's expression shifts to one of anger, but his forward momentum does not stop or slow at all despite his lost limb. The super charged blade of Soul Energy continues to swing downward directly at me.

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I'm almost entirely drained of Qi, but I planned for this to happen.

As I watch the red blood drip from the Dark Guard's wound, his sword comes down toward me at incredible speed.

I still have nearly all of my Mana stores left, so I activate my Red Hydra's Buff along with all my perception and stat boosting abilities to bring my next move to its full potential, activating 4 of my newest skills all at the same time.

[Flash][Confusion][Screech][Phantom Step]

Letting out an ear-shattering yell, with a simultaneous flash of light that erupts from my body, the sky fills with a bright white light.

Waves of eerie confusion energy erupt in all directions, and illusions of my body take on the form of purple ghost-like phantoms, splitting off into 3 different directions. One goes to the left, the other to the right, and the other flies upward.

In my main body, I activate stealth with all my leftover mana and airstep backward, then down toward the ground using gravity to my advantage to accelerate my fall, narrowly avoiding the downward strike of the bright orange energy sword that hardly slows down at all despite the barrage of distractions.

I still feel its immense heat and power melting through my mana shielding, burning my armor, and blackening the outer layers of my skin without it even hitting me.

I continue to plummet as the Dark Guard's forward momentum continues.

I swallow another Qi pill and plunder MP crystals while adding wind magic above me to accelerate the fall, getting further and further away from the man in the sky as fast as I can. The large gash and burns left across my chest and all over my arms and legs are slowly healed by my self-regeneration, but I see over a quarter of my health bar gone just from getting close to its soul energy without my Qi barrier up.

Once fully recovered, I hit the empty desert floor with a thud, making a crater over three times the size as the one I made decimating the neighborhood back in the city. I look up into the sky while readying my Qi around my body and into my sword.

Residual mana and Qi are left in the wake of my attack, and it's no surprise I sense the orange man's presence coming down toward me.

However, his rate of descent is surprising.

He looks far less intimidating with a lost limb and blood dripping from his stump of a shoulder, but the calm smile on his face and slow descent toward me is not the sight I was hoping to see.

The fact that he's relying on the Lich King's soul energy, and not able to see Qi in its base form just like me before Monk awakened me, means I have an edge in this battle that I didn't have previously.

Even if his fully charged sword could potentially overpower me, the only way it's possible for him to charge it up is if he lets other portions of his defenses down.

Even knowing this, he floats down and readies his energy blade with a single remaining hand with a creepy grin.

He touches down on the desert sand about 50 meters away.

My eyes dart back and forth, analyzing his Soul Energy flow, and seeing thin spots of shielding where I'm positive I could pierce through if I replicated my last attack.

I grip my blade with both hands and breathe slowly and deeply to wait for him to make his next move... Then, our telepathy link opens while something very strange begins to shift in his Soul Energy Shielding.

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"I didn't know why the Dark One liked you so much... but now it's starting to become clear..."

He takes a step forward while the Soul energy around his body drifts toward his lost limb.

An orange veil of energy covers it, and in a matter of seconds, the outline of an arm is formed in the shape of pure energy.

It doesn't grow back; there is just a manifestation of an arm there, similar to his sword. It's arguably more deadly than the real thing, but in doing so, the other areas of defenses around his body thin out even more.

"You caught me off guard. For that, I'll remember this battle for many years. Not many humans can say they punctured the skin of a double-ranked-up Colossal."

My grip on my sword tightens, and my gaze is locked on its weak points.

However, the energy around its body starts to grow...

Every step forward it takes, more orange energy seeps out from its core like an endless supply.

"A valiant effort, young hunter, but you cannot survive a single attack from my final form. I assure you, the battle is finally over."

The energy around its body becomes equivalent to the density that made up its supercharged sword moments ago.

My eyes widen as I realize I wouldn't be able to pierce through this shielding if I tried. Maybe blocking a few blows would be possible, but the many plans of attack I had swimming in my head moments ago all fall away as the entity's entire Soul Energy Density shielding begins to rise even higher than the supercharged sword.

After a few more steps, it looks as if the energy around him is expanding outward.

Then, a few steps later I'm positive it is.

Along with the expanding energy, his body grows too.

I see large bulging muscles and veins growing all over, striations in his chest and thighs, and thick hair grows on his legs and one remaining arm.

The orange energy's density stays the same, but multiple times more of it comes flowing out from a hidden source, covering its full body in a massive flowing shield.

The manifested sword grows larger and larger, and the fake arm on his left side grows to match his expanding body as well.

I feel the atmosphere crackle and buzz in the growing presence of the monster that slowly walks toward me.

His facial features even begin to shift, and his short hair grows rugged and long.

The slick smile and smooth skin molt into a coarse hairy beard, and two long yellow tusks curve down from the edges of his lips down to below his chin.

His posture grows larger, and his eyes begin to merge together to form one massive eye that stares down at me without blinking as the steps draw closer.

As the creature before me passes 10 meters in height, it's closed half the distance, and I stop trying to guess how much more it will grow.

The rate at which it does isn't looking like it will stop anytime soon.

I take a step back, assessing my options, and try to find some kind of weak spot in its shielding, but the overload of immense power that comes off it is mind-bending.

I can't perceive a single opening.

"So this... is what a level 1000 monster can really do...."

I take another step back, then open up my item storage portal behind me.

Two glossy black wings flap in both of my peripherals, as the glowing Orange Colossal Monster doubles its size again and raises its Soul energy manifested sword high in the air.

The blade itself is larger than a building, and the immense crackling pressure in the air is pushing tons of sand to the side and shaking the ground with every step closer it gets. Waves of aura hit me like tsunamis, and I clash back with my own intimidation aura and shield my mind from the mental pressure using Qi, but it just keeps getting stronger and stronger.

I hear Ember's voice speak in a calm and curious manner through our link.

"You're in quite the troublesome situation, aren't you? Would you like some assistance?"

I respond while staring the beast in its single eye.

"Yes. Let's kill this thing."

A wave of red energy floods out of Ember, and clashes with the aura of the Colossal.

I jump up in the air as Ember swoops down beneath me, and I land on his back.

The enormous one-eyed monster's height surpasses that of multistory buildings, and it swings its sword downward as I stand on Ember's back and we soar up into the sky straight at its attack.

Ember's mouth opens wide, and I watch a wave of shimmering Soul Energy imbued flames erupt out. They're tinted red and flow like water, enveloping the energy sword rather than clashing with it.

The only other time I saw him use an attack like this was when he demonstrated how his Soul Energy worked, disintegrating an entire mountain in a dungeon with ease.

As the flames begin to react with the shielding around the Dark Guard's final monstrous form, I come up with the perfect strategy to defeat this creature once and for all.

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Ember's Soul Energy-imbued flames cover the orange sword that plummets down at us, but as the beast follows through with its swing, the massive blade disintegrates away in an instant.

All I feel is a huge gust of wind left behind in its wake, but as we swoop upward, and I see the rest of the flames flow down the monster's arm, eroding away the Soul Energy Shielding around it, a plan comes together in my mind.

I may not be able to puncture its shielding myself at my current strength, but I sure can cut through its flesh with an invisible attack if I'm given the opportunity.

A flap of Ember's black glossy wings brings us higher into the air, moving up past the monster's eye-line almost 40 meters off the ground now.

I deactivate my mana skills and channel Qi into my sword again, just like I did before to take off the monster's left arm. White hot energy flows from my core and oversaturates my sword again, residue trailing below as our ascent increases in speed.

Before, it was still a test; now I'm sure it will work.

My gaze locks on the evaporating layers of orange shielding that creeps down the monster's arm while Ember's Flames of Cleansing begin to die down too. They have their limits too, but it seems the limit to their power is going to be just enough for me to set off an attack.

I swing my blade downward, aimed at the thinnest portion of its defenses in the elbow joint of its right arm where the majority of flames have accumulated and begun to die out.

Orange energy seeps in from its core to fill the exposed portions of shielding, but it's too late.

Another blade of Qi flies downward, and Ember and I fly up.

The sound of a ferocious roar fills the air, followed by a thud as half of the beast's last remaining arm hits the desert floor.

I smile inwardly but keep myself composed in full battle mode while restoring my MP and taking another Qi pill, leaving just 2 more in my storage total.

I open my telepathy link with Ember as he stabilizes us in the air and swoops back down at the beast, now manifesting two arms from pure energy and regrowing the long sword.

"We need to aim for its vital points. The head or heart will be the only way to take it down."

"Understood."



Ember swoops down and tries to attack the monster from behind, releasing a blast of Soul Energy imbued flames at its head.

However, it seems this beast won't fall for the same trick twice. It turns its body the moment it sees the attack coming and uses both of its manifested arms and sword to block the wave of fire.

The same scenario as before happens; its sword is melted away, and the energy that makes its arms melts away too, but it manages not to let any of the dangerous flames hit its real body this time around.

Ember swoops around it with impressive speed and agility, but the giant angry eye continues to track us through the air without fail.

I grip my sword tightly, using my perception skills to their maxed-out potential, trying to find any kind of opening I can.

Ember releases another wave of fire. At the last moment, it's blocked again.

The Colossal's sword and arms are disintegrated away, and some of the shielding on the stub of its right remaining arm is burned away too up to its shoulder. I could land another hit. However, wasting my entire Qi stores on a non-lethal attack right now is not a good idea.

I open my link again.

"We need to slow it down. This creature is too quick and battle-seasoned to allow us to pull another fast one on it."

"Got it."

Ember swoops down again, sending a third wave of fire down onto the monster, only to be cloaked by the same standard move.

However, Ember doesn't swoop back up like the previous times.

We dive down low to the desert floor, and Ember releases another wave of flames mere fractions of a second after the first attack, directly aimed at its legs.

I focus my Qi on the way down and let an attack fly right behind the waves of flames, confident they'll do their magic.

If we don't land this hit now, this monster will surely catch on and find a way to counter this one too. It's now or never.

An eruption of flames, Qi, soul energy, and a vicious roar erupt in my senses as Ember and I fly right past the creature's kneecaps and back past its eye level up into the sky.

An earth-shaking thud can be heard while I rejuvenate myself with mana and another Qi pill, ready to strike again if needed.

My body is starting to ache and shiver from the high usage of Qi in such a short period of time. I've never gone through multiple full cores in just a small amount of time, but I push the feeling to the back of my mind and charge my blade up one last time.

My head turns to the ground as Ember changes direction and starts dive-bombing toward the desert floor again.

The body of the Colossal is resting face down in the sand with both of its legs cut off through the shins.

However, the growing orange glow that pulses and hums throughout its body grows new manifested limbs, and it begins to attempt standing back up on its new bright orange feet.

"Don't let this monster stand again. We're finishing this now."

A wave of flames stronger, hotter, denser, and more intense than any of the previous waves comes blasting out of Ember's mouth as we make a crash course straight for the back of the creature's head.

It's lifting itself off of the ground slowly, but we're falling downward toward it much faster.

Once my sword is fully saturated, I don't move a muscle and keep my eyes locked on the back of its neck.

The Soul Energy flames make contact with the beast, evaporating its shielding away, and I see my opening.

A final crescent of pure Qi makes contact with the exposed neck, and it slices through without any resistance.

The head slides off its shoulders, and Ember swoops upward while I watch the frightened and confused massive eye lose its life as it hits the desert ground.

Another thud follows as the remainder of its body collapses without life.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

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I hit level 765 in an instant, and Ember circles around the corpse high in the air for a few moments before we finally drift down to the ground.

The leftover orange soul energy begins to disperse into the air, but some still stays stagnant. It's just like the leftover residue from my Red Hydra's buff.

Before I hop off Ember's back, I swallow my last remaining Qi pill along with restoring my MP. Even with continuous self-regeneration, my body feels a bit weak. Plus, I'm covered in sweat and breathing heavily.

I do a few circles around the monster, trying to scan it for any other interesting things, but no readings come back.

There aren't any extra popups for stat boosts, and no skills either.

I can't help but think it has something to do with its soul bond with the Dark One. Just like the ghouls and Wraiths, its status is cleared of any items or skills, or extra buffs.

I let out a sigh, then do a deep, extensive All-Seeing Eye scan to see where the dropped armor was that it shed before the battle, and locate it in the city along with many of the broken armor pieces and Wraith Essence Cores scattered around from the other earlier fights.

Then, the faint reading of mana comes from inside the middle of the monster's corpse.

I lift my sword and begin chopping the massive leftover mass of flesh to pieces, trying to dig through to its heart.

The more flesh I rip away, the more intense the source of mana becomes. It gives off a reading unlike anything I've felt before, and doesn't feel like it's infected by the Lich King's soul energy at all.

I finally find its heart and carefully tear it open to find a clear crystal-like shard bigger than my open palm.

I have to put my sword to the side to lift the large clear crystal up with two hands and use appraisal on it.

[Shard of The Colossal] [+266% Strength][+210% Defense][+200% Mental Strength]

I stare down at the item in awe for almost a full minute, admiring the amount of mana coming off of it in its dormant state.

The possibilities of item crafts race through my mind, but I can't think of any item at par with its quality that would be worth merging with it.

This is my first A-Class material I've ever come in contact with.

With a growing smile across my face, I place the item into my item storage and turn to walk away through the blood-stained sand.

I let out advanced fire magic behind me and let my black flames burn the corpse away before it makes a mess out here in the desert.

Then, I approach Ember with a smile.

"A job well done. That was quite the battle."

The corners of Ember's mouth are curved up, and I can see a toothy grin forming.

"It sure was. Your first double-ranked up monster kill."

I nod, and a moment of silence follows before Ember speaks again.

"I know that soul energy very well. That was one of the Lich King's subordinates, wasn't it?"

I let out a sigh.

"It was. And now that this has happened, I doubt it's the last."

Ember thinks to himself and watches the black flames crackle away as the body burns.

"Well... Nothing we can do about it now. If more are on the way, you'll need to find a way to get much stronger. Fast."

Before I open my mouth to agree, more ringing system notifications enter my ear, and I look down at my status to see quite the unexpected string of skill upgrade notifications from my body double. It makes me realize there are definitely more things than just dungeons down in that Canyon.

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[Body Double POV]

[~7 Hours Earlier]

I catch the transport crystal and place it in my storage while my main body leaves to check out the town.

My other body double heads off to begin farming skills while I glide down into the Canyon to step into the nearest stable dungeon.

It seems to be a standard high E-Grade grassland dungeon, but I don't stick around long enough to figure out what kind of monsters are inside. I set a dungeon walker point and crush the teleportation crystal in my hand to bring me back into the lobby of the Galeheart Tower.

Unfortunately, this body double form doesn't have all of the perks of my main body. I don't have access to my Red Hydra's Buff, and no Qi is present in my core. However, my mana control is still leagues above anyone near my level.

I place a shielding barrier up, mimicking my old way of suppressing my intimidation perk's aura.

As I walk forward through the blinding transportation light, I see a single figure in the lobby waiting for me, stood up against the desk that the two lobby men sit behind.

Arie stands up straight and gives me a wave.

His all-black outfit contrasts a lot with the white mana shielding as he walks over with a curious expression but decides not to bring up my change in aura that I'm pretty confident he can perceive.

He just speaks up, turning to the elevator.

"I was prepared to wait a few more hours, but looks like you came right on time. I assume this means you already made it to Sector 2?"

I nod, and the elevator door dings while sliding open. We board it.

"I have. Let's save the talking until we make it there."

My eyes move around the room in a suspicious manner, and Arie shrugs.

"Sure, whatever works for you. If you really think you can get me deeper into the Abyss, it'll be worth the wait."

\*Ding\*

We make it to the dungeon access floor and make our way into the Red Ogre dungeon to use as a connector point to teleport back to the dungeon I just left.

As we step out of the exit portal onto a narrow rocky ledge within the canyon, I let out a sigh, and Arie's questions begin to fly.

"Your aura feels totally different than last night, what's up with that? And is what Fisher said true? The abyss is really nearby?"

I airstep upward, and soon see Arie follow as he manifests small platforms of white energy beneath his steps.

"The aura may feel different because my main body is off exploring the city. You're talking to a body double right now."

Arie lets out a remark in a joking tone.

"Oh, you sent the errand boy to come fetch me, that's real nice."

I turn my head back as we're about to exit the canyon.

"Hey, it's still me. I'm just multitasking."

I turn back as the open desert comes into view. The town is on one side of the canyon while a giant black looming cloud of used up demonic energy is sitting stagnant in the desert.

I point to it.

"Does that answer your second question?"

Arie's eyes track it left and right, scanning the massive black cloud that curves around as far as the eye can see.

His ranked-up buff even activates, and I see a layer of white energy forming around his eyes as we begin to float closer.

"Yeah, it definitely does... Let's check it out."

We fly over to the edge of the Abyss, and I activate my Demonic Energy Manipulation, but use the trick to split my focus that I learned before to allow myself to use mana-powered skills as well.

It's been a while since I used energy like this, but with all my new Qi and mana control training, my ability to manipulate any kind of energy has increased drastically, it almost seems as easy as breathing to spot the small clusters of unrefined energy in the Abyss and pinpoint enemies that line the border.

As my head turns to look straight in the direction of one that seems to be the same strength as those Demonic wolves I faced in the Abyss right outside Solara, Arie's gaze turns to it too.

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We both touchdown about 20 meters away from the wall of darkness, and he speaks up.

"So you can actually see them too?"

I nod with both arms crossed.

"I'm more surprised you can see them, honestly. Is it a special perk from your ranked-up buff? I thought it could only manifest weapons and gear for you like you showed me before."

He nods and begins to manifest a white bow out of energy, then draws back a shimmering white arrow made of the same material.

Moments later, he locks it onto a target in the abyss and lets the arrow fly.

It pierces through the veil of darkness and hits the swirling ball of unrefined energy I pinpointed previously. Then, a howl and squeal of an injured wolf calls out the moment it's hit, but ceases moments later as I'm sure the monster was killed.

Then, the sizzling sound of sparks and Demonic Energy reacting with mana erupts from inside the Abyss for a few seconds, crackling like fireworks, then going silent again.

My curiosity is piqued.

"How'd you manage that? You sent a mana-based attack through the Abyss without it instantly erupting into sparks?"

"It's more complicated than that. Inactive, sealed, or very unique mana signatures don't activate a reaction. It's how you're able to wear gear inside the Abyss and not have it explode on you. As long as the mana isn't free flowing or actively interacting with anything, it shouldn't combust."

I nod, pointing a finger at the abyss and shooting a fireball at the dark wall to watch it explode and turn to yellow and white sparks the instant it makes contact with the wall of black fog.

Arie continues, activating his red hydra's buff for a split second and letting a white arrow coated in red energy fly into the abyss next.

It soars for hundreds of meters, almost further than I can sense, then finally hits something, and the energy is dispersed, making a crackling explosion deep within the darkness.

"The energy from this buff works as a protective layer as well, it makes my attacks last even longer before they sizzle out. However, I have reason to believe my skill and buff are not replicable. You see, I didn't naturally awaken my Spirit Archer skill. It was artificially infused into me while I was awakening as a gift from my village leader back in Sector 4. I believe because of this, the special traits have carried on to my ranked-up buff too."

I turn my head to Arie, wondering exactly what he means by this. I always knew his skill was odd. "Spirit Archer" is not a skill I've ever seen a replica of. After scanning hundreds, even thousands of skills in cities like Solara, Vice City, and Valor City; I've never seen a skill like this. Whatever he's talking about, it would explain a few things.

"I've been meaning to tell you this for a long time, but never found the opportunity to do so."

There's a silence between us, but I reply in a friendly tone.

"You can tell me anything, my lips are sealed and my ears are open. We have plenty of time."

He smiles.

"Well, as you already know, I was trained at a very young age to become a strong archer. Others in the village were made to focus on their specialized abilities too. Some were tanks with shields, others were rogues with swords and daggers, some specialized with medicine, and others worked on their perception skills day and night."

He lets out a sigh staring into the Abyss with the white glow from his buff still surrounding his eyes and charging up his bow to make another arrow.

"There were 20 of us, orphans. And of course the leader of the village who took us in to train. Every day he would consume white pills and tell us to sit on slabs of black rock while we eat our meals, and even while we slept. The day any of us turned 18 was the day he'd bring us to a low-level dungeon and watch us awaken. Everyone came each time, and the old man always told us that we would awaken special unique skills if we followed his training regime."

I nod, letting Arie go on, curious about this unknown history he's hinted about but never shared with anyone on the team before.

"Most members would awaken normal skills. Body hardening, swordsmanship, speed or strength buffs... So we just assumed the old man was crazy, or just kind; Keeping our hopes up and making our lives fun despite being misfits thrown away by our families in the Dark Continent. However, this all changed when my 18th birthday came around."

Arie pauses, smiling to himself, and releasing another arrow far into the Abyss. As it pierces through two Demonic wolves that were approaching at the sound of its fallen fellow monster's call, he continues to talk.

"I was the first to awaken a unique skill. I was overjoyed, but the old man seemed to be the most happy of all, screaming out that his hypothesis was right and I was the first success. After that day,

he'd bring me to the dungeons in Solara to train every weekend, buying as much mana potions and gear as I needed to buff up my mana control at a young age and level up quickly."

Arie powers down his buff and the bow disappears from his hands.

"A few years passed as I trained up my skills with the other kids there, and one other girl in the village awakened a unique talent too. Her name was Luna. It wasn't a powerful combat skill or anything, just a very unique perception skill that only works at night."

Arie lets out a sigh.

"The old man told us he would awaken us fully if we ever made it to level 500, but we all thought that was just to push us further in the future. However, there were no dungeons strong enough for the public to farm in once we got to a certain point. As each of us hit level 250, we were each given special access from the Solaran government to enter the Hunter's exams with temporary citizenship granted by the Hunters Association. It takes a few years to get approved, but the process is not complicated. Long story short, I left my village right after one of the first big surges, entering the C-Class exams, and meeting all of you..."

He pauses and we stare off into the Abyss in silence for a few seconds, and I connect all the pieces together in my mind even before he speaks up again.

"Ever since we first set foot in Solara, I dreaded nearing the Abyss because the fact that it was that close to the city could only mean one thing. It had already enveloped the place I used to call home. I'm sure our leader got out of there with the students he had left, but I still wanted the closure of seeing it one more time. Once I finished up my power leveling with Chester in Solara last week, I went to venture out into that pit of darkness to find what remained of my village but couldn't make it far enough in... I kept running into some damn giant worm and was never able to make it past."

Despite the long heartfelt story, memories of running away from that giant Demonic worm come back to my mind as well, and I can't help but to crack a smile.

"You almost got eaten by one of those things too?"

He sees me chuckle and shifts his serious tone back to one more lighthearted and smiles back.

"Yeah, three times actually. One time, two of them even attacked at once, they're no joke. No matter what direction I came at, they wouldn't leave me alone. My arrows still aren't strong enough, I never even managed to leave a scratch."

Memories of my time in the abyss flash through my mind, then I compare it to all of the training I've done recently. It's not too outlandish to believe I could make it past those worms now if I really tried.

So, I nod to myself and respond to Arie with a proposition.

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"I know three potential ways you could get strong enough to venture further into the abyss. Would you like to hear them?"

Arie listens and nods.

"Of course. What do you know?"



I do a quick inspect on Arie to see he's level 586. It's a high number, but far below his actual power level that he showed me with his bow right here.

"Well, the first way is obvious. I could take you back to the Vice City Labyrinth and we could climb the floors to level up. I'm sure the stronger you grow your body, levels, and mana control; the better your unique skill will work against Demonic Monsters."

He responds.

"Sure, that's obvious. But it'll be a slow process, and just raising my mana control and level does not guarantee the increase in effectiveness against these so-called Demonic Creatures."

I nod.

"Yes, you're right. That leads us to the second option. I could awaken the power that Maria and Abby have been training with the last few weeks. It's called Qi, and I have reasons to believe after hearing your story, this is the energy your old village leader used to awaken your unique skills special traits. Similar to the Red Hydra's Buff, it is rooted in a different power source than just mana-based attacks. It would not react with Demonic Energy like mana does."

Arie perks up at this.

"You can just awaken me? And I'll be able to wield it immediately...?"

I sigh and shake my head.

"No, it would take quite a while to learn... and to be honest, the only source for more energy to get stronger is back in Valor City. I can awaken you if we meet up with my main body, but it will still take weeks or months, maybe even years to get to the point where it'll actually do significant damage on a creature of the Demonic Worms' stature. Though, I'm very confident Qi would be enough to kill it."

Arie gives me a curious look, then speaks up again.

"Okay, what's the last option. You've given me the fast and inefficient route with mana training, the slow and guaranteed route with this Qi proposition; so what's the third option? A risky yet guaranteed method, or what?"

"Exactly."

I smile, looking Arie in the eyes for a moment, then turning my head to the Abyss while activating my Demonic Energy manipulation and gathering all 30 or so Units of Unrefined Demonic Energy that has dispersed from the Wolves killed by Arie's prior attacks.

A swirling of black energy comes flowing out of the Abyss, then into my hand, and flowing into my body to rest in my Demon's Core.

I create a slashing movement with my hand, letting a few units of energy flow out into a small crescent of energy. My Midnight Dagger is in the item storage of my main body, I would have used it now to show off if items like that could replicate into body doubles.

Still, the refined demonic energy flows from my finger and pierces through the dark veil of the Abyss.

I let the remaining refined energy drip from my fingers and lock away the 27 units of unused energy into my core for later use. Then, respond.

"The third option is using the power of the Demonic Monsters against them. I believe I can teach you how to wield Demonic Energy."

Arie's eyes open wide. He watched the whole attack and didn't let his gaze leave the crescent of darkness for a moment. I continue to speak in his moment of silence.

"I'm positive it'll kill these creatures. I managed to crack the tooth of one of those worms with this power when I was much weaker than both of us are now. From what I've learned so far, Demonic Energy is the most effective and safe offensive move against Demonic Creatures. It only took me a few days to get the hang of it, and as you can see, we have a pretty abundant supply of energy to do training."

I point at the abyss, and Arie finally replies.

"I think the answer is pretty clear then."

I smile.

"The only tricky part is, to prepare for training, you're going to have to permanently give up an item slot. And... we're going to have to clear a labyrinth."

Arie's eyes open even more, but while he thinks to himself I do another deep All-Seeing eye scan of the Canyon nearby. If my guess is right, at least one of the two strongest portal readings is a labyrinth. Fisher mentioned he saw one in our briefing back in Valor City too, but I still need to see it for myself.

I speak up.

"Before I get your hopes up, I want to go check out the canyon for myself and see if there is even a labyrinth for us to farm. If there is, I'll be telling you the secret of a Labyrinth's hidden reward for completely clearing it."

Arie shared his past with me, and in return, I'll gladly explain the secret intricacies of what the actual purpose of labyrinths are. He responds, clearly still very deep in thought.

"Sure. Let's go see. You're right, we better see if there really is one first. If there is, I'd like you to teach me Demonic Energy. I pick option 3."

"Gladly."

We head back in the direction of the many dungeons and begin air-stepping and spirit-walking down into its depths of the canyon.

It gets darker the further down we go, but Arie illuminates the area around us with a white glow. My advanced eyesight is good enough in the dark that I don't really care either way, but the light does make traveling a little easier.

A few red dungeon breaks pass by, and dozens of blue portals fill my vision as well, but once we finally get about 3km down past winding paths, huge rock formations, and small flowing streams of underground water sources, the first anomaly reading on my radar comes into view.

It's an enormous portal, but unfortunately, its tint is blue.

Based on its mana output, this is a middle or high ranked B grade dungeon. Possibly the strongest one I've ever felt. It gives off more energy than the Red Ogre dungeon back in Valor City. However, it's not worth checking out right now. My other body double that is checking out the dungeons in here will get to it eventually.

This dungeon has the same level of mana output readings the other oddity gives off. However, the depth of its power feels much different and the energy flowing away from it is in a far more constant and steady rate. I believe these are the readings of a very stable labyrinth, but don't have much data to test my theory. As we dip into another cave system following the flowing streams, we make our way to the last oddity.

The air gets thinner, the humidity increases, and the temperature around us gets hotter the further down we travel. But once we're nearly 6km beneath the surface, and pass a few more scattered dungeons, a faint green glow hits my vision and I begin to get excited.

"There it is."

I can see a grin forming on Arie's face too, and sweat drips from both our foreheads as we touch down on the wet rocky floor in front of a large green glowing labyrinth portal.

"So, training can begin?"

I nod.

"Yes, it can. Let's clear this Labyrinth. You have much to learn."

We both jump through onto the first floor without hesitating at all, eager to see what's inside.

Not to waste any time, we both race through the bottom floors without targeting any monsters. I make it a habit to kill one per unique floor just in case there are some new skills, but most of these dungeons are duplicates that I've faced many times before.

At our top speeds, it doesn't take more than 10 to 15 minutes to zip through some floors high above the sky.

While we venture further upward, I explain the basics of dungeon physics and dungeon mass regeneration, as well as the presence of a labyrinth master at the top floor. I mention the fact that they're Demons that make soul bonds with powerful creatures like dragons, and if defeated, the Demons drop their cores and can be wielded by humans.

I reveal the fact that I have two cores. One from the C-Class exams, and another from the Solaran Labyrinth. Explaining that this is most likely the reason the Association screwed us over, but I still don't have any evidence of it.

I tell him about what happened when we were captured, and how I escaped using Demonic energy and my Demon's core for the first time.

I even reveal the events of my time in the Demonic Rift, fighting three waves of Demonic Minotaurs to Arie, then relate all this information to the fact that there is probably some kind of Demonic entity deep inside the Dark Continent causing the abyss to expand.

This possibly gives validity to Chester's theory of their being a massive Labyrinth deep within the Dark Continent.

Of course, I give no mention of Ember or the Void Creepers; they seem pretty unnecessary to this conversation and it's a secret I'm still not ready to share.

About 4 hours pass and we beat the 20th floor's special boss room of this labyrinth, Arie is completely caught up to speed and understands the risks and rewards of accepting a Demon's core. We decide that from here on out, he'll be doing all the fighting because he needs the level gains and combat experience more than me. However, we have also agreed that I get the final strike on this Demon at the top no matter what because it may have unique skills I can absorb.

Once we pass the 25th floor, things start to get interesting because the creatures on these floors are nearing Arie's level.

By the time we hit the 26th floor, a large mountainous region with earth wielding bug creatures with strong exoskeletons that are able to dig holes and spin their bodies very quickly to both attack and retreat, Arie starts to level up.

Once I see he's still able to pierce their vital points with a single arrow, I step back and let him train solo for a bit.

The 27th and 28th floor go similarly, as Arie uses this opportunity to make it to level 632.

Once the tan-skinned archer easily defeats the flaming serpent boss of the 28th floor with two white arrows through the forehead, we're both transported into a narrow stone hallway that feels very familiar.

I turn to Arie and speak as he illuminates the short pathway to show a slow spinning portal at the other end.

"This is it. The Labyrinth is 29 floors. Next up, you'll be fighting a Demon."

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Arie takes a step forward and powers up with a buff.

"Let me fight on my own. I'd like to see how I stack up against this final floor. I want to feel like I've earned this core."

He stops right before the portal at the end of the hall.

"Of course, slip in the final blow to get whatever skills you need, just don't help me in battle unless I'm in really bad shape. I doubt I will be, but you never know."

I nod, and he jumps through without saying another word. I do the same, letting the transport magic bring us to the final floor of this peculiar labyrinth.

It's not much different than the labyrinth we faced back in Solara, and only a few floors higher. However, something feels too perfect about this place.

The teleport magic brings us into a wide open boss room that is forest and earth-themed. Thin dark green trees reach up to the blue sky, and rocky mounds of hills and stone formations riddle the landscape.

For the most part, it's very flat and calm. However, near the back of the boss room where the danger always lies, the dense presence of two mana figures comes rocketing our way instantly.

I do a full inspect and appraisal while stepping to the side, letting Arie know what's happening.

"They're on their way."

I cross my arms and airstep backward to sit on a tall boulder, and take a look at just the level and skills from the two approaching figures.

[Lv. 707]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Body Double [Legendary Grade]

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

[Lv. 707]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Plunderer [Legendary Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

The shadowy figure of a Greater Demon with two red horns coming out of its forehead and curving behind its head comes into full view as it glides above the treeline, standing on the back of a massive Earth Dragon almost the size of Ember.

The Demon's eyes are sharp, and it stands almost 3 meters tall. It has an impressively strong and tight build, wearing dark red armor with impressive defensive stats. It wields two daggers and stares both of us down from a distance.

The dragon lets out a loud roar, and I observe its glossy tan scales reflect the clouds and the blue sky from above and the dark green trees below it on its white underbelly.

The flapping of its wings ceases once the two touch down on the opposite side of the small wooded clearing we're in, and a surprisingly pissed off voice comes through our telepathy link. It seems like we're just pests that woke it up from a nap, rather than hunters challenging its throne.

"What are you two doing here? I thought we had a deal. I won't kill your men in the dungeons around here, and you'll let me grow my labyrinth in peace. I almost have that unique floor 30 ready for you, so what's with the interruptions?"

The demon rolls its eyes and starts to get closer, gripping its two jet-black daggers and imbuing large amounts of mana into them, giving off a growing aura of intimidation and hostility.

As I piece the puzzle together that the sector 2 leader must have had some kind of deal with this Demon to allow it to grow its base while not interacting with hunters that farm the nearby dungeons for supplies, it seems Arie has come to the same conclusion.

He manifests a white bow and arrow, speaking out loud to the Demon and massive earth dragon.

"Deal's off. The Leader you made that deal with is dead. You'll be fighting me now."

More intense aura pours out of the Demon, and its calm stance shifts to a much more serious battle-ready one.

"Fine. Filthy humans, you all can never keep your word. The ones that can are always too weak and die before any deals can be done. I was foolish to believe that man was any different."

It glows white, and 3 body doubles separate from its main body, all of them have nearly identical amounts of mana control as far as I can see.

They charge forward, leaving the main body and the dragon behind, slowly making their move.

Arie smirks, spirit-stepping upward, and releasing a full-powered arrow strike far faster than anything I've seen him send off in the past.

It collides with the dense shielding of a nearby demon's clone, while the other two blip out of existence and reappear on opposite sides of Arie with their daggers poised to kill.

One goes all in for a shot at his neck while the other aims its daggers at his heart.

He summons two small walls of white energy in front of his vital points using his ranked-up buff, and the buzzing noise followed by fragmenting metal is all I hear as the daggers break against a nearly impossible to penetrate barrier.

Meanwhile, the dust and mana cloud around the double Arie shot at that is still on the ground finally clears, and a bright white arrow is lodged right through its chest. Blood drips out, and the Demon does not look happy as it pulls it out from its chest with bare hands.

The creature dungeon walks up to help its two other partners with the close-range attack.

As it materializes, Arie turns his gaze and releases another arrow that punctures right through the already injured demon's head, killing it on the spot and the double disintegrates into pure mana.

Stolen from its original source, this story is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

He twists his body around, jumping higher in the air while blocking the onslaught of more close-range jabs and slashes from these two remaining demons' knives.

Unexpectedly, three of the small shielding circles Arie summons to block their strikes morph into a long white spear the moment their attention leaves it. One of the unsuspecting Demon's copies is impaled from behind, skewering it three times with multiple new manifested spears from its blind spot.

In the same moment, the last body double is thrown off its game for a split second while witnessing the gruesome and instantaneous attack out of nowhere, and Arie takes this moment of hesitation to charge his bow back up to its full potential, landing a fully charged arrow to its forehead at point-blank range.

It doesn't even get to scream, and the double disintegrates away.

The mana disperses, and the only thing I can think to do is clap slowly.

That was an impressive display of raw power and battle IQ. I have to give it to him, Arie has improved.

However, based on the reaction of the real Demon's body that storms his way, it's not as impressed.

It jumps up in the air, glowing brighter and brighter white itself, while the earth dragon by its side begins to activate what I can only assume is its ranked-up buff.

A thick barrier of liquid stone surrounds the dragon, and a pair of crimson wings the same color as the demon's horns come jutting out of the Demon's back once the white light goes away.

I sense its mana control increase by over 50%, meaning it's activated some kind of ranked-up buff too, with a shapeshifting perk that I've never seen a demon wield before.

As it flaps its wings and flies into the air, the dragon jumps up and, even with its heavy stone armor on, gracefully spins through the air.

Three more doubles of the Demon form all around it, with wings of their own this time around, and twist and swirl through the air with impressive agility.

Arie stands still, drawing his bow back, and not moving from the circular 1-meter wide white manifested platform beneath his feet.

Then, less than 10 meters before impact as the 3 body doubles dungeon walk closer and the real demon and its ranked-up dragon swirl around it attacking from both sides, a dark crimson aura emits from Arie and I watch blood-red arrows fly.

Streaks of red energy are left in the sky as the instant Arie activates his Red Hydra's buff, his speed, agility, and power are multiplied by a factor of nearly 3.

The doubles are disintegrated in the blink of an eye, and I see a barrage of crimson arrows crack through the defenses of the earth dragon's stone imbued ranked-up shielding.

It takes a few hits in the exact same spots, but eventually, one of his arrows pierces right through the dragon's left wing.

The Demon ruthlessly sends more and more doubles at Arie, but they get weaker and weaker every wave. Arie takes them out with ease.

The great thing about the Red Hydra's buff is you're able to keep up the same intensity until the battle is over, only then will you have to face the consequences. The Demon is unaware of this, and I'm starting to see the look on its face change from annoyance and anger to helplessness and fear.

This Demon has never faced a fearsome opponent in its life. It's been able to sit back and enjoy the luxuries of growing its labyrinth with the Sector 2 leader watching over its lackeys, never having to actually protect its throne.

The battle instincts of a Demon that it was born with are surely there, but its will to survive and win by any means necessary are lacking. It's very clear to see, Arie's sharp eyes, determined grit, and battle experience over the years will easily bring him to victory here.

Another 30 seconds pass and Arie gets closer and closer, chipping away at the Earth Dragon's armor and dispatching dozens of body doubles that come three at a time. He finally sends a red arrow through the walls of protective doubles and shielding to hit the Demon's main body in the thigh.

It yells out in fury while blood flows through its wound, opening up a telepathy link as a last ditch effort. The Demon's voice is wavering and much more nervous than before.

"L-Let's make a deal, come on! That was just a test. I see a very profitable future in your midst."

Another red arrow comes curving around the back side of the dragon, past its wings that have a few arrow holes of their own pierced through them, and the shot lands right through one of the Demon's wings on the same side as its injured leg.

It erupts into a massive display of mana shielding flying into the air and red residue from the red hydra's buff as Arie releases yet another arrow, threading the needle through the tall trees, explosions, and distractions placed in his way.

"You should have spoken up before you tried to kill me. Your core is all mine!"

His next arrow hits the Demon's other wing, making it begin to fall to the woodland floor. Arie spirit-steps and narrowly dodges every one of the body doubles with ease, making eye contact with me for a split second, letting me know he's going in for the kill and I should get ready to do what I need to do.

I activate my buffs and pull out my sword while Arie releases his final shot aimed straight at the Demon's heart, charged up with as much of his Red Hydra's buff soul energy and mana from his skill as possible, making it a strike that is a guaranteed fatal blow.

I grin, filling my blade with mana and igniting my body on fire as I air-step into battle. I follow the crimson arrow with all my buffs activated and extreme speed on full blast. I zip through the trees, soar beneath the wing of the massive earth dragon, and swing my sword at the Demon's neck as it falls toward the ground.

There's a satisfying sound of dense mana slicing through weaker mana as my blade melts through its shielding and cuts off the demon's head in an instant. However, fractions of a second later, the dark red arrow pierces its heart and the body of the creature goes limp before it can even hit the ground.

In the resulting thud, the soul bond agreement between demon and dragon is triggered and the eyes of the mighty Earth Dragon gloss over and it falls to the ground as well.

My eyes, on the other hand, light up with excitement as the notifications in my vision appear.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Body Double

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Dungeon Walker

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

As I choose yes on both of them, notifications that they've been transferred to my main body fill my vision.

Then, Arie walks over while powering down his Red Hydra's buff.

He catches himself on a nearby boulder as he almost passes out from exhaustion, but I run over and help him walk toward the Demon's dissolving corpse to claim his prize.

"I'm impressed. That may have been the most extreme battle I've ever seen you fight in. Taking on a Demon and Dragon over level 700 on your own... not bad."



I crack a grin, and he tries to smile back, but the fatigue is definitely kicking in.

The cleanly sliced neck and perfectly circular hole through its heart are signs of seasoned killers at work. We both admire our shots, but I can feel Arie's breathing is very heavy and his eyes are threatening to shut.

The moment the corpse finally dissolves, a mana crystal, bright red horn, and small black core fall to the boss room floor.

I point it out, and Arie reaches down to grab it.

Just like the two times I received my cores, the moment it touches his palm, it begins to sink into the center of his hand, and a long black line starts to form from his wrist, up his shoulder, down his chest, and stops right above his heart.

He then falls to the floor asleep with a wide smile across his face.

I can't help but to let out a laugh.

"You did well. I've been in the same exact place many times. I'll watch over you while you recover."

I take the demon's horn, two mana crystals, and single earth dragon scale as loot from the battle and place them in my item storage.

Soon after, the Labyrinth begins to fade away, bringing us back to the canyon.

However, the instant my feet hit the damp rocky floor of the underground cave system, an overwhelming aura of death and destruction fills the air unlike anything I've ever felt before.

My head instinctively turns in the direction of the city, but the aura feels as if it's coming from much further out in the desert. Whatever it is, that seems way out of my current body double form's league. It feels as if gods have clashed. So, whatever it is, the fact that I haven't disappeared from existence means my main body is taking care of it just fine.

Still, I begin to air-step my way out of the cave system while carrying Arie to reach the surface to check out what happened for myself.

Chapter 447

[Main Body POV]

I stare down at my status as two new skill upgrades are added to my repertoire, and a grin widens on my face.

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Body Double][Legendary Grade]

[Skill Transfer To Main Body: Complete]

[Dungeon Walker][Legendary Grade]

My eyes scan over their additional legendary perks, and I see that the reduction on base stats and mana control has been lifted on my body double skill now.

So, any clones I make will be identical in strength to my original form, but it looks as though my soul energy buffs and Qi will not be transferred, only mana and demonic energy powered skills will.

On top of that, the maximum body double limit has raised to 3, so my multitasking just got a whole lot faster.

Next, I read over my new legendary perks of the dungeon walker upgrade and find that now I don't need to set any exact spawn points within dungeons. As long as I've stepped foot in or have a memory of any portion of the dungeon logged in my subconscious, I'll be able to access any part of it instantly.

This makes me wonder If dungeons logged by my body doubles' memories will now transfer to my main body. There are no exact transport points I need to follow anymore, it's either I'm greenlit for a dungeon or not.

Along with that, a certain newly unlocked perk catches my eye that I wasn't expecting.

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[Legendary Perk][Activation Time: 10 Seconds][Cooldown: 24 hours][Debuff: 99% decrease in all base stats and 99% mana control Suppression for 24 hours following usage.]

The caster is able to teleport from anywhere outside of a dungeon into a dungeon of their choosing. Only the caster and equipped items may use this perk, passengers will be left behind.

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The consequences of using this new perk seem to heavily outweigh the positives, but it's an interesting getaway move that may be useful in the future.

Once fully satisfied with my findings, the mana signature of one of my body doubles carrying the familiar reading of my teammate Arie comes into my general perception range. Then, soon after, I see them both coming near me and my double raising its waving hand in the air while pointing to Arie who seems to be knocked out cold or sleeping.

My double drifts down to the desert floor and sets Arie on the ground, I take this as a cue to point my finger at my own double and shoot a small Qi imbued bullet of stone through its forehead and the memories of the labyrinth come rushing back to me.

"Interesting..."

I have a lot to think about. After the defeat of the 7th ranked dark guard, Arie's new goal of learning Demonic Energy, and now the nearly 400 people in the town that just watched me slaughter their leaders without breaking a sweat, there is much to do.

I activate my body double skill again, making two more copies to hit my max while the 3rd continues to farm skills and log dungeon details in the canyon.

This time, they're at par with my current level 765 status and the mana control is leaking off them like massive beams of light to my refined eye.

If you find this story on Amazon, be aware that it has been stolen. Please report the infringement.

I point to one, throwing it a new transport crystal back to the Galeheart tower.

"Explain as much as you can to Abby and Maria. They may be out in town, just have Lith send out guards to retrieve them before tonight, going into the Arena again may not be a smart decision. Especially considering the 7th ranked Dark Guard won't return. Have them come here as soon as

possible, and try to get them to bring Monk here as well. Tell him I'll have an increased cultivation speed method ready, but he's going to need to bring a lot of Qi pills for us all to try. Whatever happens, don't leave the mana shielded protection barrier of the Galeheart tower, the Dark One cannot suspect I've defeated its subordinates yet."

My double catches the crystal with a nod, crushing it in its hand instantly.

I look to my other double, and it begins to morph into the flaming black business suit attire using conceal and the properties of my cloak to match the exact look of the Flame Emperor that I presented before.

I nod and point to the town.

"You already know what to do, I've been thinking about this for a while. Just get everyone in one place, make sure the higher level grunts don't fight, give everyone ample food and water, and wait for the mind control potions to wear off. It should take another 6 or 8 hours for everyone to come to their senses. Find the access key to the bunker, and don't let anyone else in it. I want that base for myself. Store all B grade items or above down there, the rest of the materials we'll sort through and figure out uses for later."

I reach into my item storage and pull out my final [Full Restore] potion, and uncork it.

"By then, hopefully, Abby is in town and she can help heal any major side effects that elixir has on all those workers."

My double nods, igniting yellow flames in its eyes behind the manifested black mask and putting up layers of invisible mana shielding to stop its waves of intimidation streaming out, then airsteps off toward the town.

I finally open up an item storage portal to let Ember walk inside. He lets out a remark in our open telepathy link while moving forward.

"Looks like you've got your work cut out for you. I recommend you train extra hard or leave this place in the near future. We may have beaten one of the Dark Guards, but I believe you still cannot comprehend The Lich King's true strength. If it realizes one of its top officers is killed, more will come. It wouldn't be a bad idea to try and hit our second rank up stage soon, if your plan is to fight and not run, hitting level 1000 will give us a much needed strength boost."

"You're right as always, Ember. I have a plan. The next guard they throw at us, we'll be ready."

Ember disappears into my item storage.

Then, I feed Arie the [Full Restore] potion using my telekinesis skill, and he immediately begins to open his eyes and come to.

"W-Where are we? I won right?"

I chuckle as Arie stands to his feet in a state of confusion.

"Yeah, you won. Now we can start your training in the abyss, shall we?"

His eyes widen, and he looks down at his hands.

Eventually, his gaze shifts to meet his forearm and follows the newly formed black tattoo using his index and middle finger all the way up his sleeve to meet his chest.

Then, opens his status.

"It really does give a hundred percent increase in all stats too? Not bad. I can't sense any of this so-called Demonic Energy yet though."

As he punches the air and continuously forms his bow and mimics shooting arrows to feel his new base stat boosts, we begin walking toward the Abyss.

Once we get within visual range, I speak up while I activate my Rising Emperor's Domain buff, and surprisingly, Arie automatically clears all the conditions and I'm allowed to add him to my status to add skills.

"I'm going to use one of my abilities on you, open your status again. As I already explained quite a few times, Demonic energy is quite dangerous and if handled poorly can lead to guaranteed instant death. So, you're not going to be practicing with your main body."

The instant I share my Body Double Skill with Arie, an odd notification pops up in my mind's eye.

[Congratulations! Rising Emperor's Domain Milestone Reached!]

[5/5 New Party Members Added]

[New Perk Unlocked: Find My Friend]

A rush of information hits my subconscious, and with pinpoint accuracy, I see 5 geolocation points as clear as day in my mind's eye all over the world.

[Ember]

[Maria]

[Abby]

[Bri]

[Arie]

Ember's is located wherever I step, indicating he's inside my item storage space, both Abby and Maria are way up North in Valor City. Bri is in her workshop in Vice City, and Arie is right beside me.

As I scroll through each of their names, their full status screens pop up with health, gear, skills, levels, and pure stats down to the last digit on everyone. I try to share skills with members that aren't near me, but it shows it is impossible because they are outside of my active Rising Emperor's Domain range.

I continue playing with the brand new interface in my status as we walk closer to the Abyss. This ranked up buff is starting to become a lot more interesting. It makes me wonder if this is what happens when just 5 members are added, then what perks will I get when I add more?

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As these questions about my ranked-up buff continue to race through my mind, we come face to face with the Abyss, and I save my theories for later when I can actually test them. Arie opens his status to see the new skill shared with him.

A flash of white light shimmers all around him and creates a single body double. I do an All-Seeing Eye scan to confirm a copy of his greater demon's core did in fact manifest in his new body.

I point at the Abyss.

"Alright, it's time to begin your training."

---

It takes a while to get started because without a Demonic Energy Manipulation skill, the unrefined energy that drops from monsters cannot be manipulated from long distances. However, after a few trial and error attempts, we figure out a way for Arie to channel the unrefined energy into his core.

All it takes is physical contact with a newly slain Demonic Monster.

The first attempt with a Demonic wolf is a success in my eyes. Even though Arie's body double erupts into a massive ball of sparks and explodes on the spot, at least some of the Demonic Energy enters his pathways to his core.

It works similarly to using mana control and creating shielding, but without a mana manipulation skill. Even though Arie doesn't have a Demonic Energy Manipulation skill, he can still move the energy around and sync his movements with his core.

Just the fact alone that a demon's core is in his body opens up the possibilities of wielding this new energy. However, he still has to learn it from scratch, like I did.

Arie creates 3 more doubles and is determined to improve.

I re-tell the stories of all my past experiences learning to let the Demonic Energy flow through my emptied out mana pathways while turning off the flow of active skills to not mix the two.

It takes dozens of failed attempts of massive balls of sparks and killed body doubles until Arie finally manages to keep some of the energy in his body double's core.

He releases it with a slow drip from his fingertips just like I did when I first started, and also self-destructs when his pathways are not completely cleared out while instinctual mana is used to power footsteps or movement speed.

On the bright side, Arie's high level of knowledge and experience manipulating mana translates over well. In just a few hours, he manages to fully absorb a full 10 units from a fallen Demonic wolf into his core and also can let the energy itself leak from his fingers pretty quickly, activating his mana skills again within minutes and not being overcome with sparks.

This kind of result took me many days to master. However, I didn't have 3 body doubles that speed up training and remove the risks of dying. Plus, he has access to a nearly endless supply of Demonic energy, and of course, most importantly, an excellent teacher.

Once Arie gets the hang of things and has a set goal in mind to replicate the black crescent slash I showed him before we entered the labyrinth, I finally take a break from overseeing him and sit down in the desert sand right outside the abyss and pull one of the isolation pods from my item storage.

I need to be within range of Arie's main body with my Rising Emperor's Domain. It stretches out almost 40 meters now, it's much larger, but the range is still limiting. His doubles are capable of

traveling far away and practicing on their own, scouring the edge of the abyss, but I need to stay near the real Arie to continue sharing my skill.

The narrative has been stolen; if detected on Amazon, report the infringement.

So, we both get situated next to the shade of a small nearby rock structure jutting out of the sand.

"While I have a moment, I think this is a good time to start figuring out how these things work."

I activate my All-Seeing Eye, then my appraisal skill, and begin tinkering with the isolation pod.

There really isn't much to it.

It's a large heavy metal cylinder with a mechanical door set to open and close with a mechanism locked to a control panel. The control panel on it allows a user to set any amount of time using seconds, minutes, and hours.

The inner walls are made of what seem to be a unique mana shielding, and up above in a compartment connected to the shielding is an incredibly high mana reading. Covering this, is a powered-down digital clock that usually displays how much time is left in a user's pod session. If I had to guess there's still hundreds of millions of mana still locked away up there even though Lith said these machines are dormant and out of juice.

I can't seem to see through it all the way with my All-Seeing Eye, and my appraisal skill just gives blank and basic readings back.

It isn't until I activate my mythic grade crafting skill that a few new text boxes pop up in my mind's eye that were not there before.

[Input Mana]

This hovers over the top portion of the machine's mana dense section. It glows blue and looks just like the setting in my mythic grade craftsmanship interface that allows me to imbue items with skills, elements, and other features.

My gaze shifts down to the other lighter blue text box that hovers right over the control panel on the inner wall.

[Current Dilation: 1.2039x]

It doesn't have any way to add anything or change it in any way. So, my best guess is that it is dependent on how much mana is inputted, and the dilation will increase if more power is stored.

A final blue box is visible on the floor inside the pod.

[Crafters Note]

I click it, and a single text wall of instructions is left behind.

---

Isolation Pod version 1.9.3

2/2: Sold to Lith Galeheart

Craftsmen instructions: Upon sale, time dilation will be about 10x faster inside the pod vs the outside world. After daily use, this pod may run dry in 1-2 years. Energy output and mana leakage

for higher dilation is not worth the mana costs for commercial sales. Latest test of 28.3055x Dilation fell below 10x in just 36 hours of usage. Stability of A+ Grade mana shielding has diminishing returns after 9-10x dilation. Energy loss can be mitigated with higher-level shielding, but materials are not available. V2.0 date TBD.

---

It looks as if this is another craftsmen note left behind by the Sector 2 leader, most likely not meant to be seen by anyone's prying eyes but his own.

However, it gives me interesting insight into his crafting process...

I reach into my item storage and pull out a few thousand MP worth of mana crystals and begin feeding them into the [Input Mana] slot to do some testing.

The pink crystals instantly disappear from my hands in a flash of white light and are added to the dense core on top of the pod in an instant. When I look at the control panel and see [Current Dilation: 1.2039x], showing it hasn't changed at all, I reach into my storage and pull out many more crystals.

I have tons to spare, and just want to see this number rise to confirm I'm doing it right.

After countless gems are pushed through, roughly a hundred thousand MP worth, it shifts to [Current Dilation: 1.2040x] and a grin comes across my face, also paired with a long sigh, realizing something...

"These are going to be really expensive to maintain..."

Arie looks over, replying to my mumbles.

"Find anything interesting?"

I nod.

"Yeah, I figured out how to power them... but according to my calculations here, it's going to take at least a billion MP to get this thing to dilate time up to twice as fast. Plus, it seems like there's an issue with holding in its energy past a certain point. I'm not even sure if my calculations are correct, it could get more expensive the higher it's pushed, there's no guarantee the energy needed for higher dilation is linear. Honestly... I doubt it is. On top of that, according to the creator, pushing the machine to anything over 10x faster than the outside world is burning excess mana unnecessarily. However, it's apparently plausible for one-time uses, which may be worth the excessive burn if we're in a time crunch."

I start thinking deeply to myself, and Arie asks the question that is exactly what's on my mind.

"Well, where are you possibly going to come up with that much mana to test these things out?"

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"The Vice City Labyrinth is probably the most convenient place to start."

I think over the logistics in my head.

At the level of monsters I'll be fighting on floor 30 and above, each mana crystal dropped holds almost 1000 MP, give or take a few hundred. At this rate, every 100 monsters I farm will drop 100k

MP, and with enough body doubles working at full speed, I can most likely keep that steady rate of killing and collecting loot to 5 minutes per 100 monsters.

Maybe I could push it further, but for the sake of my estimates, that's just over 1 million MP per hour.

That's not nearly enough to power these machines to the capacity I'm aiming for, but it's enough to do some tests and kill 2 birds with one stone.

I'm still on a time crunch here, not knowing when the Dark One will catch onto the fact that I killed the 7th Ranked Dark Guard. It'd be best to listen to Ember's warning and take it very seriously. While I'm in the labyrinth, I'll try to make it to level 1000 as fast as possible.

This is a more achievable and guaranteed way to gain power quickly. Testing out these isolation pods is more of a long-term project.

As I come to this conclusion, Arie glows white off to my side about 10 meters away, creating another double as it seems one of his clones fell victim to the sparks again when pushing too hard on training.

He speaks up.

"Maybe taking a break and going into the labyrinth is a good idea. I think I'm plateauing here for some reason."

I raise an eyebrow.

"How so?"

"I've sped up my refinement and release speed like you instructed, and have been doing it repetitively with my doubles non-stop while you were working on that pod. However, I've come to a bit of a bottleneck. There's no way I'm able to form this energy into a concentrated slash like you did, it feels like it's just liquid flowing from my body at its own will. It doesn't matter how much Demonic Energy I saturate into my core, even a full 60 units doesn't change my excretion speed. Is there such a thing as Demonic Energy Control? Does it just take time and practice?"

I ponder his question and realize I never had this issue because I'm able to use the Demonic Energy Manipulation skill to expedite this process.

"Yeah, there may be, but I believe it goes hand in hand with increasing your mana control as well. The better you are at controlling and manipulating energy in general, the faster you'll be able to progress here."

My gaze turns back to the canyon filled with dungeons.

"Let's head off to phase 2 of your training. We'll raise your level up to what your skill actually reflects, and in the meantime, I'll show you another one of my skills that will help you improve your mana control at a very fast rate. That will probably get you past this plateau quickly. Otherwise, I think you'd have to stay here and channel Demonic Energy for a few weeks straight to improve your control naturally. Either way, you'll be getting a lot stronger."

On that note, I put the Isolation Pod into my storage, and we begin making our way back to the canyon.



As we reach the edge, I pinpoint my third double zipping from dungeon to dungeon, making the stone magic markings outside each stable portal with detailed notes of what level creatures are in each one and what items they drop.

I open my telepathy link and tell it to come here, stating there has been a change of plans.

Once it does, I kill it on the spot, letting all the memories of the past day of dungeon diving rush back to me.

Arie and I step into the nearest blue portal after this, and once I open up my dungeon walker skill, I feel a brand new sensation come over me.

It feels like I'm touching every part of this dungeon with a widespread perception skill, and am able to teleport to any position of it I choose in an instant even if I haven't been to those regions of the dungeon in the past.

Stolen novel; please report.

The more I let my mind wander, the more dungeons I feel. Even the dungeons from my body doubles past memories become clear to me, and I'm able to blip there at will if I please. This is a new sensation that wasn't available when using the special grade version of this skill.

I stand still in wonder for a moment, admiring the possibilities of the upgraded skill, then teleport both Arie and myself to the 30th Floor of the Vice City Labyrinth where Wyverns of varying levels up to 750 fly freely in the sky.

There are three sections just as I remembered, Water, Earth, and Fire; and in the center of the dungeon, the boss room portal spins slowly waiting for a challenger.

I left off near the volcanic region last time, bordering the large lake of water, hoping to find another one of those rare mutants fighting Wyverns at the time, so that's where I bring Arie to start his training.

I create another body double and order it to begin farming the other areas of the dungeon as fast as possible, collecting mana crystals and element stones without holding back.

A burst of buffs, high mana control, intimidation, and it blipping away with a flaming sword held tight lets me know it's off to farm. I turn to Arie and give him the rundown on this dungeon while sharing my absorption skill and explaining how it works to increase one's mana control.

Before I finish, a level 685 fire-wielding wyvern comes dive-bombing toward us, but I watch Arie summon his bow, charge up a shot, and let it fly with confidence and accuracy. It curves through the air and makes a heavy direct hit on the monster's tough hide, but surprisingly, the Wyvern survives the blow and lets out a screech.

Arie is quick enough on his feet to release another full-powered arrow and spirit-step to the side, killing the Wyvern before it has a chance to release an attack of its own and letting it fall to the dungeon floor.

His eyes light up when he sees the text boxes above the defeated monster and turns to me after absorbing the millions of MCP and igniting his hand with flames.

I smile and reply.

"Don't get your hopes up too much. That fire magic will not stay on your status. Once Absorption leaves, the skills gained will too. However, it's impossible to take away the experience gained from processing mana, so as far as I know, the MCP gained will stay indefinitely. It did for Abby and Maria at least."

Arie nods to himself, pulling back his bow, aiming at another Wyvern coming from another direction, and covering the arrow in flames before releasing it into the air at long range.

Once it hits the next incoming red Wyvern, it explodes into a wall of fire, but just like the other, Arie needs to land another direct hit to kill it completely. As its corpse falls to the floor, and Arie absorbs its MCP, I speak up again, pointing to the center of the dungeon.

"The closer we get to the middle, the stronger the monsters will get. I know you're able to one-shot all of these, even the max leveled ones with your Red Hydra's buff, but that isn't the goal. We'll be working on your base level stats, raising your mana control, and taking advantage of my skill while you have the chance."

He nods as I go on.

"So, we'll work our way to the center of this dungeon, but after that, I'll be leaving you behind with my body double to climb higher. I might have really pissed off the Dark One while you were training in the labyrinth, so I need to get a lot stronger, and fast."

Arie's eyes widen.

"The Dark One? You mean the Sector 1 leader Lith has contracted us all to kill? What'd you do,,,? How strong"

"It's a long story, and I have no idea of its actual strength, but I do know you wouldn't even stand a chance against any of its guards in your current form. Honestly, neither would I. If I knew what was coming, trust me, I'd explain. The only thing we can do right now is train and wait for a response from Valor City. I already sent a double out there to retrieve our teammates."

I assumed Arie would ask more questions, or be more concerned, but his response is both surprising and exactly what I was hoping for at the same time.

"Well, looks like you've got it all handled. All we can do now is train, right? No point in wasting any more time."

I nod, air-stepping upward, and turning my direction toward the Center of the dungeon.

Arie follows, and the Wyvern hunt begins.

We occasionally cross paths with my dungeon walking body double as it blips around killing everything in its path. Sometimes, I even feel it leaving this dungeon to farm lower floors while it waits for more monsters to respawn.

Meanwhile, I watch Arie kill Wyvern after Wyvern with his arrows, only having to use 2 MP potions after over 40 solid kills.

It takes just over an hour, but we make it to the center of the dungeon and Arie reaches level 741.

It takes him 3 to 4 shots to kill most of the peak level monsters on this floor, but none of them have managed to land a scratch on him just yet.

When 2 or 3 team up together, Arie has to go all out, and a few times I've seen the glint of the Red Hydra's Buff start to flare in his eyes, but he has pulled through and managed to win every battle without using it, and not once have I had to step in.

Arie does look a bit tired, but I'm sure he has a few hours of work left in him.

So, as we stop in front of the large grey swirling boss room portal, Wyverns of many different elements at the highest of levels continuously swarm down and attack. My body double comes back to stand by us too, and I turn to the portal.

"You still have a few more levels to gain before you hit your limit. Farming with my Absorption perk would be more beneficial of course, but I've used up enough valuable time already and need to leave. My double will stay with you and farm in this dungeon until you hit your max. Jump up to the next floor if you think you're ready."

He nods and I walk through the portal to face the 30th-floor boss.

## Chapter 450

The transport magic around me disappears, and I stare out at a marshland of deep swampy water, lush green trees, and flickering blue flames oddly staying lit on top of the water and not spreading to the greenery.

My eyes lock onto the one and only appraisal reading in this whole boss room, and I dungeon walk over to it without wasting a second.

The bright blue scales and glowing sharp eyes of a level 789 Blue Wyvern Boss lock onto me, and I see its mana shielding cover its entire body while it prepares to send waves of blue flames my way, but I can tell this monster is no match for me.

Using only my mana control, I take my sword from my storage, activate my buffs, and release a thin blade of flames down on the beast below me.

The crescent of flames splits it in half the long way, and even separates the marshland below, evaporating water and destroying trees for over 20 meters in all directions. The water soon flows back to its natural state as the corpse lies in two pieces on the floor.

There isn't even another sound to escape the monster's mouth; all I hear are two level-up notifications, bringing me to level 767 while I absorb its available MCP.

As the body dissolves away into the marsh, a bright blue crystal is left behind in its place, and it makes the water bubble and churn around it.

As my appraisal skill locks in a reading to find that it's a fire stone, I can't help but let out a chuckle while opening an item storage portal and letting it fall inside.

"Really? I tried to find one of these for hours... all I had to do was face the boss room."

I roll my eyes as the transport magic takes me to the next floor.

[Level Up] x82

[+1PP] x6

[+722 Mental Strength]

[+816 Strength]

[+146,110,205 MCP]

[Iron Fist][Legendary Grade]

The next 5 floors move by very quickly. I make it to level 849 without breaking a sweat, or even having to use any of my Qi.

Using dungeon walker and enemy detection, I'm able to pinpoint mobs near my level and instantly kill them, teleporting around a dungeon and clearing every monster inside it in less than 10 minutes per floor.

I try to kill in ascending order to maximize the amount of PP gains I can. Even so, the process is very quick. I've been desperately needing to bring my level up to my ability for a long time now; it feels good to go all out. The rush of constant level-ups and base stats rising is a great sensation.

One notable floor on my way up is the 33rd. It has an Elite form of Yetis that all wield Extreme Ice magic; they drop element stones every 30 or so kills. Unfortunately, my absorption skill isn't high enough in proficiency to upgrade advanced to Extreme skills yet, but based on my speedy progression here, I can tell I'll be back here soon enough.

However, on the 34th floor, I came across earth golem monsters with a skill called [Iron Fist]. It is a form of body hardening that only forms around the user's hands, and greatly increases the force, impact, and hardness of a punch in hand-to-hand combat. I absorb it, but as hand-to-hand isn't my normal fighting style, I don't plan to use it very much.

[Level Up] x67

[+1PP] x4

[+190,990,345 MCP]

After beating the 36th and 37th floors without the use of any Qi either, one-shotting everything in my path, and reaching level 916, the 38th floor comes along, and I finally face opponents that give me a hint of trouble.

Eerily familiar massive worms with circular serrated teeth come flying out of the sandy dungeon floor, somehow locking onto my mana signature wherever I fly above the surface. They're all easily 30 to 50 meters long, and over 5 meters in diameter; some even reaching close to 10.

Every monster in this 38th floor is between levels 932 and 950 and have the same 3 skills.

Body Hardening[Legendary Grade]

Extreme Stamina[Legendary Grade]

Combat Magic[Advanced Earth Summoning]

I'm very surprised when one of my full-powered mana blades doesn't make it all the way through one of their hardened skins.

With a combination of all its skills, there's a thick white glow that surrounds the monster, and it flows through the sandy dungeon region like water as it uses its earth manipulation skill to move quickly away.

I send blade after blade at it from a distance, not wanting to get too close, but despite the half a dozen deadly slashes in a single area, and its bodily fluids leaking behind it, the enormous worm creature doesn't give up.

Every chance it gets, the beast chomps its spinning teeth high in the sky to try and catch me, but my speed and agility are still far too much for it to stand any chance.

After 8 full-powered hits, the creature finally meets its end.

[Level Up]

I absorb its MCP and Extreme Stamina[Legendary Grade], testing out its capabilities, and realize it's a resource converting skill. The skill allows the user to heal their HP by 10%, converting exact MP points to HP, only following an enemy attack that lands damage. It can be used an unlimited amount of times, as long as the user gets attacked again. It cannot be used if the user has not taken any damage from any enemy.

After reading its description, the white glows and incredibly tough defenses make sense now; this is a very odd conditional skill, but one that will definitely come in handy for me in the heat of tough battles.

[Level Up] x29

[+1PP] x2

[+1015 Defense]

[+113,060,399 MCP]

It takes well over two hours to finally reach level 946, even going all out; this was one of my most troublesome dungeons to take down in this run so far. Some of the strongest worms in here took upward of 10 hits to defeat, and the spawn rate isn't very fast. Less than 20 worms are available in the dungeon at any one given time, and it takes over 30 minutes for each of them to return.

I challenge the boss room even though I'm four levels away from maximizing my efficiency. It may take another few hours if I try to grind it out perfectly.

[Level Up]

As I hit level 947 and teleport onto the 39th floor to be hit with an unexpected sweet scent of honey and a cool breeze.

Rolling hills, colorful wildlife like flowers, bushes, and trees, and endless grasslands fill my vision.

However, my moment of peace is rudely broken as I sense 9 figures in this dungeon all between levels 965 and 980. There's a 10th very far away at level 989, but it seems to be an outlier.

I teleport to the closest one with my sword ready, and I see another familiar creature staring back at me with a bull-like face, long red horns, tough skin with matted fur, wielding two massive silver axes, and red eyes filled with rage triggered by instinct on sight.

A minotaur larger than any I've ever seen runs forward at me, glowing blue, golden, and coating its skin in a metallic shimmer.

I take a look at its skill list.

Extreme Strength[Legendary Grade]

Extreme Speed[Legendary Grade]

Body Hardening[Legendary Grade]

I activate my own buffs and speed away from its incoming dual axes with haste, letting them sink into the dungeon floor and send shockwaves through the ground as I airstep up in the air to admire the pure force and power of this beast.

It's at least 8 or 9 meters tall, and bulging with muscles, layered with mana shielding higher than anything I've ever witnessed on a natural being.

The minotaurs I've faced before were 3 or 4 meters tall at most, some mutants reaching upward of 5; so this must be some evolved form.

I release a full-powered wave of flames from my blade similar to the ones that took out the worms on the floor below in a few hits, but the Minotaur takes it head-on with both of its silver axes, letting out a roar while dispersing my flames into the air, not receiving a single scratch.

I'm sure I could split this monster in two using Qi without batting an eye, but I don't have any replacement Qi pills left, so I'll try not to use any if I don't have to.

I activate phantom step while the monster charges my way with blades ready again, jumping in 3 different directions while using stealth to conceal my main body and dungeon walk to the creature's blind spot.

I use earth magic to make the earth beneath its feet grasp its legs tight in an instant, stopping its mobility, then use [Bind] to make the dark purple hand from my back manifest and grow large enough to hold the beast in place.

Once it's helplessly locked in a compromised position, I let spears of ice and earth rain down on it from above while swinging my blade over and over at point-blank range to release crescents of fire at its unprotected back.

The explosions of shielding, painful roars, and valiant effort it puts up against my restraints are impressive.

The shackles at its feet made of earth magic are destroyed, and it even manages to break free from my binding hand, but the ruthless barrage of attacks that follows is far too much for the monster to survive through.

A crater in the floor is formed as the hailstorm of ice and earth batter the monster's body, diminishing its mana shielding and destroying its armor. The faint golden glow of what seems like a ranked up buff begins to activate, but it is far too late to save this creature now. I don't stop until I hear a notification in my inner ear.

[Level Up]

"You were a tough one..."

Its mana shielding is pretty similar in basic strength to my own; it just lacks the ability to indefinitely replenish its MP and use a variety of offensive skills to the same degree.

I have to keep this in mind and stay on my toes moving forward. I'm facing seriously strong and fairly intelligent opponents now. One wrong step, and I could actually get injured; I need to always make the first move and take control of each battle before they even start.

[Level Up] x4

I defeat the other 8 minotaurs of similar level and make it to level 952, leaving only one more in this dungeon, the outlier at level 989.

I teleport near it and scan its skills.

Combat Magic [Extreme Fire Summoning]

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Extreme Speed [Special Grade]

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

The minotaur is even larger, easily over 10 meters. Its axes are over 3 times the size of my body, and left behind in its footsteps are black flames that have destroyed the meadows and rolling hills of the beautiful landscape.

I take no time admiring the beast, as I know mutants always have extra tricks up their sleeves; I have to go all out on the first move.

I use full-powered water magic to shoot plumes of its element's worst weakness all around it, while forming spears of rock and ice, manipulating them with careful use of telekinesis and mana manipulation to shower it with lethal strikes from all sides.

I'm using stealth throughout all of this, so my opponent has not even seen me yet; it is only faced with my waves of confusion, intimidation, and furious elemental attacks.

An explosive shockwave of black flames erupts from the monster as it fends off my attacks as best it can.

I dungeon walk around it at erratic angles, shooting off full-powered mana blades at a safe distance. Just feeling the heat of its flames from over 20 meters away feels like I'm plunging into the depths of a volcano.

It seems as if many of my attacks are being eaten up by its pitch-black flames before they even hit its body, but the loud roars and explosions of mana shielding after every occasional high-powered attack make me think my relentless barrage is doing something useful.

However, I wait nearly 4 times as long as the base mobs in this dungeon, but the creature isn't giving up. Its rage only seems to get stronger, and I watch an aura of red energy begin to surround its body as I sense its mana control multiplying by the second.

My eyes widen, and I immediately imbue my blade with Qi.

"That's enough... I'm not dealing with whatever you're about to unleash."

As I airstep in, charging my blade hotter and hotter with dense white Qi, the mutant's ranked up buff begins to obliterate all of the mana-based attacks I was previously throwing at it. The ice shards melt away before making contact, my water beams evaporate into thin air, and my rock spears melt to lava as it hits its outer aura.

Even my final mana blade rebounds off its wall of red aura.

However, in a single slash, my blade covered in Qi rips through its crimson veil, pushes its black flames aside, and slices right through its neck, defeating the monster before it can break through to release its full strength.

[Level Up]

Its body falls limp and its head sticks into the dirt floor upside down held up by its curved horns a few meters off the ground.

I whisper under my breath down at the corpse after the loud thud.

"That was a close one... I'll admit, you were pretty strong. You're the first pure mana being that has forced me to use Qi at my current level."

I reach level 953 and absorb its MCP, then walk over to its corpse as its body dissolves away.

A large black flaming stone is left behind.

"Another unique element stone too... this Labyrinth just keeps getting better."

It's the second-highest mana rating I've ever felt come off of a monster's loot drop, only second to the A-Class Colossal I fought with Ember out in the desert.

After admiring the hot black flames that ripple off of it, thinking of the crafts I could do with a stone like this, I throw it into my item storage for later. I slowly walk out of the massive blackened crater and open up my enemy detection skill to check if any new mobs have spawned back.

There were only 10 on the whole floor, but I will admit they were incredibly strong.

No more have spawned back in yet, so I'm all alone on the 39th floor.

I make my way over to the Boss room portal at the back of the dungeon, thinking about whether or not I should wait for these beasts to respawn to grind out a few more levels, or challenge the Boss and move up to the 40th floor right now.