

## D. Diver 91

Chapter 91

[Time Remaining Until Test 2: 15 Hours]

I slowly walk over to the slim blond young man. He instantly makes eye contact and waves me over.

"Hey, hey! The name's Tripp, nice to meet ya! Looking to help out in a little dungeon cleanup?"

I continue to approach him slowly, then use inspect and appraisal. He's a bit taller than me, dressed in the casual green and black Hunters Association raiding uniform, doesn't wear any armor, and wears a pair of silver daggers on his waist.

[Lv. 322]

Active Items:

Special Grade Platinum Ring [+55% Mental Strength]

Enchanted Leather Boots [+35% Speed][+35% Agility]

Reinforced Steel Dagger Set [+400 Strength]

Active Skills:

Dagger Mastery

Instant Nullification

I look the man up and down thoroughly. An interesting idea comes to mind, my curiosity gets the better of me sometimes... I reply.

"Sure, I'd be interested in helping a fellow dagger user out. How tough is the break today?"

Tripp's face lights up and he puts out a hand for me to shake.

"Is that right? A fellow dagger user? And you're a C class or what? All we need to do is keep an eye on the exit, it shouldn't be too long until the advanced team takes out the boss. We just need to keep the mutants at bay for a little while."

I shake the man's hand and smile back. After pretending to sift through my item box and reaching around in my pockets I begin to put my sleep-deprived battle-crazed plan into action.

"I left my ID at home, unfortunately. I just came by to check out the commotion. I assume you're all understaffed because of the exams right?"

He nods, then turns to the large black-haired dark-skinned tank, and a petite blond-haired woman.

"Yeah exactly. Either way, we'll be heading out soon. Just wanted to pick up a member or two from the crowd here just in case. We're from the Association by the way, if you couldn't tell by the getups."

He points to his outfit while taking out his ID card to show me he's definitely with the Hunters Association.

While using conceal, I wipe all the skills off my status except for Dagger Mastery and the Fire Combat magic, then flip my status for him to see.

"Well, I'd say I'm about qualified. I did just pick up a new pair of blades, I've been meaning to test them out."

Tripp raises an eyebrow and studies my stats for a moment, then looks up at me with a sigh.

I can tell he's going to ask for my ID anyways... Some sort of distraction is needed here. I take out the pair of shining black daggers from my item box and give them a twirl. It feels so natural... This is just like my swordsmanship skill. Dagger Mastery is a passive ability that grows alongside my level progression.

I look at the man with a slight grin.

"Well... what do ya say?"

He looks over his shoulders both ways, then back at me with the same sly grin.

"Come on then, let's go. Our boss is stuck out at that C Class exam tonight, might as well have some fun."

He says something to the other two team members, then walks right through the D Class gate motioning for us to follow. Tripp shows his card and the guards nod us past just like that. We're off to the Lizardman dungeon.

After making our way downstairs and boarding the train, Tripp looks me in the eyes and speaks up as we leave the station.

"So, you from out of town or something?"

I reply.

"Yep. Just stopping by for the exams I- I mean, one of my friends is taking it this weekend."

He smiles.

"Oh nice, nice. You do seem familiar though, I could have sworn I've seen your face somewhere before."

I gulp.

"Yeah, maybe. I come to the city a lot. Might even get a place here soon."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, it's nice out here."

"...."

Tripp stands up.

"We'll, anyways. This is Sandra and Mike. Mike is a heavy tank, definitely overkill for today's outing. Sandra is a healer. Again, we won't need her, but can never be too sure ya know?"

I nod.

"Nice to meet you two."

They both nod back but don't say anything. Tripp interjects.

"Hey come on you two! I know it was supposed to be our night off, but things happen!"

Mike speaks up.

"Yeah yeah. This should be a simple one anyways, I don't know why you have to bring this kid along. You could have handled it yourself. Honestly, Sandra and I could have stayed back too."

Sandra nods and pouts. Tripp rolls his eyes and speaks up while smiling at me.

"I want to see what the new dagger user in town can do! Ya never know, maybe we can add a new recruit to the Midnight Squad."

I raise an eyebrow.

"The what?"

Sandra lets out a sigh and interrupts.

"Ughh. The midnight squad. It's what Tripp likes to call our nightshift duties."

I grin... then let out a little chuckle. Mike laughs lightly as well. Tripp jumps back in.

"Hey! It's a cool name. Anyways. This will take half an hour at most. Our only order is to guard the exit until the raid team finishes up in the boss room, got it?"

We all get serious as the train comes to a screeching halt.

"Got it."

Moments later, we all climb the escalator and jump through the glowing red portal to enter the Lizardman dungeon.

I look around the moment we arrive inside. It's the same arid desert wasteland I remembered. The air is dense with excess magic though. We all walk forward about 50m, then Tripp speaks up.

"All right. This is good. Jay and I will fight out front, I want to see what he's made of. Sandra and Mike, feel free to stay back. I'll only need help if there's some outrageous mutant here."

The healer and tank stop in place and start up a casual conversation as I walk up front to join Tripp.

"So... are there breaks like this in the capital often?"

The hot desert continues to beat down on us with its bright artificial sun. Tripp replies.

"Yeah, we get one or two a week. It's not such a big deal, this one was just a little out of the ordinary. The Lizardman dungeon is fairly stable. It must be a bit of recoil from the surge last week."

I nod and start playing with my daggers looking out into the distance.

"Makes sense."

After 10 minutes of waiting around, and constant complaining from the two hunters behind us, a small dust cloud appears. I point it out with the tip of my right blade.

"Looks like we'll finally have some company."

Tripp grins.

"The wave is here, we were just on time."

Sandra's voice rings out.

"We were ten minutes early."

He continues.

"Anyways... The first fight's all you Jay, let me see what you've got."

I eagerly continue to twirl my daggers. They're definitely not as invigorating and stat-boosting as my sword, but a quick trial run before going back into the labyrinth is exactly what I wanted.

I use inspect and enemy detection.

[150m]

[Lv. 269]

[Lv. 266]

I smirk as the two mutant lizardmen come into view. They're each around 3.5m tall, with dark green scaly skin, and light armor. One is carrying a long spear and the other carries a shining silver sword. Their humanoid features stand out in their torsos and lower bodies, but their heads are of pure lizard. Those yellow beady eyes lock on me as they approach and their long red tongues flail about as they let out battle screeches.

I nod to Tripp, and run at the monsters. I ignite into flames and immediately activate bloodlust. My body and blades are both completely engulfed in flames. The crackling fire around me hides the ominous aura, I just want some extra speed to show off.

The two scaled beasts lunge at me with their spears. I jump through the middle of them with a graceful twist, narrowly dodging their attacks letting my daggers whistle through the air outreached on either side of my body.

**\*SHINGGGG\***

Leaving trails of fire in my wake, the two lizardmen's heads topple to the ground. I turn around deactivating my skills and give a slight bow.

Tripp nods slowly as I walk back in their direction.

"Not bad, not bad."

He looks me up and down.

"You wear a whole lot of jewelry, are those all magic items? Are you going to war or something?"

We both let out a laugh, then I reply.

"Is it a lot? I just thought I might as well wear them all, the more power the better right?"

He sighs.

"The more power the better? I guess so."

We both stare off into the distance as another dust cloud appears. I turn to Tripp.

"You're up."

He smiles and steps forward. The man takes the daggers from his waist and eyes the approaching enemies.

A pack of three shows up moments later. Two lizardmen lead the charge, they're level 267 and 268. They both carry long silver spears and look identical to the ones I faced previously.

The third monster looks much different. It's slightly tinted red, and carries a long wooden staff. It's level 277.

Tripp turns back to me before sprinting off toward the beasts.

"Looks like I got the fun ones!"

I watch him curiously as he charges forward at the trio.

\*SHINGGGGG\*

The dagger user bobs and weaves through the oncoming spear attacks and does a near picture-perfect copy of my jump and spin move from earlier... Minus the flaming blades obviously.

The heads of the two beasts fall to the floor as he mimics my bow, then smiles and turns to the odd-looking lizardman.

To my surprise... the monster ignites its body into a ball of fire. I use appraisal.

[Lv. 277]

Activate Items:

Lizard King's Staff [+40% Mental Strength]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic[Fire Summoning]

My eyes open wide as I watch Tripp face it off. He stops in his tracks about 15m in front of the mutant and begins glowing bright white, then a barely visible wave of energy radiates off of him.

The moment that wave hits the lizardman, its flames completely die out. The beast stands there in confusion as the dagger user sprints forward and readies his blades.

Seconds later, the mutant's head rolls to the dungeon floor next to its underlings.

Tripp spins his knives around, then places them back on his waist and walks over to me.

I give him the same slow nod of respect.

"Not bad. That's a nifty skill you've got there."

He grins.

"You showed off, so I had to as well."

I smile back, but in reality, I'm a little bit scared of what that skill can do. It's a good thing we're on the same team here...

We continue our friendly competition for the next 15 minutes or so as we cut down half a dozen more waves. Each of them increases in level and size just slightly. The last one had a level 289 mutant fire user, I got to fight it. The mutant was pretty strong, but I managed to easily overpower

it. All of the monsters dropped a good amount of loot as well. I kept a few handfuls of mana crystals, two spears, and even one of the mutant's staves. I'll have to bring it to the market later to see how much its really worth.

Tripp gave me a quick lesson on the rarities of elemental magic in dungeons as well. Apparently fire magic is the most common. Lightning comes next. Then earth, followed by ice, water, and wind. Then lastly, the two rarest types of magic are light and dark.

I also got a bit noseey and asked how much the Hunters Association pays them for this work. Apparently, they get paid 3 gold a month to be on active guard duty cleaning up any potential breaks, or whatever extra things the "Midnight Squad" is assigned to do. Plus, the three of them go on 2 mandatory raids per week to farm resources for the Association. Pretty neat gig.

About 2 minutes after that final wave was defeated, the entire dungeon started glowing with a bright white light. Tripp spoke up.

"Looks like the raid team took out the boss, we're headed back!"

Moments later, the transfer magic took us right back to the dungeon's entrance.

The small room was filled with 9 people including myself. A team of 5 stood there covered in blood smiling to themselves. They're all men. It's a team with 2 tanks, and 3 rogues. On second thought, they could be swordsmen.. or maybe just a bit of both. Overall, they all appear to be tough fighters.

One of the tanks lifts his head to us and laughs.

"Hey Tripp, you missed a good fight. This break was a doozy, that lizard gave us a run for our money!"

The other team members murmured and laughed as they all made their way down the escalator. Tripp made some small talk with the tank as we followed close behind and made our way back to the main D Class platform.

The tank and healer tiredly gave me a nod and wave goodbye as they went back upstairs to their post. Tripp on the other hand, had more to say.

"Ya know, I'm sure I can put a good word in for you at the Association. There's always a need for more C Class and above hunters! Most move out to some of the stronger regions once they land better deals with guilds or private teams, so if you're planning on moving into the city I'm sure you could strike a good deal for yourself!"

I gulp, then remember he still thinks I'm a C Class Hunter... Sure, I insinuated that I was... but I never flat-out said it.

I scratch my head nervously.

"Ya know. I appreciate it, but uhh. Maybe you could- uh not put in a word? I'm sort of trying to keep a- low profile. Just doing my thing, and not get the Association involved."

Tripp squints his eyes and stares at me for a moment.

A very long moment....

Then he finally replies.

"Well, fine by me. I won't say a word."

He smiles wide and turns to go, then says one last thing.

"Maybe we'll meet again soon if you'll be around more. I'll keep an eye out, there aren't many high-level dagger users out here ya know!"

Tripp starts walking up the escalator without another word.

I wave and shout out.

"Hey, thanks! Was a pleasure fighting with you guys. Appreciate it, I'm just going to train a bit more, I uh-"

He's already gone. There's no point in finishing what I had to say I guess.

It's getting really late.

I look around at the empty dungeon platform and shake my head vigorously, then murmur to myself.

"You idiot!! What was that??? You're in the middle of an exam!!! What are you doing Jay???"

I take a deep breath in while looking over my shoulders, then let the breath back out.

I take the next train to the closest dungeon possible, I don't even check to see which one it is. I use a dungeon walker the moment I step inside and make it back home.

The walk back to my apartment feels unbelievably long. The last hour or so keeps repeating over and over in my head. I talk to myself as I walk in the dark using one flaming finger as a light.

"I just wanted to try out my new daggers... On the bright side, I can use them pretty well if I need to now. But-"

I gulp.

"I think it'll be fine."

Finally, my apartment steps come into view and I make my way inside. The moment my door closes I fall face-first onto my bed and fall into a deep sleep.

~ 8 hours later

\*KNOCK\*\* KNOCK\* \*KNOCK\*

"Jay!!! We gotta go!!!"

Maria is pounding on my door. I roll out of bed, stretch my arms and back, then make sure I have everything I need before opening up.

"Hey Maria how was y-"

"I slept fine, you?"

I smile as she looks at me with a face full of urgency.

"I slept fine too, I j-"

"Great, let's go! There's no time to waste!"

She points off in the distance toward the starter dungeon as the sun begins to rise. I chuckle and shut my door.

"I guess you're right."

We walk down the steps together and head back to the starter dungeon. It's time to get back to business.

Chapter 92

[Time Remaining Until Test 2: 6 Hours]

I open up a large black swirling portal and we both jump through. While holding Maria's left hand, I sift through the mind's eye image of dungeons flashing all around. Finally, I lock onto our previous position. The private room from earlier is still empty and glowing with that faint white light.

Maria and I step through. As we do, I feel a massive amount of MP drain out of me. This long-distance double-passenger travel takes a lot of energy.

I grip a handful of fresh mana crystals plundering my MP back up to full as Maria looks up at me.

"Well, that's a relief. I thought for sure someone would have come in here by now!"

I reply.

"Yeah, I was a bit worried too... th-"

"HEY! I CAN HEAR YOU IN THERE! OPEN UP!"

I hear a loud and deep voice from right outside banging on the curtains.

"Uh-come on in!"

The voice replies back.

"I can't you moron! These things have mana locks on the inside ya know. I can't get in unless I break this thing down. Do you think this is funny?"

I walk over and peek my head out of the curtain to see what's going on. A team of 3 rugged-looking men stands outside our tent looking exhausted and impatient. The same deep voice rings out from the tallest one in the middle as he gives me an angry glare.

"Apparently you two have been in here for over 10 hours! That's what another team just told us. Come on already, play nice, and give us a chance to rest up too!"

I stare back at him filled with confusion, then turn to Maria as she walks over and pokes her head out of the white curtain as well. She replies.

"Sure, we're done anyways, even tidied it up a bit. The place is all yours!"

The two of us walk out with satisfied looks on our faces. The group of three mutters a few minor rude remarks and walk past us to occupy the room.

Once outside, I can see the crowd of hunters trading gear and lounging around has nearly doubled in our absence. There isn't anyone immediately recognizable, so we decide to find an open table and sit down facing each other. Maria grins and looks at me with a half-serious look in her eyes.



“Our Operation was a success.”

I laugh, then roll my eyes.

“Yeah. Operation Snack and Sleep went really well.”

We both let out sighs of relief as the white noise of hunter’s chatter fills the air. Eventually, I reach into my storage, take out half of the food and water supplies I bought at the corner store last night, and place them on the table.

“Here. Take these and throw them in your item box, you’ll probably need them for our next test.”

Maria’s eyes light up and she hastily puts them away.

“Ohhh! You’re right, when’d you get these anyway?”

I begin to reply, but a raspy feminine voice interrupts me.

“Hey! Watcha want for some of those?”

A short, curly brown-haired girl with two swords across her back walks up to our table and looks me right in the eyes. She wears a tight black shirt that shows off her slim but curly figure, short blue jean shorts, and black combat boots. The artificial sunlight of the dungeon gleams off her fingers showing off her assorted rings.

With an arrogant attitude, but a powerful voice, she repeats herself.

“So? Stare all ya want, I ask again. How much for some water and a bit of food?”

I look over to Maria, she just shrugs back. The girl speaks up again, then a line starts to form behind her.

“Here!”

She slams a ring down on the table.

I use appraisal.

[Ring of Protection] +25% Defense

She speaks up again.

“How much will that get me?”

I grin and realize what’s going on here... I reach into my item box to pull out two bottles of water and a small bag of dried fruit.

She tightens her stare, then turns around to see half a dozen other eager potential buyers lining up.

“Not bad, I’ll take it. Thanks.”

She grabs the water and fruit, then leaves without saying another word. Maria and I stare at each other wide-eyed for a moment, then proceed to take out all our excess food and drinks, leaving just enough for each of us to survive a few more days if need be. It’s a good thing I bought extra, the market value of basic sustenance has skyrocketed... time to cash out!

After we squeezed all we could out of the small crowd, I managed to get 7 more HP potions, that ring of protection at 25% defense from before, one pair of steel wrist guards, and a spare steel sword with +300 strength. I doubt I'll use any of these, but the resell value won't be bad later. I store them all in my item box. Maria managed to get herself a 30% mental strength-boosting ring, and another ring of protection with a 25% defense buff. They're both good additions to her stats, the challenges ahead will be difficult, but these will definitely help.

Once we finish trading all the resources we were willing to part with, we decide to pass the time by playing a game of chess with mana crystals. I carved out an 8 by 8 set of squares on the wooden table, and we used different-sided crystals for the assorted pieces. It was hard to keep track at first, but we got used to it eventually.

Time passed and the crowd of hunters got bigger and bigger as stragglers came in. Some looked like wrecks, while others looked fine like they just took their time and strolled through.

4 hours of surprisingly entertaining games and idle chatter went by before I saw someone walking over to us from the dungeon entrance in a Hunters Associations getup. They're sporting bright green hair, bend the ground below them as they walk, and are covered head to toe in dirt and blood.

She scans the area of hunters, then of all people locks eyes with me... and runs toward our table with a smile across her face.

"Jay! You made it here too!"

I let out a slight grin as I look her up and down.

"Abby, it's good to see you made it here too. What- uhh- what happened? Is your team oka-"

"Aghh, long story."

She rolls her eyes and sits down next to Maria, then puts her head down to let out a sigh.

"A really long story..."

I just wait patiently for her to continue, but she never does. Moments later Maria puts her head down near Abby's, then starts to laugh.

"S-She's Asleep!"

I smile and let out a laugh of my own. I guess that story can wait for another time....

With the sleeping green-haired girl sitting face down at our table, we continue our game.

Another 30 minutes pass and a large man with a certain red-haired girl make their way towards us from the resting areas. Nessa shouts out as they approach.

"Hey, Maria! Jay!"

Her face is much brighter than earlier. Bruce looks good too. A good night of sleep was exactly what they needed.

Nessa sits down next to Maria and Bruce takes a seat next to me. I give him a friendly nod.

"Any luck finding that shield?"

His grin fades immediately.

“Unfortunately no-”

“Knew it... I got you covered.”

I reach into my item box and bring out the shield I bought at the market, and his grin comes back like a little kid’s.

“Where did you... how much do you want for-”

“My treat, don’t worry about it.”

His smile widens as he examines the large shield.

“Hey thanks, Jay! I owe you one, for real.”

Bruce puts out a hand and I shake it firmly.

“No problem.”

Nessa speaks up.

“Hey, can you do that fire thingy real quick?”

I laugh.

“That... fire thingy...”

“You know what I mean.”

I point my index finger in the air and ignite a small flame.

“Is that enough?”

She concentrates for a moment, then smirks.

“Yeah, perfect. I haven’t used a fire skill since the last time we met. This’ll be fun.”

I put the fire on my finger out, then point it at her.

“Hey, you owe me one too.”

Nessa slightly rolls her eyes but nods in agreement.

“Fine, sure. One question though...”

She points at Abby face down on the other side of Maria.

“Who’s this chick?”

“Oh- That’s Abby. She’s uh- a little tired right now.”

Not much more explanation is needed. We all chuckle a bit and ignore the sleeping girl for now continuing small talk and using my carved chess board to entertain ourselves for another hour until a loud voice sounds from above us. It’s Rodrigo. He’s standing on a small white podium at the back of the tent area.

“All right. With 24 minutes to spare, our 200th member has made it just in time. Test 2 will begin shortly!”

Maria nudges Abby and she violently shakes herself awake. Rodrigo continues.

“This next test will be fairly different from your last. You may still team with as many other hunters as you’d like, but there is one exception. During test 2, teamwork is forbidden in all boss rooms. The act of slaying bosses together will count as a disqualification.”

The crowd starts murmuring to each other immediately.

“I know this may come as a surprise to some of you. This exam is full of very talented individuals. The shot callers at the Association are looking for a very specific group of hunters. So only those of you that can make it through this hardship will qualify. Teamwork is very important, but independence and personal growth are arguably even higher up on that list. If any of you wish to leave the exam, you may reach out to any yellow armband-carrying overseer at any time. They will contact me, and I will gladly give you a one-way trip back to the spawn area.”

Rodrigo smiles as his lifeless white eyes slowly scan the crowd.

“There will be monitors stationed at every boss room portal to oversee your progress. If anyone is caught trying to skip to another floor with the help of a fellow hunter, that will count as an immediate disqualification. Your personal strength is vital to your success. You must prove that you’re able to take on tough challenges alone. The first 100 hunters to defeat the next 5 floors will have the opportunity to attend the final trial. You must meet me on floor 16. Many of the obstacles in front of you may be more difficult than anything you’ve faced before. To pass this next test, you must become stronger than you are now. This is a true test of adaptability to a unique and hostile environment. There is no time limit. You may go up and down to any previous floor to train together, but you may not face bosses as a team. 100 of you must get stronger and meet me on floor 16 all by yourself, these are the only rules. Are there any questions?”

The entire crowd goes silent.

“Very good. Test 2 starts now. I will see 100 of you on floor 16. Until we meet again.”

A flash of light appears in Rodrigo’s place, and dozens of other flashing lights appear all around us. The numbered coins we were given earlier begin to dissolve. Potions, food, and water appear in their place.

I look in my item box to see what happened to my coin. It dissolved into 4 MP potions, 4 HP potions, 2 waters, and 2 small bags of food. The coin in Abby’s hand with “188” printed on it turned into 1 MP potion 1 HP potion, 1 water, and 1 bag of food. The more I look around the clearer it

becomes. The faster hunters get better gear, that's only fair I guess.... That's life. The coins were isolated storage systems that somehow react with Rodrigo's magic, how interesting.

Many hunters are taking out their weapons, yelling, and leaving the tent area. It's like a stampede.

Just like that, Test 2 has begun. This is pure chaos....

I look around and make eye contact with Bruce, Maria, Nessa, and Abby one by one.

"Well, this is sudden... Are all of you ready?"

I smirk and draw my sword.

Bruce nods and readies his shield.

Maria grins ear to ear glowing bright blue.

Nessa gives me a fiery thumbs up.

Abby stares at me blankly, then salutes with a thin smile.

Test 2 has begun.

### Chapter 93

Battle cries fill the air as dozens of hunters charge by swinging their weapons preparing for battle. We all step out from under the guarded tent area, and that same mirage of rippling light from when we previously entered reappears.

The plain, flat, never-ending grassland dungeon distorts in front of my eyes and the genuine landscape appears in front of me.

The five of us made it less than 50m before stopping to stare and take in the view.

Three tall mountains stand before us. The furthest one towers over the others easily 3km higher than the solid ground we stand on now. The bright green grass below our feet remains, but the beautiful view of snow-peaked mountains with thick trees at their bases is a breathtaking sight to behold.

Hunters run off in all directions to climb the first peak, I squint my eyes to see large winged creatures flying high in the sky casting shadows onto the landscape. Their exact features are hard to distinguish from this distance, but the excitement kills me. I grin ear to ear.

"Let's do this. My guess is, the boss room lies on top of the tallest mountain."

I smirk.

Without another word, we join the charge forward into the unknown.

Most groups of hunters seem to be minding their own business. It's the first floor in this new test, after all, the pressure is moderately low. There isn't much point in fighting one another just yet.

After 10 minutes of light jogging and some minor deforestation, we make it through a light patch of trees that covers the base of the mountain. The teams around us have dispersed throughout the surrounding area. There are no noises of any other teams in our general vicinity.

As we make our way through the heavily wooded mountain base, the abundance of plant life begins to thin out the higher we climb.

Another 15 minutes pass, and I hear Maria's excited voice call out from in front of us.

"Hey! Guys! Check this out!"

We all hurry up to see what the fuss is and make our way toward her. The light is shining very brightly through the trees as I climb up a small rocky ledge to where Maria's voice came from. A warm smile appears across my face as I walk out onto an overlook.

We all stand on the massive flat boulder free of trees blocking our view to see the other two mountains towering above us and a deep valley below. The bright yellow artificial sunlight shines down on us with a magnificent glimmer.

We stare off into the distance for a moment until we're rudely interrupted by a massive gloomy shadow.

The dark black outline of a large bird-like creature with wings blocks our view of the sun. It's followed by the ear piercing Shriek of a monstrous beast.

\*THUDDDD\*

A pair of sturdy legs hit the solid rock ground 30m in front of us. The fur is golden brown and a thin yet powerful tail wags back and forth along the stone floor.

My eyes open wide in awe as a massive 5m tall Griffin glares back.

The monster's towering upper body has elegant feathered wings with razor sharp talons on its front legs. The rear has golden brown fur, a long curving tail, and the ferocious looking claws of a lion.

I grin with anticipation, but hold myself back and look over to Abby, giving her a nod.

The green haired girl steps forward, understanding my intentions. She's new to the team, I'm the only one here that trusts her or has even see her fight. First impressions are very thing after all. She speaks up while she begins to glow green.

"I handle this one. Stand back."

The four of us watch filled with curiosity. I quickly use inspect before their brawl just to gauge its strength. This beast is level 256.

"All yours."

The fight begins.

Abby runs at the creature bending the rocky ground beneath her feet.

The Griffin lets out another ear-piercing screech as it locks its yellow eagle eyes on the glowing girl running its way. With a single wide flap of its wings, the monster takes flight and hovers over 10m in the air looking down on all of us.

Abby continues to run forward as the ground shakes violently under our feet. The rocks begin to shift, and large pillars of stone start forming in front of her.

A tall moving stone staircase of pillars erupts from the ground as she runs forward stepping gracefully to each one flying high in the air to meet the winged beast at its level.

With blinding speed, the Griffin makes its move. The front legs armed with talons stretch out in front of it as the monster dives forward to attack its prey.

Abby places her hands to her sides and two large spears of rock materialize from the pillars she walks on.

With talons and spears at the ready, the two collide moments later in a deafening clash.

**\*CLANNGGGGG\***

The sound of the reinforced stone hitting the harder-than-metal talons creates the sound of steel swords colliding as the two warriors clash. Sparks fly.

They seem to be on even grounds at first. Both opponents stop in their tracks, but a true victor is soon to come out on top.

Abby glows even brighter, and the spears of rock holding the Griffin back begin to deform and melt. The monster pushes forward, but I see a smirk appear on her face. The rock around the griffin's talons reforms into a massive rectangular block of stone locking the beast's front legs together in mid-air.

In the confusion, the monster shrieks and flails its front legs about. Abby continues to form more spears of stone from the pillars below throwing two straight at the beast's left wing while it's distracted.

A gruesome ripping sound can be heard from below as the elegant beast falls to the rocky floor with two large holes in its wing.

Abby follows, shifting the rock beneath her to step down with ease facing the monster right in front of us yet again.

The Griffin begins to glow with a faint yellow light and its eyes glimmer sharply.

I sense something's off, but Abby doesn't seem to waver.

The beast runs at her with its wings folded to its sides. Its sharp beak and focused gaze come hurdling at the green glowing girl.

**\*CLANGGGG\* \*CRACKK\***

Abby attempts to block its charge with a wall of stone. The sharp beak of the massive creature pierces through with incredible newfound strength.

I watch the monster land a direct hit to the center of Abby's body, leaving her bloodied but not broken just yet.

She takes the hit and grabs the Griffin's beak with both hands. While glowing even brighter and spitting out a mouthful of blood, 6 large spears begin to form beneath both Abby and the beast.

**\*SHINGGGGG\***

The enormous half-bird, half-lion cries as its body goes limp from being skewered in all directions.

Humongous pillars of jagged rock lift the monster into the air as Abby lets out a sigh of relief and turns to us.

"So, did I make the cut?"

I smirk and nod while looking at the others.

Maria watches with her arms crossed and one eyebrow raised. Nessa grins wide, and Bruce leans on his shield holding a big thumbs up, replying to her.

“I’d say so. Not too bad!”

She walks back over to us as the rocks behind her sink back to the ground lowering the dissolving Griffin’s body.

“Good. You’re up next.”

I watch from a distance with a satisfied look as the four of them examine the fallen creature’s body before it disappears back into the dungeon. They look like they’ll get along.

“All right, glad we settled that. Let’s keep it moving!”

We set off down towards the next mountain. This first climb was easy, we didn’t even have to scale the whole peak. This next mountain looks a bit more troubling. The trees are thicker and we’ll have to walk right over its peak to get to the last one. Trying to walk around would take much longer than necessary.

I activate enemy detection, but it doesn’t help much here. Sure, we can avoid some opponents if need be, but I can’t tell hunters from monsters anymore. Everything in this dungeon is above level 250.

One mountain down, two more to go.

#### Chapter 94

The five of us make our way down and around the first mountain with ease.

As we make our way through the rocks and trees to climb atop the second peak, Griffins soar above our heads screeching and diving below attacking teams seemingly at random.

The trees at the base of this second mountain are considerably darker green and much thicker. Both Maria and I swap places upfront using Ice and fire to shatter and burn a path upwards.

Although I love burning all kinds of things to the ground, I much prefer monsters to shrubbery. Maria, on the other hand, looks like she’s having the time of her life. I let her excitedly lead the way as I point out subtle directional changes to avoid any groups of hunters or monsters on the ground level. Abby glows light green healing her wounds from earlier as Nessa and Bruce take the rear chuckling about something, I’m not sure what it is in particular.

After a solid 30 minutes of upward climbing on Maria’s fragmented trail of Ice, we encounter an opponent that’s impossible to avoid.

A Griffin of similar stature to the last one comes down the mountain at an incredible pace. The beast is silently soaring towards us just above the tree line with a look of determination in its sharp eagle eyes. A light yellow aura covers its entire body.

Maria notices it first.

“HEADS UP! This one’s mine!”



She turns to me with a smirk while glowing blue creating a winding staircase of Ice. All the trees in her path freeze completely solid creating the base for her structure on an upward climb.

The Griffin's front talons shine in the yellow dungeon's sunlight as the beast dive bombs our group with Maria as its main target. She shines bright while throwing herself at the monster, her sword is drawn and she's ready for a fight.

The Griffin screeches as Maria jumps into the air, pushing herself further and faster with a wave of Ice from behind.

**\*SHINGGGGG\***

In a flash of blue light, and the faint sound of clashing metal, the massive beast's entire front side becomes enveloped in a thick sheet of Ice. Its wings stop flapping and the ice wave continues to cover the rest of its body. Maria finishes her slash and the massive creature explodes into an incredible display of dazzling frozen ice fragments.

Moments later, she slides down her frozen tree sculptures with a satisfied grin.

"Now that was a fun one!!"

I let out a chuckle.

"That bird never had a chance."

Nessa calls out from behind me.

"It's a lion too ya know!"

Bruce smirks.

Abby watches in awe as the remainder of the snow falls down shimmering silver and gold.

"W-Wow Maria. You've gotten really strong..."

"Hmph. Thanks."

They smile at each other with a competitive edge to it, then we continue to make our way up the mountain. 30 more minutes pass and Maria continues clearing the way for us as we travel upwards. She drinks 2 MP potions but has more than enough to work with, It shouldn't be a problem.

She jumps in the air filled with amusement as we approach a high point.

"Woah. Guys, you've gotta see this!"

We make our way up, climbing her jagged ice-covered path. We've made it to the mountain's peak! I lift my sword in the air with excitement, then look to my side to see Maria next to a massive pile of what looks like fallen trees. Then I take a closer look.

**"IS THAT A GRIFFIN'S NEST?"**

An impossibly huge nest made from the branches of enormous trees rests on the back side of this mountain's peak. It's easily 20m in diameter and Maria is running around inside it without a care in the world.

"Hey! What are you-"

She looks up at me and points toward the backside of the nest.

“Look!”

Bruce, Nessa, and Abby make it over to us as I see what she means.

“It’s one of those... gift boxes!”

A large white rectangular glowing box sits unopened at the back of this massive nest. I grin and walk over to it with Maria by my side. The others are close behind.

\*Clink\* \*Clink\*

I tap my sword’s tip against the box’s lid two times, then it springs open like before. Inside, there’s a handful of potions, some food and water, a silver ring, and a large matching weapon to go with it.

I turn my head to see Bruce walking over and I point to the box.

“This might suit you well.”

He raises an eyebrow as he peers in to see the assortment of magical items. With a wide smile, the tank grabs what’s inside, raising up a heavy war hammer.

The long silver handle seems to be made of reinforced steel with leather wrappings to allow the user to grip it tightly. Its head has two sides. One is a square flat surface about the size of a human head, and the other is a smooth curved spike that points downward. The weapon shines silver, it’s definitely unique.

I use Appraisal.

[Enchanted War Hammer] +450 Strength

Bruce examines it up and down as we continue to sit through the gear. The food, potions, and water are split evenly, and a quick Appraisal of the ring shows up as a 30% defense-boosting item. I let the others fight over it while looking off into the distance sizing up our final mountain.

I activate enemy detection to try and gauge if any teams are ahead of us, but still, it’s hard to tell if they’re people or flocks of Griffins... or is it packs of Griffins...? Depends on which direction you’re looking at them I guess.

With a long quiet sigh, I let the cool breeze pass through my hair. I take a deep breath in and out slowly letting my eyelids shut. The moment they do, an ear-piercing screech jolts me awake as an enormous Griffin returns to its nest from above.

I watch Maria and Abby jump out of the way as it comes crashing down to eliminate the intruders in its home. Bruce and Nessa step forward, then jump out of the nest as well onto solid ground. Nessa calls out.

“Our turn.”

Bruce swings his hammer around eyeing the beast up and down.

“Yeah, it’s time to give this thing a trial run.”

The enormous Griffin towering above us in its nest charges forward, but Bruce blocks its beak with a solid stance and a steady shield.

Abby, Maria, and I all jumped backward onto a rack pile nearby to watch the fight commence.

Bruce continues to hold the charging monster back as Nessa ignites her sword and body into flames. The four-legged beast retreats and lets out a screech flapping its wings and glowing with a faint yellow aura.

Nessa runs toward Bruce and he gets down on one knee lowering his shield. She steps onto the solid plate of steel and jumps upward as Bruce thrusts her into the air. With a trail of flames crackling behind her, Nessa lets out a yell and slices through the beast's thick hide in the blink of an eye.

Another violent screech erupts from the monster as it retaliates and claws at Nessa with its back legs. She manages to block its attack with the flat side of her sword but is thrown to the ground by the force of its hind legs. The beast stares them down and dive bombs in on the offensive.

Bruce runs at the monster, with a large shield in one hand and his new hammer in the other.

\*THUDDDDDD\* \*CRACKKKK\*

As the Griffin dives focused on Nessa as its prey. Bruce comes charging in to land a mighty swing across the monster's head moments before impact. Its bones crunch and crack as the destructive force of the hammer's hit catapults the creature through a patch of trees straight at a stone wall over 10m away.

On impact, the formerly elegant beast lets out a deafening whine before falling to the rocky forest floor.

Nessa darts over to the fallen monster stabbing it through the neck, igniting it in flames, and turning the beast into a pile of Ash.

She points her flaming sword in the air to announce victory as Bruce lets his hammer hit the ground with a thud while leaning on the handle.

I walk over with the others following close behind, clapping my hands slowly.

“Good fight. That hammer really does suit you well.”

“You got that right, we've all taken a crack at these Griffins. This just leaves you Jay.”

I nod and turn toward the final mountain ahead.

“Yeah... To be honest, I'd rather just jump straight to the boss.”

Chapter 95

We make our way down toward the final mountain.

Maria continues to lead the way, freezing the forest solid while Bruce happily smashes the fragile Ice sculptures to bits. It's a waste of energy in my opinion, but they both seem to be enjoying themselves.

Abby, Nessa, and I take the rear. Abby speaks up.

“Ya know, I really didn't expect to see you here. It feels like just yesterday I forced you through those E-Class Dungeons.”

She lets out a laugh, I roll my eyes.

“Hey! I’ve been training really hard since then. I was equally as surprised to see you here!”

She looks up at me for a few seconds, then smiles.

“You look really different Jay. A lot... older.”

“.... Thanks.”

Abby blushes and hits me on the shoulder.

“It wasn’t a compliment! I-I’m just stating the obvious..”

Nessa grins and turns to me.

“Oh yeah? So Abby was your trainer?”

“Uh- Yeah. Something like that. It’s more like she was trying to get me killed back then.”

I smirk thinking back to the few dungeons we raided together, then look over to Abby. We both let out a laugh... but I was being serious... She was basically trying to kill me back then.

30 minutes of Ice smashing and old “training” stories later, we make it to the base of the third mountain. Maria turns gleaming with a smile ear to ear pointing upwards.

“Almost there!”

I look up, then nod firmly.

“Lead the way. Everyone stay sharp.”

I use enemy detection and scan the final mountain. It’s covered in moving targets. No matter what path upward we take, we will eventually run into danger, especially near the peak.

No more than 10 minutes into our trek upward the loud screech of another Griffin appears. With a look back for confirmation, Maria takes care of the monster in one fell swoop. The same magical display of ice fragments showered down on us as we continue upwards.

Over the next 30 minutes, another 2 creatures attack. Maria takes care of them with ease as well. I speak up as we approach the mountain’s top.

“Careful up ahead. We have company, and a lot of it.”

My enemy detection skill is showing over a dozen enemies all clumped together about 100m in front of us. One of them is way too high-leveled to be a monster, so my guess is these are all hunters.

Maria replies with a thumbs up but doesn’t slow her pace.

“Got it!”

We continue through the ice-ridden dense forest until the distinct sound of human voices comes through the tree line. Maria stops freezing the wilderness and we all draw our weapons approaching with caution.

As soon as I make my way through the heavily wooded clearing, I see four groups of hunters all standing in an orderly line at the center of a small grass-covered clearing.

To my left, the trees part wide open to look down on the other two mountains in the distance. To my right, there's a light grey twisting portal with a test supervisor watching hunters enter one by one. He speaks up as we approach.

“Get in line! Or don't, I couldn't care less. Fight to the death if you really want. The only rule is, you all have to fight the boss solo. This room resets every 30 seconds for a new challenger to fight it. Multiple people may technically be fighting at once, but they'll be in alternate boss rooms. Of course, you'll all be fighting the same boss, just in different copied boss room pocket dimensions.”

I look at him with an eyebrow raised, then he continues.

“Have a problem with that? That's just how dungeon magic works, don't blame me for it.”

He raises both of his hands in the air defensively.

“Anyways, I'm here to make sure you don't slip multiple people into the same room. Once you enter, you either lose or move on. Got it?”

We all grip our weapons tight and nod hesitantly. I step forward and lead the way for our group to stand in line behind about 16 other hunters. The three people in front of me look like they just went through a war... they're covered head to toe in blood and their gear isn't looking too fresh either.

“Next!”

The monitor speaks up again and the line moves forward a bit. There's some murmuring from the crowd up front that I ignore. I look back and get my team's attention.

“Everybody ready?”

Maria grins and nods.

“So ready.”

Abby concentrates intensely on the boss room portal.

“Yeah, I got this.”

Bruce and Nessa both stand side by side nodding reading their weapons.

“Next!”

The monitor speaks again and the line moves forward. A small woman without any combat gear enters the portal nervously, her team pushes her forward. She must have been their healer or something...

Around 20 seconds pass, and the glowing grey portal darkens. The monitor speaks up.

“Would you look at that, another one down! We have a mutant up next, who wants it?”

A well built swordsman steps up with a confident look on his face and walks through. I murmur under my breath.

“What was that all about...?”

The blood-covered man in leather armor carrying a silver sword turns around with a pale face and answers me in a shaky voice.

“A-Apparently, every time a hunter loses to the boss, It takes in their mana and grows stronger. I-It’s happened a few times while we’ve been waiting here.”

I nod slowly.

“Interesting. Appreciate it.”

He nods back and looks forward again.

“Next!”

The monitor yells out again as the portal goes back to normal. It looks like that swordsman took care of the mutant pretty quickly.

The line continues to move along, and my anticipation grows steadily.

“Next!”

The first man in the group of 3 before me jumps into the portal. Both his teammates wish him good luck. 30 seconds pass, and the monitor calls out for the next man to enter. As he walks closer, the portal begins to turn dark just like before. The entire first half of his body is already through before the monitor lets out a chuckle.

“Well, he’s in for a surprise!”

He looks at the man’s teammate in leather armor right in front of me.

“Looks like your friend took on a mutant, think he’s up to it?”

I hear a loud gulp, and he doesn’t reply. 30 more seconds pass and the monitor motions for him to enter the swirling dark portal.

“You don’t have to enter you know, can always quit now.”

The man in front of me just stares forward. I look back at my teammates with a shrug as the terrified hunter walks forward into the twisting darkness.

I turn back around and look directly at the mass of swirling energy in front of me as it instantly darkens indicating that Hunter must have already been defeated... The monitor speaks up as a wide grin appears on my face.

“You’re up. Seems like... you’re ready...”

I jump through without another thought.

The transfer magic activates and I step out onto a massive wooden structure. I look down at my feet and feel the hardwood beneath me. With a quick glance to my sides, all I see is blue sky... At the bottom of my field of vision, I see green leaves and sprouting branches.

I look out into the distance and see a massive Griffins nest... We're on top of an enormous tree, but all that's below is an endless void.

“SCREEEEEECHHH!!!”

A dark shadow appears from behind me as an ear-piercing screech dulls my senses. An incredibly huge birdlike creature swoops down to attack.

I activate my fire magic, bloodlust, berserker, and intimidation all at once to dart out of the way before meter-long talons glide right by my face.

I sprint along an enormous flat wooden branch downward to secure cover while turning my head to get a view of my opponent.

It's a beautiful sight. With a wingspan of nearly 10m, the white feathered wings of a mutant Griffin flap gusts of wind in my direction forcing me to stop in my tracks and brace myself. Its golden hide and long lion's tail sway in the breeze as it hovers over me.

I use inspect and appraisal while smirking with delight.

[Lv. 317]

Active Items:

[Griffin's Talon] +40% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

Bufs:

Special[Lion's Pride] +25% All Stats

My sword begins to glow bright red as I stare down at the monster in front of me.

“Finally, I get to fight a worthy opponent.”

I run up the long tree branch in front of me while leaving a fiery mess in my wake. The monster lets out another screech as it dive bombs toward me.

I let out my own yell, focusing fire magic into the center of my blade. While jumping in the air, I release a fiery slash to officially begin our battle. The crescent of dark fire magic leaves my blade and hurdles toward the incoming creature.

It glows with a golden aura keeping its laser-focused glare directly at me. The moment my wave of fire approaches, the beast twists its body and flaps one wing.

I feel the air pressure change and a massive gust of wind forms pushing my ultimate fiery slash off course missing its body completely.

This is the first time I've seen anyone or anything dodge, or even better, deflect that attack....

I grit my teeth and get ready for its incoming strike.

The eagle in the sky twists its body again to get back on track and locks its eyes on me glowing even brighter with that golden light.

I ready my sword and reinforce my wrists with body-hardening crystals to brace myself for impact.

“CLANGGGGG”

The beak of the elegant beast clashes with my fiery sword. Sparks fly and I stare into its wide-open bowling ball-sized eyes. They’re a deep yellow color, and full of wisdom... with a side of murderous intent.

The monster flaps its open wings pushing me backward as it retreats from our equal exchange. No damage was dealt to either side, but our physical strengths were measured.

I take this moment, to get to higher ground. As the bird flies high in the air, I run up to the top of a wide curved branch about 5m thick at the top. With a blast of flames, I incinerate all of the loose leaves and branches within a 10m radius giving me a much better view of the surrounding.

The Griffin lets out a screech and dives at me again. I feel the air pressure change as it stares down at me with its wings outstretched. My sword flickers with flames as I stare it down ready for its incoming attack.

\*SHICKK\* \*SHICKK\* \*SHICKK\*

I feel three sharp pains in my torso, left arm, and right leg. Out of nowhere, I cough up blood and fall to one knee scanning the area around me attempting to see where that attack came from. The air pressure drops suddenly.

\*SHICKK\* \*SHICKK\* \*SHICKK\*

Two more sharp pains in the back, and another in my left leg this time around. I cough up another mouth full of blood as the beast hurdles toward me.

The air pressure drops yet again...

I immediately cover all my vital points with a thick layer of body hardening to watch the black crystals immediately explode as they’re impacted by an invisible force.

“It’s.. the wind...”

I regenerate the flesh around my wounds and continue to cover my body with hard crystals as I stand to my feet. The Griffin makes its move. It falls out of the sky at an incredible speed with its front talons at the ready.

\*CLANGGGGG\*

The monster clashes its sharpened claws against my fiery blade in an explosion of sparks and flames once again.

I grit my teeth and activate stealth to dart out of its way.

I reach into my item box and pull out my daggers.

“You want to throw invisible weapons? Two can play that game.”

I throw the two daggers in the air, activating Telekinesis, and aiming for the creature’s head.



The moment the daggers left my hands, they became visible to the beast and it twists out of the way letting the shining black blades whiz by its head.

With this distraction, I swing my glowing red blade to release the same dark crescent of fire energy it previously dodged.

With a deafening squeal, the flaming attack makes a direct hit with the Griffin's side, searing a large fiery wound into its feathers, hide, and flesh.

The beast flaps its massive wings and rises high up into the sky.

I feel the air churn and twist all around me while I bring my daggers back to my left hand placing them back into my item box. Simultaneously, I grab two mana crystals and plunder their MP to bring myself back up to nearly full.

I attempt to run along a large open branch to change my position. The monster knows where I last stood, regardless of my stealth skill.

The leaves flap and the branches creek as the wind picks up all around me. I hear the monster's murderous cry as it plummets toward me.

"But... how...?"

Its eyes are locked on me and its talons are sharp and at the ready.

\*CLANGGGGG\*

Its claws and my blade collide again. My stealth skill deactivates as I concentrate on blocking its brutal attack. With a burst of flames, I twist my body to the side again, narrowly avoiding its sharpened claws.

The monster flies up into the sky once again, and I reactivate my stealth skill to plot an attack from the comfort of invisibility once again. The air pressure drops and a gust of wind comes through the trees right before the beast makes its move.

It finally clicks. This bird knows its tree better than anything. It's using the air displacement in its wind patterns to find my exact location...

I grit my teeth and run back up the way I came. The Griffin appears, diving toward me with its eyes locked straight ahead. I grin ear to ear as an idea comes to mind.

I sprint up the enormous branch on a direct path to clash with the monster once again.

Less than 10m for our collision, I launch my attack.

"Dungeon Walker."

A swirling black portal appears in front of me and I run through without hesitation. The Griffin continues to hurdle at my last known location.

I create a new portal about 5m behind and above the charging winged beast facing the opposite direction so I come flying out towards it.

As it claws at where my body should be as I step out to diving in at its backside.

My blade burns bright begging me to destroy the prey beneath my feet. I let out a yell and another flaming crescent slash of pure dark ego-filled fire magic. It makes contact with the beast's wings, slicing large gashes through both of them.

It lets out a cry and tries to twist around to see its attacker.

I don't give it the pleasure of doing so and land on the back of its lower neck, driving my burning blade deep inside.

While releasing an intense wave of intimidation, I plunder its MP and let out enough fire magic to kill it ten times over.

The monster falls to its knees admitting defeat while I reduce it to a flaming pile of ash.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

[YES][NO]

I lift my blade from the defeated monster and choose yes to absorb its skill.

The ashes dissolve and it leaves behind a huge mana crystal. I place it in my item storage as the white transfer magic brings me to floor 12.

Chapter 96

I look around as the white light from the transfer magic dissipates to find myself standing in a wide-open dirt patch. There are odd hills and valleys as far as the eye can see, but beneath my feet, there's just boring brown dirt.

The further I look out into the unfamiliar dungeon, the more the lack of trees and plants irks me. The ground is a little damp, and the sky is blue with white fluffy clouds, but there isn't a single sign of life anywhere.

A flash of light appears behind me and Maria comes flying out moments later.

"You're so lucky arghhh!"

I turn to her with a smile.

"What do you mean?"

She rolls her eyes and sighs.

"The boss, how was it? A good fight?"

I smirk and nod.

"Yeah, I had to get a bit serious. It was a fun one. How about you? Did that mutant give you a run for your money too?"

“Hmmpf.”

“What? It wasn’t that hard was it?”

Maria shakes her head.

“No. That’s my point exactly. Right as I was about to enter, the portal returned to normal. You must have taken out the mutant already. I faced the normal boss.... One hard hit and it was over.”

She pouts and crosses her arms playfully.

“Well, the next mutant is yours. How about that?”

She grins as a flash of light appears behind us and a green-haired girl appears.

“Woooo! That was a rush!”

Abby glows green while healing a large gash on her upper thigh with her right hand and drinking an MP potion with her left. I reply as she walks over to us.

“Oh yeah? How’d you uh- Beat it? There were no rocks or anything...”

She rolls her eyes.

“You know I don’t need to have stone around me to use my skill.”

Abby places a hand in the air while glowing even darker green. A small circle of stone begins to form into a long sharp spear. I raise an eyebrow.

“Oh- cool!”

She twirls the weapon around, then sticks it in the ground as a bright light flashes behind us again. Nessa walks out on fire with her own battle-crazed grin from ear to ear. She spits out a mouthful of blood on the ground, then walks over to us without speaking a word.

We all stare into the spawn zone and wait eagerly. A few moments later, the white light flames once again.

\*THUDDD\*

A large hammer hits the dirt ground with a thud as Bruce appears in front of us with his own toothy grin.

“That bird-for-brains never stood a chance!”

He swings the hammer over his shoulder and walks toward our group. I call out.

“We all made it, let’s head out!”

With unanimous nods of agreement, we all turn and begin the trek into the new dungeon terrain.

The soft dirt ground sinks under the weight of my body a few centimeters every time I take a step. It’s an odd sensation. The ground feels very unstable under my feet.

We walk for about 10 minutes on moderately flat ground until coming across one of the most absurd sights I've seen in a while.

We stop in our tracks as I peer over the edge of a long twisting ravine. The ground is split in two, divided by a narrow hole about 10m deep that twists and turns as far as the eye can see. It looks like something long and cylindrical was dragged through the dirt for kilometers.

I look to Maria and give her a nod.

She jumps forward and begins glowing bright blue to create a bridge of ice for us to cross. One by one we cross the mysterious hole and continue our journey.

Another 15 minutes of walking go by and we come across an enormous mound of dirt piled up over 30m high into the sky. It looks like an artificially crafted hill.... Right behind it, there is a similar ravine. I scratch my chin with curiosity.

"What is going on here?"

Maria creates another bridge of Ice and we cross one by one, each peering into the ominous depths below.

The moment I step back onto solid ground again, I feel movement beneath my feet. The ground is shifting ever so slightly.... It's not rumbling, it's more like... churning...

I turn my head back and forth but there's nothing in sight. I activate inspect and enemy detection to take a closer look.

[200m]

[Lv. 275]

I call out.

"There's.... Something coming!"

I ignite my sword and continue to look around but all I see is flat ground.

The odd sensation of churning dirt continues to grow more and more prevalent the longer I wait.

We all back away from the empty ravine as Bruce smashes the ice bridge behind us. All five of us stand in a line moving forward slowly while looking on into the distance where I point my sword. Maria speaks up.

"What is it?"

I grit my teeth and squint my eyes.

"I don't know... Do you feel that?"

There's silence. Abby glows light green, then replies.

"I feel it. The ground. It's... moving."

'.... Yeah."

The flames of my sword crackle as I stare out into the open plane of nothingness. I even ignite my body into a ball of fire to activate berserker and bloodlust to boost my senses.

Still... Nothing....

[100m]

[Lv. 275]

The ground shakes and the churning sensation grows even more.

My eyes dart back and forth over the horizon as I try to pick up on where this beast may be hiding. I murmur under my breath.

“How could a level 275 be hiding from me at this distance.... It’s like the thing went underground.. or-“

My eyes open wide as I piece together the puzzle staring me straight in the face.

[50m]

[Lv. 275]

I yell out to my teammates.

“IT’S UNDERGROUND!”

The moment these words leave my mouth, there’s a massive explosion of dirt less than 40m in front of us. The brown cloud of fresh soil flies high in the air as the monster I tracked all this time erupts from underground where it was hiding.

My eyes open wide and I smirk as the flames on my sword crackle in the wind of the debris.

“Let me handle this one. I want to try out a new move.”

An enormous worm’s head pops out of the ground showing off 5 rows of razor-sharp teeth in its never-ending abyss of a maw.

The monster’s purple skin looks alien to the dull brown environment as it lets out a malicious roar.

Dirt flies everywhere. My teammates step back and let me handle the beast as instructed.

Its body is just under 10m in diameter, and from what I can see, over 50m sticks out of the ground as it points down at me from high up in the air but I have a feeling it’s much longer than that...

Its mouth opens up wide showing every last jagged tooth as it lets out a roar and dives down at me.

Its long body continues to come out from hiding underground as it dives down with its humongous open death trap of a jaw.

I take both of my hands and grip the handle of my sword tight, focusing a large amount of MP into the core of my blade. It reacts instantly and begins to glow red.

I smirk, realizing this is the first time it’s changed colors on my direct command.

With a deep breath, closed eyes, and a focused mind I let the fire magic build up in my blade as the purple monster plummets toward me.

I tilt my head upward and open my eyes while activating my new skill.

“Wind Summoning.”

With an upward swing of my blade, I let the dark crescent of fire energy leave my sword encapsulated by a layer of refined wind energy.

As the attack leaves my glowing sword, the wind surrounding it pushes my fiery attack upwards with blinding speed and precision.

The excess air pushes my flames to ignite even brighter growing the flying crescent of fire into a dazzling display of bright red light in the sky.

The mass of energy collides head-on with the incoming monster and it's split clean in two....

Without an ounce of resistance, the fiery attack slices the jagged maw of the beast clean in half. It follows through, cleanly cutting the monster all the way in half the long way through.

I control my wind summoning magic to keep the fatal strike on track as it makes its way all the way to the monster's tail, then deep underground.

With a massive explosion of dirt and fire, the two monster halves fall to opposite sides of the newly formed crater in the ground before us.

I stand up tall, deactivating all my skills and admiring my work.

"...."

"WHAT WAS THAT???"

I hear Abby yell out from behind me as the rest of the group comes running over.

I grin and turn to meet their surprised faces.

"As I said before, I just wanted to test out a new move."

Abby replies.

"A new move?? That was literally the definition of overkill. That was-"

Maria interjects.

"That was SO COOL!"

We all go silent for a second. Then Maria and I burst out in laughter.

"Yeah, it was really cool wasn't it? I wasn't sure if it would go all the way through.. but it did!"

Abby stares at me wide-eyed.

"But- you just- how-"

Nessa pats her on the shoulder as Maria and I keep laughing and pointing at the burning remains of the massive purple behemoth.

"Just go with it."

Nessa sighs and continues.

"These two are... for a lack of better words... insane. Well, insanely strong... You'll get used to it."

Abby nods slowly while staring at the dissolving creature.

"I guess... I guess I will."

Chapter 97

As the giant purple worm disappears, two shiny items drop from its corpse.

I use appraisal as I pick up the large mana crystal and a round white orb. It's slightly purple-tinted, similar to the monster's skin color.

[Purple Worm's Pearl]

"Hmm, there's no info on this thing..."

It lets off a light hum. The orb is no more than 1kg and rests firmly in the palm of my hand. I toss it up and down a few times before shrugging and throwing it into my item storage with the mana crystal.

Everyone else in the group catches up and we continue to roam the flat dirt wasteland of a dungeon.

Over the next half an hour, we trek straight forward and run into 2 more giant worms.

I let Maria handle the next one. In one long continuous slash, she's able to freeze the front half of its body, taking out the beast in a single hit.

Nessa, Abby, and Bruce take on the next attacker. As the monster erupts from the ground Abby skewers it in place with 8 massive razor-sharp cones of dirt and rock. Nessa bursts into flames and slices the worm's front side wide open forcing it to squirm and squeal in agony. Bruce follows at the rear, with an onslaught of hammer hits leaving the beast's jaw unable to function. With a series of fiery slashes and jagged rock stabbings, the monster is defeated with ease. Abby speaks up with a wide grin after the creature disappears.

"I gained two whole levels from that!"

Nessa nods in agreement.

"Yeah, I gained two as well!"

Bruce nods happily.

"I gained one myself."

He looks over to me.

"Us three should handle the worms for now, I assume you and Maria aren't leveling up at all here."

"You're right, we'll step back. You three need the levels more than us."

We all agree and continue forward.

Over the next hour and a half, the three of them improve tremendously. They fight 4 worms together, then 3 more individually. I use inspect and monitor each of their progress closely.

Bruce uses 2 MP potions in total while making it to level 276 over the next couple of battles. He comes up with a new move using the sharp end of his hammer to rip the monster apart in just a few hits.

Nessa consumes 3MP potions and makes it up to level 274. Her firepower is decent, but it still takes a few hits for her to slice the monsters in half. The long way that is... Nessa really tried to copy my move, it didn't work out as well as she'd hoped. It still got the job done eventually!

Lastly, Abby grew the most in my opinion. While only drinking 2 MP potions, she grew to level 274 as well. I witnessed a new battle technique from her. While capturing the beast in a prison of rock spears, she conjured two reinforced stone daggers. With a graceful jumping maneuver similar to the stone pillars she used facing those Griffins, Abby threw herself over the worm and slid down its back with both daggers piercing its thick skin while growing them in size. By the time she reached the ground, the creature split into three separate parts....

"How'd ya like that?"

Abby walks back over to our group after this final battle with a confident smirk across her face.

I reply.

"Not bad, not bad at all."

\*THUDDDD\*

The two parts of the beast hit the ground on either side simultaneously as its middle piece crumbles to the floor.

I use enemy detection as Abby collects her mana crystal and the rest of the group praises her for the unique kill.

While squinting my eyes, I look out into the distance.

"We're either at the boss room... or we're in trouble."

I can sense a lot of high-level beings less than 500m away.

Maria laughs and points forward.

"That's the boss room! Come on!"

We all begin running forward toward the specs on the horizon. We make it there in record time.

Just under a dozen hunters are standing in an orderly line in front of a floating boss room portal. The heavily armored monitor beside it speaks up.

"Newcomers! Welcome, this is th-"

I cut him off.

"We got it."

He tightens his lips, then nods abruptly.

"Next!"

The hunter upfront steps through without another word.



I inspect and appraise all the hunters in line. They all appear to be well equipped for this boss room. Not a single one of them is under level 270. I guess the weaker hunters are either leveling up as we speak or already got disqualified.

"Next!"

The line moves forward as I finish my assessment, then look toward the monitor.

"Hey! How many hunters have come through here already? Just curious."

He grins.

"Oh yeah? Just curious? You getting nervous?"

He chuckles to himself, then a few others in the front of the line let out small laughs as well. I roll my eyes.

"Yeah. Terrified."

I grin and continue.

"So... how many?"

He looks up at the sky momentarily counting on his fingers, then looks back at me.

"I'd say... fifty or so. You're all still pretty much at the front of the pack."

I nod slowly and squint at him for a moment.

"Thanks."

He nods back.

"No problem. Next!"

If he's telling the truth, we're making pretty good time.

The line continues to move slowly. Another 5 minutes of waiting go by as 2 more teams arrive behind us. I turn to my own party looking them up and down.

"We all set?"

The four of them give me confident nods as the monitor yells out again.

"Next!"

I turn to the swirling portal and jump through with my sword pointed straight ahead.

Moments later, I enter the boss room.

It's dark, damp, and disgusting. I erupt into flames, lighting up my surroundings. It seems like an endless abyss all around me. I can't see the ceiling or walls, but the flat dirt ground shoots off in all directions indefinitely.

I use enemy detection and inspect.

[200m]

[Lv. 285]

I put my sword into my item box, then pull out the pair of daggers I've been itching to try out.

"This won't be nearly as hard as that Griffin, I guess I can try a few things out in the meantime."

I run forward while lit up in a ball of flames. The ground begins to shake and rumble as I get closer. Then, like clockwork, a massive purple worm erupts from the damp soil less than 50m away from me. It's barely visible in the dim light, but its sharp white teeth reflect off my flickering flames.

I continue to sprint toward the beast at full speed while focusing on both my blades summoning a layer of wind magic around each of them.

The worm lets out a horrendous roar and dives toward me as I release my attack.

With two swift slashes, I bring both my black shimmering blades across my body with a powerful strike. Two invisible sharp gusts of wind fly at the incoming monster.

**\*SHINGGGG\***

The invisible slashes make contact with the beast's ravenous jaws. Its entire front half is pushed backward on impact as blood explodes in all directions. The rows of teeth are split into 3 parts as the massive worm flails about releasing a deafening cry.

"Not what I was going for... but not bad."

I grin and jump up at the beast activating berserker, bloodlust, and intimidation.

The monster stops flailing immediately as it's struck with a wave of fear. I concentrate on my glimmering daggers once again and release two more wind slashes straight at the injured monster's defenseless body.

The beast is shredded to pieces moments later.

**\*THUDDD\***

Portions of its lifeless body hit the ground as I land on the damp soil next to it. While twirling my jet-black daggers, I walk over to the pile of sliced-up flesh and wait for the beast to dissolve.

Moments later, it drops a large mana crystal and a triangular jagged tooth.

**\*Click\* \*Click\* \*Click\***

I tap one of my blades against the hard white surface, then throw both items in my storage with a smirk. The white transfer magic appears moments later and I'm transported to the next floor while placing my daggers into my item box and bringing out my sword.

I step out onto hard orange rock and look down into a deep canyon.

There are twisting rock patterns and tall smooth structures shaping various walkways throughout the endless pit. There's small green shrubbery in the shade of larger boulders, but no sign of a water source in sight. The artificial yellow sun is beating down on the landscape sucking it dry of any life.

A white light flashes behind me as Maria appears and takes in the view with me.

One after another, Abby, Nessa, and Bruce all make it through.

I smile and confidently nod, then point down into the canyon leading to the backside of the dungeon.

"Onwards."

Our trek begins.

We take a long winding path deep into the canyon. I use enemy detection and find discover most of the creatures around here travel alone. They're pretty high-level, but nothing we can't handle.

After 20 minutes of walking, the five of us make it to a portion of the trail that branches out into an open field with more shrubbery than any other place in the canyon. It's still rather desolate, but the bright shades of green are calming on the eyes after walking in the sun for a while.

There are two massive boulders at the back of the clearing. There seems to be an unspoken group consensus that we're taking a break here. We stop for a moment to drink water, eat a bit, and account for all our gear and potions.

Just to make sure, I do one more sweep of the area with enemy detection. My eyes sharpen and I draw my sword as an entity shows up in my mind's eye...

[100m]

[Lv. 290]

"Hey, we can take a break in a second! We have a visitor, incoming!"

I point my blade at one of the two boulders on the edge of the field, as it splits in two....

A murderous roar comes from behind it as a truly disgusting creature appears. A 6m tall behemoth of a beast stomps out from behind the broken rock.

It looks rather humanoid, with light orange skin, long fangs, an ogre's stature, a giant's body, carrying a massive club, and wearing a long necklace with a green gem dangling from it. The monster's arms are hairy and much longer than they should be, reaching down to its overgrown toes. It's well built, but a layer of grime and fat covers up the muscles beneath. An overwhelming smell of body odor and rotting flesh fills the air as the beast approaches.

I grit my teeth and run at the beast coating my blade in a layer of wind magic.

\*SHINGGGG\*

Moments later, I slice clean through the beast's thick neck like butter and turn around.

"Well... that was easy. A little... too easy...."

The monster's head rolls to the ground by my side. Its beady red eyes and long sharp teeth glare at me even after death.

\*THUDDDD\*

\*THUDDDD\*

It begins to stomp its feet...

I turn around to watch the beast grow back its head in a matter of seconds, then use Appraisal while jumping backward.

[Lv. 290]

Active Items:

[Heavy Club] +400 Attack

[Desert Troll's Charm] +45% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Self Regeneration

"We're dealing with a Troll! Everybody get back!"

I erupt into flames while pointing the tip of my blade at the monstrosity as it turns toward me.

"It's been a while since I fought a monster like you."

Chapter 98

The massive troll in front of me lets out a roar as it turns.

I've fought trolls before, but nothing quite like this. These must be a unique desert variant... and supersized!

The beast begins charging at me with flailing limbs and its heavy club showing off a newly grown pair of red eyes and sharpened teeth. With my blade on fire, I activate bloodlust and berserker just for good measure while charging right back at it.

In two clean cuts, I slash a fiery "X" across the monster's front side, cutting it into 4 pieces. The massive chunks of burning flesh hit the hard orange rock floor with a thud. I watch the remains burn to ash.

While deactivating my skills, I turn to my team members.

"These are going to be a bit tough. We need magic to defeat them, preferably fire."

Nessa smirks and raises her sword.

"Looks like I'm all set then!"

She lights it on fire, then Maria speaks up.

"I've fought similar monsters back in basic training! Ice magic works too, it's just not as effective as fire."

I nod slowly, then turn to Abby and Bruce. The green-haired girl speaks first.

"There's a troll dungeon in the capital. I've trained there a few times."

Bruce gulps and turns to her.

"So... How do you beat them...?"

Abby grins.

"It's pretty simple. Brute force."

I open my mouth with a confused look on my face but tighten my lips and hold back as Bruce replies while swinging his hammer around.

"Oh yeah? So I can just smash 'em to bits?"

Abby nods with a light chuckle.

“Kind of. Once their MP runs out, the regeneration property they possess also loses its effect. The longer we can keep them fighting, the better chance we have of killing these trolls off.”

They both nod at each other with a serious stare.

I smile.

“Well, looks like the two of you have some work to do.”

The troll dissolves and I pick up the mana crystal it drops. The five of us sit around planning our descent into the canyon while enjoying a small break to eat and drink some of our rations.

I continuously keep track of our surroundings with enemy detection, but we aren't disturbed at all for over 25 minutes.

Eventually, our moment of peace is over, as another impossibly large desert troll stomps into our general vicinity. Maria perks up.

“Let me take a crack at this one!”

We all sit back and enjoy the show.

Maria glows bright blue as she draws her silver sword at the bellowing giant. The beast readies its club and runs at her.

In the blink of an eye, Maria slices the trolls left arm clean off leaving a large amount of Ice residue behind. The severed limb freezes and shatters as it hits the ground. The injured area is another problem entirely though. The flesh around its wound ripples and shakes regenerating at rapid rates to counteract the ever so slowly moving Ice magic creeping towards its neck.

Maria jumps in for another slash, taking out the monster's right leg and injuring its left. An explosion of Ice brings the beast to its knees as it roars and angrily swings its club while trying its best to keep the Ice magic at bay.

With a precise slash to the neck, and the troll's head falls to the floor. The malleable flesh of its open wounds continues to squirm as it attempts to fight off the magic residue left behind.

A few moments later, the tortured creature stops moving and solidifies into a statue of Ice.

Maria brings her blade down on the beast one last time shattering it into a million tiny pieces, then turns back to us.

“Not too hard, but you were right Jay! This thing did take a few more hits than expected.”

I cross my arms and nod, then look over to Bruce and Abby.

“Let's go find you two an opponent. You'll need practice before we make it to the boss room.”

We wait for the frozen troll remains to drop Maria's mana crystal, then head off deeper into the canyon.

My enemy detection skill is showing a large number of high-level beings at the back side of the dungeon, and not many in between. It seems like way too many to all be hunters, but that's where the boss room should be... So it doesn't make much sense otherwise.

Another 30 minutes of walking go by, and there is not a single troll in sight.

The light wind blows orange dirt around in the depths of the canyon making a whistling sound as the air currents flow through the rock walls all around us.

I kick a few small pebbles off a ledge as we continue down the winding trails just to hear the echoing sound of rock hitting rock over and over again until it disappears into the nothingness below.

Maria starts humming a cute and simple song. No one interrupts her as it fills the silence to go along with our footsteps as we venture further and further in.

Another 20 minutes pass. We all zone out rhythmically walking one by one until a voice calls out from below.

“Help! I- Somebody! Anybody please he-“

A monstrous roar cuts off a young man's cries for help. This seems to be coming from just beyond the nearest bend in the large rock wall on our right side.

To our left, the canyon slopes downward. After this bend in the path, there's an overlook to the final portion of the dungeon.

I run forward while igniting my sword in a fresh coat of fire.

Moments later, I take in the scene before me. My eyes light up with awe taking in the view.

A flash of white light goes off as a massive troll swings its club down defeating the hunter that called out for our aid. There's gear scattered all along this wide path that slopes downward.

The troll responsible for that young man's demise turns to me and grunts. I grin as I see two more walking up behind it.

“I got the middle! Maria and Nessa take the right side, Bruce and Abby take the left!”

Without hesitation, we all run forward at the beast with our weapons at the ready.

The putrid smell travels through the air hitting our noses more than 30m away. I burst into flames and glow red activating my stat-boosting skills to create a deadly strike.

Mid-charge, I think of an interesting idea and activate my wind magic to conduct a test. Just before impact, I summon a massive gust of wind beneath my feet boosting my speed while flying in the air at the vile creature. I feel my body shoot forward as I jump off the ground with incredible speed releasing a deadly fiery slash across the troll's front side.

It barely lets out a grunt. The club drops from its hands to the floor as the sorry excuse for a monster gets incinerated on the spot. Its remains are unidentifiable piles of ash on either side of my trail of flames.

I look to my right side to see Maria freezing their troll's legs solid while Nessa decapitates the monster with a fiery slash. After a few more hits for good measure, the two of them defeat their beast with ease.

Lastly, I look to Abby and Bruce.

Bruce is keeping the Troll occupied with his hammer and shield. They seem to be similar strengths, but the troll is having a bit of trouble moving forward with the large spears of rock stuck through its legs.

Abby darts around the troll hitting it with cheap shots as the monster focuses on the tank.

The two of them tag team the oaf, landing hit after hit. Every time Bruce's hammer makes contact, portions of the monster's flesh are blown away, but unfortunately mended on the spot. Abby's spears of rock create holes in the monster's legs and vital spots, but they're all regenerated in a matter of seconds as well.

Of course, this is going all according to their plan.

Nessa, Maria, and I let our trolls dissolve and collect the mana as we watch the two of them work. It takes a while... and 1 MP potion each, but after these series of cheap hits, and defensive maneuvers, the two of them break down the trolls MP and start to deal actual damage.

The first sign of this is a solid hit to the side of the head by Bruce. He breaks the monster's jaw and it roars out in pain. Usually, it would grunt to itself and regenerate its shattered teeth and droopy lower jaw, but this time around it just stares the tank down with murderous intent.

Both Abby and Bruce grin ear to ear making eye contact with each other, then going in for the kill.

Abby creates two massive spears of stone in each hand glowing bright green while running at the beast. Bruce yells out a battle cry while lifting his hammer high in the air.

Abby skewers the beast in two places. One massive spear stabs directly through the chest, while the other lodges itself in the troll's right eye.

Finally, Bruce jumps high in the air bringing down his mighty war hammer with impressive strength. Bones crunch under the pressure as it makes contact with the top of the giant monster's head in an explosion of blood and brains.

The Troll falls to its knees with a final whimper. The two of them smirk while turning toward the three of us. Abby jumps in the air excitedly.

"Woohoo! I gained 2 levels for that!"

Bruce grins and throws his hammer over a shoulder.

"Same. We're going to need to be able to do that ourselves though. I'm not ready to face the boss alone...."

I nod while walking near the edge of the overlook.

I peer down toward the back of the dungeon while my other four teammates talk amongst themselves.

The massive number of high-level beings on my enemy detection radar finally becomes clear to me... It was not other hunters after all...

I turn around and wave the other over.

“If we can make it through this, I’m sure the boss will be a walk in the park.”

The five of us take in the view.

There’s a pit 500m below us, it’s around 1km long and 1km wide. At the very back, I can see the faint glow of a boss room portal.

Guarding the entrance... I see over 100 giant desert trolls. They all pace around frantically, attacking each other and anything that moves. The disgusting creatures are covering every last square meter of land between us and that portal.

Bruce gulps, Abby glows green, Nessa draws her silver sword lighting it on fire, Maria glows blue freezing the ground beneath her feet, and I... Well, I stare out at my prey in awe.

“It’s time to burn every last one of these trolls to ash.”

Chapter 99

A long twisting pathway leads down to the pit along the cliff on our right side. I can hear the faint sounds of stomping trolls and grunts approaching from below.

We start making our way down.

I’m grinning excitedly, thinking about all the new moves I’ll get to try out on over 100 fresh moving targets.

No more than 50m of travel downwards, a lone desert troll comes bustling up the canyon pathway. In the distance, I can see half a dozen of them slowly making their way up the trail as well.

“Nessa, Abby, and Bruce. You three need to gain some serious levels before reaching the boss. Take care of these monsters.”

I point my sword down the path, then continue talking.

“Maria, watch over them until they can handle these wanderers alone. I’ll go take out the source of the problem, maybe I’ll even leave a few for you... but probably not.”

I smirk playfully and dart off to the left before any of them get a chance to reply. The smartest... or no... possibly the dumbest idea popped into my head and I can’t wait any longer to test it out.

With a graceful leap, I jump off the edge of the winding path with nothing but an endless pit of trolls 500m below me.

“WHAT ARE YOU-“

I hear a few concerned voices drown out in the wind as I quickly plummet off the face of this massive orange rock wall. For a moment, I close my eyes and let the cool air wrap around my entire body as I fall weightlessly to the ground.

“Wind Summoning.”



After a brief moment of peace, I concentrate my wind magic to form strong gusts beneath me. I visualize a wall of wind and try to let it catch me. The first attempt pushes my upper half backwards spiraling me out of control....

I grit my teeth, regain my composure, and try again. The second gust is much more stable and slows my descent ever so slightly. I keep a constant stream of air rushing up to slow my fall more and more.

Finally, I begin creating small denser pockets of air beneath my feet. It's very hard to stay upright, my body naturally wants to twist and turn. I'm still falling through the air very fast, but I work best under pressure...

Once less than 100m from the hard rock floor, I've slowed myself down considerably. With a bit of trial and error, I've managed to control the small dense currents under my feet. With very slight movements, I can change my position and turn toward any direction in mid-air with ease.

I focus on creating one final gust of wind from below before hitting the hard rock ground.

\*THUDDDD\*

I brace my feet with body-hardening crystals and push upwards with wind magic to lessen the fall. My impact with the ground still creates a small crater about 4m in diameter.

It's not exactly what I was planning for, but this entrance is pretty epic either way.

I grin and draw my sword as the orange dust cloud around me settles. Over a dozen trolls surround me on all sides.

I burst into flames while focusing my mana into my sword. Moments later it begins to glow red as I activate my bloodlust and berserker skills. With much greater precision than before, dense wind magic forms beneath the soles of my feet and I push off of them blasting forward at my enemies.

\*SHINGGGGG\*

One hit and the first monster disintegrates to ash.

I plunder its MP and turn in mid-air to face my next opponent. I plant my right foot into empty space and summon a dense pocket of air behind me. The gust of wind explodes on impact with my foot forcing me to make a 90-degree turn in mid-air.

\*SHINGGGGG\*

Another troll is eliminated in the blink of an eye.

I let out a loud chaotic laugh and begin zig-zagging around the battlefield with incredible speed and precision. I jump through the air getting more in tune with my new wind-summoning skill with every strike.

In a matter of seconds, the 15 or so trolls that approached me were all dead on the floor in a wide circle of black smoke and crackling flames.

With all the flashing lights and excess mana in the air, many of the trolls in the surrounding area have started to come charging my way. Little do they know, they're just running into their own imminent demise.

The entire pit turns into a bloody massacre. The burning corpses of trolls begin to pile up as I dart around with a fiery blade.

After 20 minutes of pure destruction goes by, and the trolls begin to thin out. Their roars and grunts die down and the smoke and dust settle. I'm left with piles of mana crystals, 4 large troll clubs, and 3 desert troll charms. I equipped one of the charms, placing it around my neck, then put the rest of the loot into my item storage.

It's an impressive haul, but I'm more excited about the improved use of my new skill.

I look out toward the end of the canyon activating enemy detection to see hardly any trolls remaining. My team is also steadily making its way down the sloping pathway. I can see them on the side of a cliff about 200m above me fighting a battle of their own, they've made it down a considerable distance as well! I start my trek forward in their direction.

Another 10 minutes go by before I'm finally within range.

"Hey!! Over here!!"

I call out to them with a wave while running over sporting a wide smile.

"So how'd it go?"

Maria looks at me with both hands on her waist and an angry expression.

"H-How'd it go? You just jumped off a cliff Jay! You tell me how it went!"

"I- uhh-"

I stop to scratch my chin and think carefully about what to say next, but Maria continues without a response.

"It's fine. I'm glad you had some fun."

I lift my hand from my chin to scratch my head awkwardly, then we both let out a long laugh.

"So, Abby and Bruce, leveling updates? You two ready for the boss or what?"

Bruce grins.

"It'll be tough, but I think I can handle it. I made it to level 286, and took down 2 trolls by myself on the way down here."

I nod while crossing my arms and turning to Abby, she responds immediately.

"Yeah! Same here. I hit level 288. I used up a lot of MP, but I can take these creatures out easy as long as I'm stocked up on potions."

I smile.

"Great, great. Well, I uh- I cleared a path for us. The boss room should be right over here..."

We begin to turn toward the distant glow of a portal, but the sound of an incoming stampede of trolls echoes throughout the canyon interrupting our friendly greetings.

Nessa yells out.

“Lets move! Whatever that is... it can't be good!”

This pit seems to be the respawn spot for all the monsters in the dungeon. At least, that's what it seems like.

The five of us sprint toward the boss room without another thought. I use enemy detection to pinpoint the test monitor's exact location just to make sure we're headed in the right direction. Finally, the floating grey portal comes into our clear line of sight.

Nessa calls out again with a smirk.

“I want to go first this time!”

I look at her with tight lips but nod politely mid-stride.

“Sure, go for it.”

We approach the towering back wall of the canyon. If not for the boss room portal, we would be completely cornered in. The monitor speaks up.

“So it was you guys? There sure was a lot of noise in here. It's been a while since a new group came through.”

We all stop to catch out breath for a moment, then the monitor continues.

“Well, if you've made it this far, you know the rules. Who's first?”

With a grin, Nessa readies her long silver sword and jumps through the portal.

The rest of us are left in silence with the faint rumbling of giant trolls approaching in the distance.

It's an eerie sound... but I'm not too worried about it. I speak up.

“Hey, I'll go last. Just in case this wave hits, I'm confident I can handle them.”

Maria nods.

“I'm second to last, just in case.”

Bruce and Abby look at each other wide-eyed, then shrug. The tank speaks up.

“Well, I'm going in next... There's no need for me to fight an entire stampede if I don't have to. I leave the unnecessary battles to the junkies!”

Abby nods.

“Agreed.”

The monitor laughs.

“You're up champ, go ahead.”

Bruce jumps through holding his hammer high and the large shield close to his side.

We wait as the rumbling gets louder.

“Next!”

Abby jumps through and disappears into the boss room as well.

The first wave of trolls finally comes into view.

“Next!”

Maria looks me in the eyes, then turns to jump through.

“Let’s hope this boss is actually hard, I want to have some fun...”

She disappears into the swirling mass of energy.

The stampede is less than 100m away now.

I look over to the test monitor and he rolls his eyes.

“I know that look kid, you’re going to leave this mess in my hands.”

I chuckle and throw my hands up in the air raising my sword with a goofy grin.

“Sorry. It’s not my fault.”

He chuckles back.

“I know, Im messing around. It’s fine. I’ll get to see some action. I’m not supposed to kill any monsters while other hunters are around, so it’ll be a nice change of pace.”

He stretches his arms in anticipation as I stare into the swirling portal.

“Go for it, the boss is all yours.”

With a grin, I give him a firm nod goodbye and jump through.

## Chapter 100

I spawn into the boss room and ready my sword.

Walls of orange rock surround me on all sides creating a circular battlefield about 50m in diameter. A flash of light obstructs my vision as an enormous troll appears across the makeshift arena.

It’s very similar to the ones in the dungeon. This one is just 2m taller, hairier, darker skin, but its disgusting stench remains the same. After using inspect, the monster registers at level 298.

The massive beast immediately charges at me with its heavy club raised high in the air. I activate berserker and bloodlust while igniting my blade.

With one swift kick off a dense pocket of wind magic, I fly toward the monster and slice it in half without a second thought.

I turn around to watch both parts of the defeated troll burn to ash.

"Well, that was probably my fastest boss room win... ever..."

I let my flames die out, then walk over to the dissolving corpse to collect the mana crystal with a long sigh.

Moments later, the transfer magic appears and a white flash of light takes me to floor 14.

I look around In awe as I take in a surreal sight.

The ground is so dark brown, it almost looks black. The terrain is completely flat for as far as the eye can see, and there are very short jagged dead trees every 50m or so in all directions. The sky is such a light tone of blue it looks white. There are very small dark particles that float in the air. When I try to touch them, my hand just slips right through.

"What.... Is this place....?"

I look up to see my other four group members in a similar confused state. They're all looking around aimlessly trying to touch the particles in the air with no success.

Maria turns to me.

"I have no idea... Creepy right?"

She grins cheerfully.

It lightens the mood so I reply back with a thin smile.

"Yeah... Lets... get moving I guess."

We begin to walk straight ahead. We're all on edge quite a bit. I take the rear with Maria while Bruce, Nessa, and Abby travel up front in a triangular formation.

I activate enemy detection, but to my surprise, less than 10 enemies show up. Even when I expand my range throughout the entire dungeon... it's only 10... that's it....

Although there's no threats nearby, I can't shake the feeling that we're being watched. It's like there's eyes peering into my soul from just behind my shoulder.

"Uh- guys. Does anyone else feel like there is someone watching us-"

"YES!"

Abby turns with a crazy look in her eyes.

"I can't take it anymore! I thought I was going crazy!!!"

She starts looking over her shoulder furiously as Bruce and Nessa turn to me as well. The tank speaks up.

"I feel it too. Eerie, but bearable."

Nessa smirks as I see a fire light up in her eyes.

"Whatever it is, I want to fight it."

Maria chuckles.

"Yeah, I felt it the moment I entered this place... I agree Nessa, freezing it solid is high up on my priority list."

I nod.

"Hmmm."

We continue walking and I continue scanning the area with enemy detection.

This goes on for a while....

Over an hour of consistent walking goes by, and not a single monster appears the entire time.

The landscape remains exactly the same as we walk further in. The feeling of being watched hasn't changed one bit either.

My enemy detection skill finds three targets in the distance. Two of them are close together directly in front of us, while another is off to my right side but still a ways away.

[600m]

[Lv. 303]

[Lv. 299]

[800m]

[Lv. 300]

I call out to the group while pointing my blade forward.

"We're about to have some company. Maybe we'll get to see what this dungeon is all about. Stay Alert."

I get a round of head nods and grunts of agreement as we continue forward into the eerie wasteland.

It's so silent, and we've already walked so far. The endless flat void goes on forever around us in all directions. The only noises I hear are the footsteps in front of me.

Finally, about 10 minutes later Abby's voice breaks the silence.

"Hey! I see someone! Two people actually!"

She turns back excitedly while pointing forward.

I grit my teeth.

"People? So.. they aren't monsters?"

"Nope, they're definitely people!"

I continue scanning our surroundings as we trek forward and two shadowy humanoid figures come into view.

[150m]

[Lv. 303]

[Lv. 299]

[300m]

[Lv. 300]

I can sense a third, but as I look around it's nowhere to be found.

"Stay on guard."

Bruce tightens his grip on his hammer, Nessa lights a small flicker of a flame on her sword, Abby begins glowing Green, Maria starts leaving small patches of ice behind with every step, and I stare straight ahead trying to figure out what exactly we're walking into.

Less than a minute later, we are all within battle range. I mutter under my breath as the figures become more clear to me.

"Ugh, they were just hunters after all that... Where are the monsters...?"

I roll my eyes and let out a long sigh. Unfortunately, my pouting gets rudely interrupted by a light elbow to the gut from Maria.

"Hey! Look! It's them! It's the-"

One of the tall figures steps forward and my eyes widen as he yells out at us with a smirk across his face.

"Who would have thought I'd get the pleasure to see your face again? It looks like Portal Boy and his girlfriend have a crew! Isn't that nice?"

He looks over to his partner with a sly grin.

I immediately use inspect and appraisal to confirm my suspicions.

The first man is middle-aged, wearing silver armor with a large axe and a shaved head.

[Lv. 303]

Active Items:

[High Ogre's Axe] +350 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +500 Defense

[Stealth Boots] +300 Speed +300 Agility

[Dragon's Scale Pendant] +50% Magic Resistance

[Serpent's Ring] +70% Mental Strength

[Desert Troll's Charm] +45% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Lightning Summoning]

His partner is on the shorter side with much heavier armor, short black hair, a long silver sword, and a toothy grin.

[Lv. 299]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +600 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +300 Speed

[Dragon's Scale Pendant] +50% Magic Resistance

[Gargoyle's Ring] +60% Mental Strength

[Desert Troll's Charm] +45% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Swordsmanship

Extreme Defense

"It's them...."

I look at the two men in front of me remembering back to when we met at the beginning of this exam. Maria and I were no match for the two of them, I had to use my Dungeon Walker ability to run away. I guess that's where I got the nickname "Portal Boy"....

I look at him with a blank annoyed stare for a moment... then gulp realizing the seriousness of this situation.

"RUN! EVERYONE RUN. WE'RE NO MATCH FOR THEM."

The lightning user stares me in the eyes and lets out a long bellowing laugh.

"You got that right kid!"

He begins glowing bright yellow, I yell again.

"RUN! I'LL HOLD THEM OFF! WE'LL MEET BY THE BOSS ROOM!"

Maria turns to look at me with concern filled her eyes. I ignite myself into a ball of flames activating berserker and bloodlust before replying.

"Trust me. I can handle them."

She nods, then darts away calling out to the others.

"This way! Jay can do this!"

Maria forms a massive wall of Ice as the lightning user lets out an enormous attack. Arcs of electricity fill the air as her white crystal wall explodes into a million pieces.

I give Abby, Nessa, and Bruce a firm nod before the cloud of snow and Ice fills our vision.

I hear the angry lightning user yell out.

"You're running away from us again? You cowards!!!"

I run in between the two of them and my escaping teammates before I reply.

"Don't worry! I won't miss out on the fun this time around."

The snow cloud settles leaving me face to face with the two overpowered warriors.

The last time I faced them, I had much less gear, no bloodlust or wind-summoning skills, and had the burden of protecting Maria while I fought. This time, I'll get to go all out.

I see malicious grins appear on both of their faces as they look me up and down. The swordsman speaks up.

"I didn't have the pleasure of finishing off your partner last time we met, I guess you'll have to do."



His eyes widen with anticipation as he stares at me. The lightning user turns to him, steps back, then crosses his arms.

"Go for it Abe, this runt is all yours. I'll only step in if it gets dicey. He does have a few good moves, so be careful."

Without another word, the muscular swordsman runs at me with his sword at the ready.

I smirk and run back at him.

Our battle has already begun.

**\*CLANGGG\***

Our swords collide with the loud sound of metal on metal. He grits his teeth as I push him backward with pure strength alone. After a moment, I summon a dense wall of wind to push my sword forward even further and ignite my flames to burn red hot.

"Y-You damn-arghhh!"

**\*ZAPPPPP\***

The moment the swordsman loses his balance, I feel a familiar painful shock of electricity surge through my entire body.

I let out a loud yell and fall to my knees.

"Just as I thought. Looks like you learned a few more tricks! Abe, sorry to cut you short, but he's all mine."

The fallen swordsman nods and gulps.

With heavy breaths, I regenerate my scorched flesh and pick myself back up and stare the lightning user in the eyes.

"Scared already?"

**\*ZAPPPPPP\***

I fall to my knees again letting out a chaotic laugh while reaching into my item box for an HP potion.

I regenerate my sizzling skin one more time while darting backward to drink the HP potion and think of a strategy.

"Not so fast Portal Boy!"

The lightning user is hot on my tail, less than 10m behind me.

I jump up into the air and summon a dense pocket of wind magic directly in front of me.

"It's time to put this practice to use."

I plant my right foot in the open air and push off it while spinning a full 180 degrees.

With my flames burning hot, berserker and bloodlust at full blast, I activate intimidation while flying straight at the lightning mage. My sword glows red and I focus on my prey.

His eyes open wide in confusion as I land a critical hit across his chest. A dark wave of fire is released from my sword and I let my wind magic carry it forward with immense power.

On impact, I'm shocked to the core with a counterattack. An intense current of electricity drops me to the floor. I watch my opponent collapse in front of me with a fiery wound as well.

Both of us cough up a mouthful of blood and stand to our feet moments later...

Black dust from the ground fills the air.

He grins, rubbing the wide-open gash in his chest through a shattered thick plate of steel armor.

"Not bad, not bad at all."

I look back at him with my sword at the ready.

"You're not too bad yourself."

He smirks and looks over his shoulder.

"Abe, we're not taking any more chances here. Time to double-team him, this is our toughest opponent yet."

I grit my teeth as the swordsman walks over.

Then...

I hear footsteps.

Very faint, very quick footsteps coming from behind me.

I reactivate enemy detection.

[10m]

[Lv. 300]

I grip my sword even tighter, then duck and swerve out of the way as a cloaked figure jumps over my head with alarming speed.

\*SHINGGGG\*

I watch the mystery man in black slice at the swordsman's neck with a pair of gleaming daggers.

A flash of white light fills our battlefield as Abe disappears and the dust settles. The mysterious rogue darts behind the lightning user and readies his blades again.

I stare in awe. He took out that tank of a swordsman in just one hit...

The man speaks up in a low, but clear voice.

"Care to team up? I like your style."

The hooded man lifts his head to look me straight in the eyes.

I nod at him firmly one time, then point my glowing blade at the lightning user's head.

"Works for me."