

H. Academy 641

Chapter 641 140.5 - Concocting

As Astron continued his work, Maya observed him remembering the information regarding the complexities involved in alchemy.

She had seen alchemical processes before, but watching Astron now, it became clear that potion brewing wasn't just a matter of adding ingredients at the right temperature and timing.

If that were the case, anyone could attempt it with a bit of study. But there was something more, something essential that only a true alchemist could wield—a skill only Awakened practitioners possessed.

Alchemy required more than practical knowledge and precise temperature control; it demanded an alchemist's mana, channeled carefully into the brew. The herbs he was using were not ordinary; they were evolved plants, infused with natural defenses and resistance, making them nearly impossible to blend through physical means alone.

They required mana to activate and harmonize their properties, and this was where the skill of a true alchemist came in.

Of course, that did not mean every alchemy product needed to be produced by an Awakened as with the recent development of the Magic Engineering, even ordinary people who couldn't command mana directly would be able to generate mana from Mana Machineries.

But for those at higher levels, that was a completely different case. One needs to have such precise control of mana and a high level of mana that, at that point, they might as well have become a direct hunter themselves.

Such was the scene before Maya.

As Astron reached a critical point in the process, he extended his hand over the beaker, his gaze focused and began channeling his mana into the mixture.

A faint glow emanated from his hand, and Maya could feel the energy resonating through the room. The liquid in the beaker responded, its color shifting subtly as his mana guided the mixture, binding the essence of each ingredient in a careful balance.

She watched in awe as he navigated the process, his control unwavering, adjusting the flow of his mana with an expertise that made it look deceptively easy.

But she knew better. This was one of the reasons alchemists were rare; the task required not only theoretical knowledge but the ability to channel mana with finesse and precision, an ability only an Awakened individual with years of training could possess.

Maya's gaze remained fixed on Astron, her thoughts drifting as she watched him channel his mana with a precision that bordered on artistry. The glow from his hand pulsed in harmony with the mixture, guiding it through each subtle transition, each shift in energy. She couldn't help but feel a surge of pride—hadn't she been the one to first guide him on how to control mana and use it effectively?

'Indeed, should I be proud?' she wondered, the thought filling her with a quiet satisfaction.

But then she paused, the memory of those early days flashing through her mind. She shook her head lightly, recalling how quickly he had picked up everything she'd shown him. Even then, it hadn't really been her doing; it was his innate talent, his natural aptitude that had brought him this far.

'No... I didn't do too much,' she admitted to herself. 'It was always his own potential—his skill, his drive. I merely pointed him in the right direction.'

As Astron continued his work, Maya shook her head.

On the other side, Astron leaned over the beaker, his focus absolute as he sent a thin thread of mana into the simmering mixture.

The alchemical components required a gentle, steady hand; any slip and the entire concoction would lose its potency. His gaze sharpened, his breath even, as he calibrated the flow of his mana.

'Alchemy, like so many disciplines, is a matter of control,' he thought, weaving a thread of mana into the liquid as he would like he was training with Reina, an exercise in managing disparate forces to create unity.

He recalled his early days of training, where each discipline had shown him pieces of the same puzzle. 'Martial arts, mana shields, even refining the perception of my [Eyes]—they all come back to one thing: resonance.'

As he continued, Astron carefully balanced the threads of mana that flowed from his fingers, layering them in delicate synchrony. His training with Reina on filtering mana psions sharpened his focus; each thread now resonated with the unique qualities of the ingredients he introduced.

'It's all part of the same principle,' he reflected, his focus unwavering. 'Every technique I've mastered—creating a shield, splitting my attention across multiple tasks, manipulating psions to sift through information—it all hinges on precision, on finding the right balance and frequency.'

He guided the energy with deliberate care, watching as the Aetherial Water pulsed with each addition.

The liquid began to change color with each ingredient, its energy waves shifting in response to the interaction of mana. It was a dance of forces, each one influencing the other in subtle, complex ways.

'Alchemy isn't just mixing ingredients; it's about aligning each element's mana signature,' he thought, his hands moving with practiced precision.

'Each one has a natural resonance, a rhythm that needs to be preserved to achieve the desired effect. A disruption in that rhythm, even for a moment, could destabilize the entire brew.'

Astron reached for the Dokebloom, gently adding its vivid petals to the mix, the silvery hue deepening with its introduction.

The potion began to emit a faint glow as he channeled his mana, harmonizing the natural mana waves of each ingredient, keeping the temperature stable through precise adjustments to his own energy.

'It's the same principle as any defense or attack spell,' he mused, sensing the familiar feedback from the potion. 'Different, but fundamentally the same—find the natural resonance, adjust, and guide it forward. There's no forcing here; only aligning.'

As he let the Voidroot dissolve, the liquid took on a murky tone, absorbing mana with an intensity that made the air around him grow denser.

His mind went back to his training as a [Martial Artist]—how he had trained his body to move seamlessly, each part in unity with the whole, creating one singular, fluid motion.

That practice had been for battle; this, though different, demanded the same awareness and fluidity.

'This is also why, most of the high-ranked Awakened tends to focus on multiple disciplines.'

With one final touch, he added the Rostglow Moss, allowing its cold aura to infuse the mixture. As his mana threaded through the brew, he felt the liquid's energy settle, each component attuned, harmonizing with the rest. He watched as the mana waves rippled, locking into place.

'It's as if each skill is connected, each thread of knowledge leading to the next. Everything... linked.'

The potion's glow steadied, and Astron allowed himself a small, satisfied breath. As he stepped back, he could feel the weight of the task settle into a quiet sense of accomplishment. All around him, the alchemical equipment hummed softly, the air thick with the mingled scents of rare herbs, magic, and precision.

'And, now, the concoction is complete.'

Astron observed the potion before him, noting the calm stability of the mixture. Contrary to the dramatic reactions one might imagine in tales of wild alchemy, there was no explosive flash or rolling cloud of smoke; the potion simply settled, its energies in perfect harmony, emanating a soft, steady glow.

And that was how it was supposed to be.

Alchemy was about balance—not about chaos. This particular brew, crafted with such precision and attention, embodied that principle.

With each element perfectly aligned, there was no need for spectacle; only a quiet completion, a product of discipline and finesse.

Just then, a soft voice broke the silence. "Is it over?"

He turned slightly, almost surprised to find Maya standing beside him, her gaze trained on the potion with a mix of curiosity and admiration. In his focus, he had almost forgotten she was there, so immersed in the flow of mana that her presence had faded into the background.

"Yes," he replied, meeting her gaze with a nod. "It's finished."

Maya's eyes lingered on the potion, a faint smile touching her lips as she glanced back at him. "It's quite beautiful. There's a sense of... control in it."

Astron nodded, understanding the sentiment perfectly. "Alchemy, for the most part, is about finding equilibrium. With this one, if every component resonates just right, there's no need for flashy reactions."

Maya's gaze lingered on the softly glowing potion, a faint smile touching her lips as she glanced back at Astron. "You're truly someone who can do a wide range of things, Junior," she remarked, a hint of playful admiration in her tone. But as her curiosity grew, she couldn't resist asking, "When did you even learn alchemy?"

Astron looked at her, his expression thoughtful before he replied, "I didn't specifically learn alchemy. What you're seeing is just the result of learning how to control mana with a high level of detail. That's what makes this possible."

Her brows lifted in surprise, and she tilted her head slightly. "So, you just... adapted the skills you learned from somewhere else to alchemy?"

He nodded, his gaze steady. "Exactly. Mana control, once mastered, can be applied to a wide range of disciplines. In fact," he continued, his tone calm yet encouraging, "if you were to research alchemy, with your skills as a mage, you'd be able to do the same without much effort. You already possess the necessary arsenal."

Maya looked back at the potion, her mind stirring with the possibilities.

'Interesting, can I really do it?' The idea that her own knowledge of mana could translate into alchemical skill was both surprising and invigorating.

'Maybe, if what he says is entirely true.' Her excitement was tempered by skepticism. 'But... why do I feel like it won't be as easy as he says?'

Even as she doubted, an idea was already forming in her mind. She met his gaze, the glimmer of eagerness unmistakable in her eyes. "You make it sound like it's entirely within reach," she mused, her voice soft but edged with curiosity.

Astron gave a slight nod, his expression steady with quiet certainty. "It is, for those who have the skill and the patience. You're more than capable, Senior."

Maya's lips curved into a smile as her resolve settled. "Then... when you have the time, you'll teach me about alchemy at the academy."

Astron raised an eyebrow, his tone mildly evasive. "I'm sure there are better candidates for that."

"But I want you to do it," she insisted, her tone playful yet earnest. "Promise?"

He looked at her, momentarily silent.

"Promise?" she repeated, eyes unwavering.

"When I have 'free' time," he relented, a faint sigh escaping him, trying his best to leave an open end. Her smile widened. "It's a deal, then."

".....A deal...."

Maya was indeed really happy at that moment.

".....A deal...."

After saying that, Astron reached into his spatial storage and retrieved a sleek, reinforced vial, its surface engraved with faintly glowing runes designed to maintain the concoction's potency over time.

The bottle was crafted with alchemical enhancements specifically meant for volatile or high-powered mixtures, a detail Maya recognized immediately. For concoctions of this caliber, quality storage was essential; without it, the effects would inevitably fade, weakening the potion's intended purpose.

He poured the finished mixture carefully, allowing the dark, shimmering liquid to flow into the bottle. The runes activated immediately upon contact, casting a soft light over the potion as they worked to stabilize and preserve it. When he was finished, he sealed the bottle tightly, observing it for a brief moment to ensure the preservation enchantments had taken effect.

Satisfied, Astron finally stood, his gaze flicking from the vial to Maya. "That should keep it secure," he said, tucking the vial into a hidden compartment within his storage.

Maya watched him, an appreciative glint in her eyes. "It's amazing how much preparation goes into just storing it. I see now that the process doesn't end with the brewing," she observed thoughtfully.

Even though that was the basic knowledge in theory, seeing it firsthand was indeed interesting all the time.

Astron nodded, his expression calm. "Preservation is just as essential as the brewing itself. With the right storage, the effects remain intact. Without it, the potency would diminish before it could ever be used."

With the potion securely stored, Astron gave the alchemy station one last glance, ensuring everything was in place. Satisfied, he straightened and stood up, the purpose that had brought him here now complete.

Maya, sensing his movement, looked up at him with a hint of curiosity. "Have you finished?"

He gave a slight nod. "Yes. That's everything I needed."

"I see."

Hearing his reply, Maya's gaze drifted downward, a quiet ache settling in her chest. She had known this moment would come—had prepared herself, even. But knowing didn't make it easier.

The completion of the potion signaled the end of his purpose here, and she understood what that meant: Astron would be leaving the city, continuing on his path, and she, in turn, would resume hers. She had resolved not to cling to these moments, to let him go with grace, but now, standing here, the reality was far more tangible than the calm acceptance she'd envisioned.

'So... it's really time,' she thought, a slight pang of regret rippling through her as she looked at him, his expression calm, collected, with the same steady composure he carried into everything he did.

Maya took a steadying breath, lifting her gaze back to him, her expression composed despite the quiet sadness lingering in her eyes. Though she wanted to prolong it a little more.

"Then....Let's leave."

Astron gave a small nod, acknowledging her unspoken desire to accompany him a little further. "All right," he replied, his voice steady as always. He moved toward the door, and Maya followed suit, a small flicker of relief settling within her. This walk to the station would give her a few more moments, a quiet farewell of sorts.

As they exited the alchemical lab, the attendant was waiting outside, her posture attentive and polite. Her gaze shifted to Astron, and a faint blush rose to her cheeks, lingering a second longer than necessary as she took in his strikingly sharp features.

Maya noticed the attendant's reaction and fought back a smirk. Astron's new look, combined with his intense, composed aura, certainly seemed to draw attention.

The attendant inclined her head respectfully, directing her attention back to Maya. "Lady Evergreen, thank you for your visit. Please feel free to return at any time."

Maya nodded with quiet assurance, her expression calm but friendly. With her family's connection to the establishment, no transaction was required; the shop's relationship with the Evergreen family ensured that Maya and her guests were always taken care of.

Without further words, the attendant stepped aside, offering a final respectful bow as she escorted them toward the exit. Maya could feel her lingering gaze on Astron as they moved out of sight, but she resisted the urge to comment. As they stepped into the open air, the cool breeze of the city greeted them, carrying with it the sounds of distant chatter and footsteps.

They started toward the train station, the city streets alive with people going about their daily routines.

Maya walked beside him, savoring these quiet, final moments, the unspoken understanding between them a comfort as they made their way through the bustling heart of the city.

As they walked together toward the train station, Maya felt an inexplicable tension rising within her. It was a quiet, persistent sense of foreboding, as though her instincts were whispering a warning she couldn't ignore. Somehow, she knew Astron would face danger again—greater than anything he'd encountered before. The thought unsettled her, and before she could stop herself, she glanced at him and spoke.

"You're going to put yourself in danger again, aren't you?" Her voice was soft, but there was a note of worry underlying her words.

Astron looked at her, his expression composed but carrying a certain unyielding certainty. "One's life is always at risk as long as they are weak," he replied calmly. "I believe you know that as well, Senior."

Maya nodded, understanding the truth in his words but still feeling an ache of protest rising within her. She didn't want to leave it at that, her gaze sharp as she continued, "While being weak does put one's life at risk, that doesn't mean you have to die on the path of becoming strong. There's a difference."

Astron's expression softened just slightly, a hint of understanding in his gaze. "I will not die," he replied, his tone resolute, carrying an assurance that felt almost unbreakable.

There was no hesitation, no hint of uncertainty in his voice. It was as though he had decided this as surely as he had chosen his path forward.

"I see.... Then, I have nothing to say more."

Maya let out a quiet breath, her gaze drifting to Astron's side profile. The silence hung between them, a mutual understanding and a quiet respect mingling with her lingering concern. Just as she thought to leave the conversation as it was, he turned to meet her gaze, his violet eyes calm and steady.

"I understand your worry," he said, his voice even, "but remember, you have your own path to walk. There are things you need to achieve and focus on as well."

Maya nodded, a faint smile crossing her lips. "Of course," she replied, recalling the breakfast they'd shared and the words he'd spoken then. His reminder echoed in her mind, a quiet but firm guide urging her to face the inner conflict she'd been avoiding. She knew the importance of mastering her [Inner Demon], confronting the other consciousness within her, and finding the balance that would allow her to wield her powers freely and safely.

She sighed softly, recognizing the truth in his words. As much as she worried for him, she also knew she couldn't spend her energy solely on that.

'I know I can't just worry about you all the time,' she admitted to herself, her inner voice laced with both resolve and warmth. 'I have my own challenges to face—and I'll face them.'

They continued their walk through the bustling streets, Maya's voice filling the quiet spaces between them. She talked about small things—the city's charm, her thoughts on certain spells she was experimenting with, even light-hearted complaints about Academy life. Astron listened patiently, letting her have her time as she animatedly recounted stories.

As they moved along, she occasionally glanced his way, catching the subtle attentiveness in his expression. Though he didn't say much, his presence alone felt reassuring.

However, after a while, the scenery shifted, the streets opening into a bustling square filled with vendors, street musicians, and the steady hum of morning life.

They had reached the Ardmont City Center. The plaza sprawled before them, with its old, cobbled pathways and vibrant energy capturing the heart of the city in every sight and sound.

Maya's voice trailed off as they stepped into the square, her gaze drifting to the lively scene around them. She let out a soft breath, her expression calm but carrying a hint of wistfulness as she took it all in. For a moment, she simply stood beside him, savoring the vibrancy of the city and the quiet certainty of his presence.

Maya's gaze lingered on the bustling city center for a moment before she turned to him, a faint smile crossing her lips. "Will you be using the Teleportation Center?" she asked, her voice steady though she felt a hint of reluctance in asking.

"Yes," Astron replied, confirming her suspicions. He had indeed chosen the Teleportation Center for his next destination, a practical decision but one that signaled the end of their time together here.

Maya's fingers tightened around the hem of her coat as she nodded, her gaze dropping momentarily. "So... you're leaving, then?"

"Yes," he replied, his tone calm and certain. He paused for a moment before adding, with a trace of dry humor, "But, Senior, don't be so dramatic. The academy starts in two weeks."

Maya's smile returned, small but genuine, as his words settled in. She knew he was right—this parting wasn't permanent. In just a short time, they would see each other again, training, studying, and perhaps sharing more quiet moments just like this.

"I know," she said, the lightness returning to her voice. "It's just... a pity, that's all. These moments pass so quickly."

Astron inclined his head, a quiet acknowledgment in his gaze. "Time moves fast. That is why, it is this valuable, isn't it?"

"Heh....That is right."

Maya nodded with a soft smile, her gaze lingering on him for a moment before she lifted her hand to his collar, gently straightening it with practiced ease. Her fingers moved down, smoothing the front of his coat, a small, almost imperceptible gesture of care as she quietly fussed over his appearance.

"There," she murmured, stepping back slightly. "Farewell, Junior. Take care of yourself."

Astron offered her a faint smile, a rare expression that softened his otherwise composed features. "I will," he replied, his voice steady but carrying a hint of warmth.

'Ah, really....' His smile lingered just a fraction longer, and for an instant, her heart fluttered, the simplicity of it catching her off guard.

But she kept her composure, reminding herself of the roles they played—she was his senior, after all. She steadied herself with a quiet breath, the fondness slipping into her smile.

"Good," she said, her tone light but resolute. "I'll see you soon."

With a final nod, Astron turned and made his way toward the Teleportation Center, leaving her standing amidst the vibrant crowd.

Chapter 643 141.2 - Finding the Dungeon

After Senior Maya left, the City Center hummed around me.

'The amulet should address parts of her problem,' I thought, heading toward the teleportation center tucked within the square.

I'd designed it with her dual nature in mind, hoping it might help bridge the ever-present chasm between her vampiric instincts and human discipline.

These two sides of her—one refined and controlled, the other primal and unrestrained—were locked in a near-constant struggle, and her attempts to suppress the latter wouldn't end well.

'Typical suppression of something so innate rarely does,' I mused, weaving between the throng of people. I'd seen the signs—the way she leaned on me, her dependency growing dangerously close to addiction. It was a reliance I couldn't afford to encourage.

My path was my own, and hers, ultimately, would have to be hers.

The urge to dampen that darkness within herself was strong, but darkness resisted suppression. I'd ordered the amulet as a reminder of that, hoping she'd find a way to face her nature with balance instead of denial.

It was strange, perhaps, to think of such things as I walked through a crowd of strangers, faces blurring past in moments.

But the irony wasn't lost on me. The life we lived was a balancing act—instincts, intellect, strength, and restraint. She needed to find her own balance, or that very dependency would become her undoing.

The teleportation center loomed ahead, the steel archways catching the morning light, and I let my pace quicken. I had little time to linger on Maya's path; I'd set her on it and give her what she needed. It was up to her now.

'She'll be stronger for it if she achieves the state....If not, then we need to find something else.' I reminded myself.

I had no interest in being anyone's anchor, or rather it was not something that I could afford at that moment. Letting someone else dictate one's strength or stability was a gamble, and in a world like ours, gambles like that cost too much.

As the entrance to the teleportation center came into view, I kept my pace steady, weaving through the thinning crowd until I reached the counter. A middle-aged man with a clipboard greeted me with a brief glance before slipping into the standard, detached customer service mode.

"Identification, please," he said, his tone efficient but indifferent.

I slipped my Arcadia Hunter Academy student ID from my coat and handed it to him. As his eyes scanned the card, a subtle shift washed over his face. His expression softened, brows lifting slightly as he registered the insignia—prestige had its perks, even here.

"Oh, an Arcadia student," he said, voice edged with a newfound respect. "Welcome. Let's get you taken care of quickly."

With sudden enthusiasm, he turned to his terminal, fingers moving rapidly over the keyboard. "Destination?"

"Jarken City," I replied evenly. The sixth largest in the Federation and the heart of the western sector—exactly where I needed to be.

The man nodded, casting a glance at my ID again, perhaps to confirm what he was seeing before handing it back with a small, polite nod. "Gate J29," he said, now fully committed to his role of accommodating the Academy's reputation. He held out a printed ticket, his attitude a little more deferential than before. "Your portal is just down the left hallway, follow the signs. Safe travels."

I took the ticket, giving him a curt nod in return, then turned and made my way down the corridor. Gate J29 was within sight, an archway of glistening metal that hummed with the energy of portals activated for long-distance travel.

Stepping up to Gate J29, I handed my ticket to the attendant stationed beside the arch. The man, with practiced efficiency, scanned the ticket and gave a nod before activating the gate's controls. The portal hummed, the glow intensifying until the archway shimmered with rippling energy.

With a final glance back, I stepped forward. The familiar pull of spatial displacement took hold, but to me, it was no more disorienting than walking down a hallway. In an instant, I was through, stepping out on the other side into Jarken City's teleportation hall.

I barely paused, letting the flow of people carry me toward the exit. The familiarity of spatial travel had long dulled its effect on me, leaving no trace of the slight nausea or dizziness I'd once felt. I moved with purpose, reaching the hall's exit and stepping out into the heart of Jarken City Center.

The city sprawled around me, an impressive forest of skyscrapers gleaming beneath the midday sun. Streets bustled with energy, a constant stream of pedestrians, vendors, and the hum of distant engines. Jarken had the same imposing architecture as Ardmont, its towering buildings reaching skyward, each structure vying for dominance in the city's skyline.

I took in the scene, noting the efficiency and order of the bustling city—much like any other Federation metropolis.

Each face, every rushing figure.

I took in the cityscape for a brief moment, then began walking. Jarken City's towering structures and bustling streets faded into the background as my focus shifted to the task at hand. I reached into my coat, feeling the cold weight of the necklace I'd taken from Zharokath.

This was the key, the piece that would grant me access to the dungeon where the Void Dragon lay dormant. But finding the necklace was only the first step.

The real challenge would be locating the spatially sealed gate hidden somewhere in this vast western region. The Void Dragon's lair was locked away, concealed by ancient magic, and likely still guarded by defenses left by the Void Clan. I could almost feel the tension in my shoulders as I recalled the memory—the game's events flashing through my mind.

In the game's timeline, the emergence of the Void Dragon was nothing short of catastrophic. The Western Region was left in ruins, transformed into a desolate war zone.

I could still picture the endless waves of demonic humans flooding into the sixth-largest city, twisting the land with corruption and leaving the Federation's defenses shattered. The once-thriving cities had fallen one by one, turning into battlegrounds of chaos and bloodshed.

The sheer destruction the Void Dragon had brought to the region wasn't easily erased from memory. This creature wasn't merely another monster—it was a force capable of bending space and void energy to its will, leaving entire cities as mere rubble in its wake. But in this timeline, I aimed to intercept it, to claim the Voidborne trait before the world had a chance to crumble under its presence.

'And that is why, it is precisely harder for me to just pinpoint the location where the monster had appeared.'

I thought to myself. Even if I had a photographic memory and I had never forgotten something that I had once seen, I would still need to look around the city to find the exact location where the gate of the dungeon had appeared.

'It is also possible that the place where the dungeon appeared may not be where it is located.'

That was why, I was also considering not killing Zharokath, but knowing the kind of conviction he had, I knew for a fact that it would be nearly impossible to get something from him anyway.

I let my hand close around the necklace, feeling the cold weight of it as I moved through the crowded streets of Jarken City. This wasn't just some trinket from Zharokath—it was a key, holding faint traces of the same magic concealing the Void Dragon's gate.

Since I could tap into its mana signature, I might just be able to trace it back, and narrow down the gate's location somewhere within this endless city.

'This is where it starts,' I reminded myself, slipping into the mindset of a tracker. This wouldn't be as simple as spotting some physical landmark.

No, magic like this operated on a subtler level, and I'd have to rely on resonance, matching my own mana with the remnants within the necklace to feel any trace it left behind.

Around me, the city continued on—people rushing by, horns blaring in the distance. It was as if everything was just slightly off in my perception, my focus is drawn away from the busy scene and back toward the intricate threads of mana, I could feel pulsing from the necklace.

With the city's hum fading behind me, I began my search for a vantage point, a place to focus and sense the delicate web of mana woven into the necklace. Every passing block brought me closer to a quieter part of Jarken City, where the din of crowds softened, replaced by the faint echoes of distant engines and the occasional footsteps of lone passersby.

It was here, in a less-traveled valley between towering buildings, that I spotted my target—a quiet, unassuming skyscraper standing at about forty floors.

I slipped into the shadow of the alley, activating [Shadowborne]. My form melded with the darkness, shrouding me in near invisibility as I approached the building. A quick glance confirmed the coast was clear, and I began my ascent, hands and feet finding silent purchase on the building's ledges and structural seams. The shadows hugged me, masking my movements as I rose higher, floor by floor, until the city's noise dwindled beneath me, leaving only the faint whistle of the wind.

At the rooftop, I crouched low, still cloaked in shadow. The city stretched out below, sprawling and alive, yet insignificant from this height. I took a deep breath, letting my mind hone in on the faint mana signature pulsing from the necklace in my hand.

Carefully, I reached inward, syncing my own mana with the lingering essence embedded in the necklace. The resonance began a subtle thrum in my senses, delicate yet unmistakable.

I could feel it—traces of that ancient magic trailing through the city like a network of threads, weaving and twisting through the cityscape. Somewhere within this expanse lay the entrance to the Void Dragon's lair.

Or at least that was what I hoped would happen.

'Let's hope things won't get harder than it is supposed to be. I don't have much time to waste.'

Since the time promised to meet with Irina was approaching after all.

Chapter 644 141.3 - Finding the Dungeon

I tightened my grip on the necklace, letting my focus narrow to the faint psions of mana within it. Traces of the Void Dragon's ancient power were entwined in its essence, subtle but distinct if one knew where to look.

This dungeon wouldn't just reveal itself—it was too well-concealed for that. Even if the Federation's detectors were scouring every inch of the city, this magic was designed to slip past passive detection.

The seal meant to protect it from intruders likely had a backdoor, a flaw however small. Seals, however strong, needed some form of escape valve—a leeway, no matter how minute, that would allow the keyholder to access the contents within.

My goal was to hone in on that sliver, to pick up on the one psion out of place. It was more than a detection effort; it was a hunt for a misplaced signature in a forest of similar noise.

I concentrated, actively pushing my own mana outward in a refined wave. My [Eyes] narrowed in, filtering out the ambient hum of the city's mana and focusing only on the specific resonance within the necklace.

I sifted through it carefully, guiding my mana to latch onto the unique, elusive thread that would reveal any disturbance—a subtle tear in the air, a whisper that would lead me closer.

There, among the countless threads of mana, I felt it. A faint tremor, like a thread just a degree out of alignment. It was subtle, almost imperceptible, but it was there—the mana pulse of the seal, winding like a thread beneath layers of cloaking enchantments.

The pulse grew clearer as I focused, like catching the faint glint of a needle buried in shadows. I let my mana resonate with the disturbance, amplifying the slight tremor and following its direction.

Each step I took, still cloaked in shadow, narrowed down the path toward that hidden entry point, concealed so deeply within the city's fabric that it almost seemed a part of it.

'This is it,' I thought, maintaining the steady rhythm of [Shadowborne] as I descended from the rooftop. I slipped silently from ledge to ledge, shadows veiling my movements as I made my way down.

The city had no idea what was hidden within it—a layer of magic so ancient and camouflaged that even the Federation's monitoring wouldn't detect it. That was the advantage of old magic, woven from threads of power as subtle as they were powerful.

When I finally touched the ground, I checked the area around me before stepping from the alley. The signature led north, through the city's less-populated districts. As I walked, the necklace's resonance continued, guiding me.

The mana thread continued, faint but persistent, until I reached a narrow, quiet street lined with unmarked buildings. The mana pulse flickered here, the resonance from the necklace intensifying as if it had found a natural anchor point.

I stopped in my tracks, feeling the necklace's resonance intensify, each pulse now in sync with my heartbeat. Lifting my head, I let my gaze sweep over the narrow street before me, taking in every detail.

Shops lined one side of the street, their faded signs and worn facades fitting the general disuse of the area. A few streetlights dotted the walkway, casting muted halos of light over the cracked pavement.

Small trees framed each side, their branches reaching out like dark fingers against the overcast sky. The design of the pavement—subtle markings along the edges, the textures underfoot—all of it struck a chord.

And then it clicked.

This was it. The same street, the same exact scene I'd seen in that cutscene from the game, burned into my memory.

Every detail replayed in my mind: the appearance of the gate, tearing open reality as the Void Dragon emerged, its roar filling the screen and setting the Western Region's destruction into motion. It was unmistakable.

The match wasn't perfect—some details were different, no doubt due to the five-year gap from the original timeline. Shops had new signs, streetlights had been replaced or moved, and minor changes had been made to the layout of the area. But it was close enough to confirm.

'An 88 match. That is enough.'

I stepped back, taking in the narrow street where the necklace's resonance had intensified, grounding itself in the air around me like an invisible marker. Each pulse aligned with my own heartbeat, the rhythmic thrum an unmistakable signal that I'd arrived at the entry point.

But something was off. I scanned the street again, expecting security, wards, maybe even a concealed barrier—yet the street remained deserted, unguarded, almost welcoming. The faint glow of the necklace still resonated steadily, as though daring me to reach through the thin veil of reality that hid the dungeon.

'Strange,' I thought, slipping a hand into my pocket. For a place holding something as volatile as the Void Dragon, there should've been a sign of protection—an invisible ward, a rune, even a subtle enchantment marking this as a danger zone. But there was nothing. Just the quiet, mundane pulse of an old street, unchanged to the eye.

I focused my mana into my [Eyes], allowing their sharpness to pierce through the buildings and surrounding structures. The ability revealed hidden paths, mana flows, and even concealed figures when used with precision. My vision expanded, tunneling beyond the walls and through the shadows cast by the dim streetlights, my mana sweeping the area for any sign of surveillance.

Nothing.

There were no guards lying in wait, no mana signatures marking hidden watchers, no latent spells woven into the structures around me. The space was clean—too clean. Almost deliberately so. It was as though whoever had concealed the dungeon wanted it overlooked, hidden not by force but by simplicity.

This lack of security, though seemingly ideal, only raised my suspicion. My instincts warned me that this could be a trap, something set up to lull intruders into a false sense of ease before springing on them unawares.

'Then again, perhaps the Void Clan trusted their magic enough to hide this place without guards,' I mused, keeping my focus sharp as I stepped forward, tracing the faint trail of mana pulsing from the necklace.

The Void Dragon's gate wasn't meant to be easily found, but its concealment spell, now woven into the fabric of this unassuming street, felt almost... resigned as if the city had simply grown around it over centuries.

'Well, that is one way to hide things.'

I took a breath, letting the weight of the necklace's mana signature guide me, each step narrowing my focus until the concealment magic's threads started to come into view, faint but unmistakable.

The threads of mana began to weave more distinctly as if they were strands pulling me forward, guiding me closer with every step. I followed them through the narrow street, my presence cloaked in shadows until I reached the entrance of a small, unassuming shop nestled between two worn brick buildings. Its modest wooden sign hung slightly askew, reading "Barker's Market" in faded, peeling letters.

The shop's interior was dimly lit, shelves lined with goods ranging from fresh produce to dusty jars of herbs.

It felt oddly peaceful, the kind of place locals frequented without a second thought. Behind the counter stood an older man, his silver hair cropped short, his face lined with age but his eyes sharp, assessing every detail of his shop with quiet precision.

I moved through the narrow aisles, my movements as silent as the shadows wrapping around me, taking in each row of goods until the faint tug of mana guided me further in. I let the threads lead me to the back, where the shelves grew more crowded and disorganized, holding a mix of supplies that seemed largely untouched.

Finally, I stopped before a shelf lined with jars of dried roots and an assortment of old, worn containers. The necklace pulsed faintly in my hand, the mana threads intensifying around this spot. I reached out, extending my senses as I examined the shelf closely, looking beyond the surface appearance. The mana resonance here was unmistakable—a subtle distortion in the space itself, like a hidden layer lying just beneath reality.

'I see.'

I studied the shelf, a mismatched collection of old magazines, journals, and books collecting dust in the dim corner of the shop. Most were faded relics from the past, their spines cracked and covers yellowed with age, untouched for what looked like years. But as I scanned over them, one magazine caught my eye—a women's magazine nestled between stacks of old almanacs and gardening manuals.

Unlike the others, this magazine had a faintly creased cover, its edges slightly worn, as if it had been handled recently. A thin layer of dust clung to the shelf and the other books, yet a subtle, almost invisible line of cleaner wood framed the spot where the magazine had rested, betraying recent movement. The page corners bore the faintest sign of oil from fingerprints, and the magazine was angled just slightly off-center, unlike its neighbors, suggesting someone had pulled it out, perhaps more than once, before carefully replacing it.

'Curious choice of reading material,' I thought, letting my eyes drift over the cover before reaching out to take it in hand.

As my fingers brushed the spine, a faint pulse of mana resonated from the spot, almost as if something within the magazine itself was charged. I kept my grip firm, allowing my senses to reach out as I carefully pulled the magazine from the shelf, watching for any fluctuation in the surrounding mana.

I thumbed through the pages, each turn of the glossy paper revealing nothing but fashion ads and tips on gardening—a sharp contrast to the inconspicuous aura it emitted. But as I reached the center fold, I sensed it—a thin, hidden strip of runic markings etched along the spine. It was nearly

invisible, the ancient symbols woven into the magazine's binding with delicate precision, marking this as more than just an ordinary item.

'A key disguised in plain sight,' I mused, tracing my finger along the subtle engraving, feeling the mana hum in response.

I concentrated, pushing a small amount of my mana along the markings. The runes glowed faintly, and a ripple passed through the air around me as if reality itself had shifted. The space behind the shelf wavered for a moment before peeling away, revealing a hidden doorway that had been cloaked beneath layers of concealment magic.

'The Void Clan certainly had their methods.'

The doorway led downward, its stone steps descending into the shadows. I placed the magazine back carefully, my gaze fixed on the dark path that awaited below. With a final glance around the quiet shop, I stepped forward, the shadows swallowing me as I crossed the threshold into the hidden depths below Barker's Market.

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As I stepped into the darkened passage, the air shifted, cool and heavy, wrapping around me like a second skin. The doorway behind me shimmered briefly, and I heard a low hum—the spell formation sealing itself once more, locking me into this hidden path. I glanced back, watching as the intricate web of mana threads layered over the entrance, twisting and merging until the way out vanished entirely.

The formation was seamless, beyond anything I'd expected. I activated my [Eyes], focusing intently, yet the mana threads remained elusive, slipping just beyond the limits of my perception.

The formation didn't just conceal—it erased, rendering the entrance indistinguishable from the stone wall around it. Even my heightened senses couldn't pierce through the barrier completely.

'Impressive,' I thought, letting my hand hover near the veil, feeling the faint trace of energy lingering there. The mana here was different, older, with a refinement that suggested it came from a source of higher rank or potency than what I could wield.

The spellcraft wasn't merely intricate; it was layered, built to conceal and repel even the keenest observer.

'Whoever crafted this formation didn't just want it hidden—they wanted it forgotten.'

The Void Clan's skill in weaving spells of concealment wasn't new to me, but this level of craftsmanship spoke volumes.

'Indeed. It is much stronger than the one that Zharokath was using.'

It was the work of someone who had perfected the art, using techniques far beyond my own current mastery. Every strand of mana held a precise purpose, each line drawn to repel, to conceal, to mislead.

I observed the way the threads intertwined, their seamless fusion indicative of mana manipulation on a level I'd only read about. A faint shimmer pulsed through the lines, a mark of mana embedded in the stone itself, as though the formation had become part of the tunnel's very structure.

The more I observed, the more I realized that this formation was not just advanced—it was ancient, bound by the kind of magic that survived the ages, unyielding to time and degradation.

'It makes sense why I can't just see through it just at the first glance.'

I noted, memorizing the pattern. The sheer complexity made it evident that the Void Clan had crafted this with a high-ranking intent—either an incredibly rare mana or a formation that scaled well beyond standard techniques.

'Though I can't study it right now, it will be a good future reference.'

Satisfied with my examination, I shifted my focus back to the path ahead.

'There you are.'

The tunnel wasn't as long as I'd expected. Just a few paces ahead, I spotted a small stone platform, illuminated faintly by a dim, ethereal glow.

The closer I drew, the more apparent it became: this was a focal point, the very heart of the concealment formation, carved with a purpose. Symbols etched into its surface pulsed faintly, reacting to my presence with a slow, rhythmic beat, like the pulse of a sleeping giant.

Reaching the platform, I pulled the necklace from my coat, its cool weight resting in my palm. The intricate design of the pendant matched the cavity in the platform exactly, down to the smallest detail.

I ran my thumb over its surface one last time, feeling the faint traces of mana thrumming beneath its surface, before carefully aligning it with the hollow.

With a steady hand, I placed the necklace into the cavity. As it settled into place, a faint hum echoed through the air, and the symbols on the platform flared to life, casting a soft, pale light that filled the tunnel. The platform's edges shimmered, the old mana swirling as it awakened, each line of the formation coming together in a harmonious glow.

I watched as the platform's light intensified, filling the room with a calm, resonant energy. The air around me thickened, charged with mana that felt ancient and potent, infused with a power that seemed to belong to another age entirely. The path ahead was opening, responding to the key now resting in place.

'Finally.'

I thought, the faint pulse of anticipation thrumming.

—SHINE!

A sudden, blinding light flared from the platform, flooding my vision and swallowing the dim tunnel in an instant.

Before I could react, a powerful force tugged at me, as though the very air had shifted to draw me in. The sensation was unmistakable—a warp gate activating, its pull wrapping around me, drawing me forward as space distorted, compressing reality into a single, pulsing heartbeat.

The platform, the tunnel, and even the air seemed to dissolve as I was pulled through the twisting fabric of space, weightless and suspended in a liminal state.

And then, as quickly as it began, the pull ceased. I felt my feet touch solid ground, and I opened my eyes.

Before me lay a vast, empty expanse. The air here was dense, thick with mana that seemed to float and swirl like mist. Faint glimmers of light traced through the space, illuminating fragments of jagged stone structures jutting from the ground like the bones of an ancient creature.

The sky—or whatever ceiling encompassed this place—was of a purple color, different from the blue sky of Earth or other places.

This place was different.

'Indeed...A whole different dimension.'

I kind of expected this, coming here from the start.

The dim light illuminated the expanse, casting a haunting glow over the scene. It wasn't the familiar warmth of sunlight nor the stark, cold light of a close star. Instead, the light seemed to seep in from somewhere far off, as if drawn from the remnants of distant, dying stars hanging faintly in the endless purple void above.

I looked up and saw them—vast celestial bodies drifting through the sky, their shapes twisted, fractured, hollowed out from ages of decay. Dead planets, or perhaps stars that had long burned out, lingered overhead like the ghosts of a ruined cosmos, floating in silent testament to whatever cataclysm had once ravaged this place. The entire sky seemed a graveyard of shattered worlds, suspended in endless stasis.

'A dimension outside of our own lost to time and destruction,' I noted, feeling the weight of the ancient mana clinging to the air. The ground beneath me was uneven and cracked, scattered with fragments of stone that jutted out like the remains of a long-lost civilization. The air hung heavy, carrying a strange stillness that felt too quiet as if the sound itself struggled to exist here.

Ruined structures rose around me, their jagged silhouettes casting angular shadows against the soft, eerie glow. These weren't merely remnants of buildings—they felt like the vestiges of an entire reality, left abandoned and forgotten.

I stepped forward, each footfall echoing softly against the stone, the sound swallowed almost instantly by the thick, dense atmosphere. Mana drifted lazily, swirling around in faint, luminous tendrils, clinging to the cracks and crevices as if the dimension itself held on to the last fragments of life that once thrived here.

'This place... holds the memory of its destruction,' I thought, my gaze tracing the remnants of crumbling towers and empty hallways. It was as if the dimension itself mourned, locked in a silent requiem.

Yet, amidst the silence, a steady pulse of energy reverberated through the air, a hum felt more in my bones than heard. The mana around me, that lingering, ancient essence, wasn't simply hanging in place—it was converging, drawn toward a single point in the distance. I could feel it, a gravitational pull of sorts, siphoning the remnants of this dimension's life force into something—or someone.

I turned my gaze in the direction of that pull, my body still cloaked in [Shadowborne], melting seamlessly into the darkness. The presence was unmistakable, the energy vast and patient, consuming all that remained of this place. I let my mind analyze the clues, piecing them together with what I knew from the game's lore and my own observations.

'Just as I predicted,' I mused. 'The Void Dragon... it died. Its death weakened the Void Clan, leaving them vulnerable, forced to retreat from the influence they once commanded.'

But Primordial Demons like the Void Dragon weren't creatures that simply ceased to exist. Their essence clung to reality, their power too potent to simply vanish. Instead, the Void Dragon had found refuge in this forsaken dimension, hiding within its shattered remains and beginning the slow, arduous process of rebirth. It was siphoning every last scrap of energy from this space, resurrecting itself from its own ashes, piece by piece.

'Three years,' I reminded myself, recalling the timeline from the game. Three years from now, it would emerge from this dimension in full force, unleashing its destruction upon the Federation in a catastrophic strike, the Void Clan reclaiming its lost glory through its resurgence.

But, was it really three years of energy absorption in this world as well? Or, how much of a strength the Void Dragon had recovered, at this point in time?

That was a question that I couldn't answer.

I began walking forward, each step silent as I moved deeper into the desolate realm, [Shadowborne] blending me into the void. My thoughts circled the questions I couldn't answer, calculations shifting in my mind like pieces on a chessboard.

The Void Dragon had been here, absorbing energy for an unknown stretch of time, and the game's timeline was only a faint guideline—a rough estimate in a world where changes could alter the very fabric of fate.

But three years for a rebirth in a game didn't mean the same here. For all I knew, the Void Dragon's energy could be exponentially closer to completion.

It could be halfway through or merely a fraction away from full power. The difference between encountering a weakened, recovering Void Dragon and one nearing rebirth was stark, but that risk was one I'd chosen to accept.

A dangerous gamble, one where the margin for error was narrow. Yet here I was, feeling the weight of my choices settle over me.

After all, there were no guarantees in a place like this. The Federation and the Void Clan might have been betting on the same three years, but the Void Dragon was not a creature bound by human logic or timelines. Its resurgence was more of an inevitability than a question of "if," and waiting was a luxury I couldn't afford.

The path opened ahead, widening into an immense cavern-like expanse. The pull of energy was stronger here, thickening the air to a near-stifling density. I took another step forward, sharpening my senses and letting my focus zero in on the source.

'Bring it on.'

Chapter 646 142.2 - Void Dragon

'Bring it on,' I thought, feeling the thrill of anticipation stir beneath the steady resolve. This was the moment I'd been preparing for, a confrontation years in the making.

From my spatial storage, I withdrew the pair of daggers Kieran had provided just today. The blades glinted dully in the faint light, their edges sharp enough to slice through steel, the perfect tools for a close-quarters encounter. I hadn't had the luxury of training with them yet—they were a last-minute

addition, an unexpected bonus—but that didn't matter. Their craftsmanship alone spoke of their potential. They'd find their purpose here, in the shadow of the Void Dragon's lair.

Next, I reached into the storage and pulled out a small vial containing a concoction that I concocted when I was with Maya just now: Void's Bane. A translucent, viscous liquid swirled within, faint wisps of mana coiling up and dispersing in the dense air. I carefully unscrewed the vial and let a single drop trickle onto each dagger. The blades' enchantments responded immediately, recognizing the concoction as poison. The metal hummed softly, absorbing the liquid, the edges of the daggers taking on a faint, dark sheen as Void's Bane melded into their structure.

'Well, just to make sure they're fully prepped,' I mused as I returned the daggers to my storage. But the preparation wasn't over yet.

From my storage, I retrieved several more weapons—arrows crafted for precision and speed, along with additional daggers meant for quick strikes. I carefully applied drops of Void's Bane to each of them, watching as the enchantments recognized the potent concoction, the blades, and arrowheads taking on that same dark sheen. And finally, one final thing was left.

—Celestalith.

Coating Celestalith was a completely different matter, as the weapon would change its form all the time. And, since the weapon would change its form, naturally the parts that would be coated would also lose their form. Essentially that was one of Celestalith's weaknesses. I could coat the dagger form, but then I would be left stuck with a single form of weapon itself, limiting myself too much.

But using external weapons like these, this way, I'd have a range of options in combat, each weapon capable of carrying the poison deep into the Void Dragon's essence, weakening it with every strike.

When every weapon was treated, I took a step back, satisfied with the setup, and stood up to drink from a set of small potions. These weren't the heavy hitters—no dangerous side effects, no harsh crashes afterward—just subtle boosters that would enhance my stats by five percent for the next hour. As the effects settled in, I felt a slight surge in my body—a faint but noticeable increase in strength and awareness. Everything was ready, each detail was accounted for. With every preparation complete, I took a final inventory of myself. My mana reserves were nearly full, boosted by the ambient energy in this dimension. For some reason, the mana here felt different—denser, richer, as though each breath I took brought a purer form of energy into my body. It was as if this dimension, once rich with life, still carried remnants of that vitality, enhancing my senses and focus.

But I didn't linger on the sensation. This wasn't the time to analyze the quality of the mana here. I had only one purpose, and every second counted.

I let [Shadowborne] settle around me, merging with the dim, shadowed environment as I moved silently forward. The pull of the Void Dragon's presence grew stronger, thickening the air with an oppressive weight that seemed to seep into every crack and crevice of this place. Each step brought me closer, and the aura of raw, primal energy intensified, filling the cavern with an ancient, slumbering power.

I moved steadily, feeling the faint pulse of the Void Dragon's essence grow sharper. The quiet hum in the air shifted, vibrating at a frequency I could almost feel in my bones. This was no ordinary creature—Primordial Demons like the Void Dragon were forces of nature and even weakened, its essence was formidable.

As I moved deeper into the cavern, the eerie stillness around me became all the more pronounced. Not a single sign of life stirred in this place—not even the faintest trace of movement. It was as if every living thing that had once existed here had been drained, leaving nothing but emptiness and silence.

Finally, I arrived at my destination, stepping into a vast, circular expanse. The area was unsettling in its design: the ground, a deep purplish hue, seemed to pulse beneath my feet like veins drawing mana from some hidden source. Scattered across the floor were countless bones, remnants of past lives long since expired, their twisted forms rising among fractured stone structures that jutted from the ground like forgotten monuments. The air itself felt heavier, the ancient mana pressing down like an invisible weight.

And in the center of it all stood a massive egg. It loomed, dark and foreboding, its surface glossy and untouched, showing no signs of wear or even the slightest hint of cracking. It was easily several times my height, exuding an aura of latent energy—a formidable presence wrapped in silence.

I felt a pang of pity as I studied it. Without any cracks or movement, there was no way to gauge the state of the Void Dragon within. Approaching it would risk triggering a reaction, and studying it up close was out of the question without exposing myself.

"This is going to be bothersome."

No sense in waiting any longer. I raised Celestalith, the weapon shifting seamlessly in my grip until it took on the sleek, curved form of a bow. With practiced precision, I notched an arrow, letting my mana flow into it, sharpening its potency. I took aim, focusing on the egg's center, then released.

BOOM! The arrow shot through the dim light, striking the egg with a resonant impact, and then the arrow exploded with a blue fire of Lunar Mana. But as the smoke cleared, the scene remained unnervingly calm. There was no reaction from within, no sound, no stirring in the dense mana around me. 'Indeed. No reaction.'

And the egg was just not affected either, completely unbothered by the strike. I watched the egg intently, as it remained completely unscathed, untouched by the explosion of Lunar Mana. My arrow had been powerful enough to shatter most defenses, yet the egg's surface hadn't even been scratched. Its defenses weren't just resilient—they were sustained, bolstered by the very energy flowing through this dimension.

My eyes traced the thick, pulsing veins running along the ground, feeding directly into the egg's base, channeling mana from the surroundings to protect it. If I wanted to weaken the egg, I'd have to disrupt its supply.

With a sigh, I notched another arrow, aiming it toward one of the thicker veins winding its way across the cavern floor. I poured energy into the arrow, charging it with mana until it vibrated with a fierce intensity, then released it.

The arrow struck the vein with a resounding boom, an eruption of energy tearing through the pulsing line. This time, the reaction was violent, as the mana in the vein surged, flaring up before fading into a dim, lifeless gray. The force of the explosion shook the space around me, the ground quaking as the energy supply to that section was abruptly severed.

'It is working indeed. Now the rest.'

I quickly moved, setting my sights on the remaining veins. BOOM! One by one, I released a volley of arrows, each hit accompanied by another fierce eruption of mana as the veins lost their color, the once-pulsing lines growing dark and still. BOOM!

The cavern shuddered with each impact, and the energy in the room shifted, growing unstable as the protective flow to the egg diminished with each severed vein.

With each strike, I could feel the defenses weakening, the energy around the egg beginning to thin. The structure wasn't impervious—it relied on this network, and I was tearing that network apart piece by piece.

The energy in the space had become chaotic, mana filling the air like a raging storm. The veins, severed from their purpose, spilled their power into the open, saturating the cavern with raw, unfocused energy. It crackled around me, creating an almost suffocating density in the air, but I pushed forward, already prepared for this kind of backlash.

As I drew back my bow, aiming at the fifth vein, a sudden tremor coursed through the ground. The entire cavern shook, debris rattling loose from the fractured stone structures around me. I shifted my gaze to the egg—it was trembling, vibrating under the pressure of the condensed mana within it. Hairline cracks had begun to form on its surface, glowing faintly as the energy within intensified, pulsing like a heartbeat.

I could feel it—an immense surge of mana accumulating inside, a force so dense and overwhelming that even from a distance, its presence bore down on me. This was it; the Void Dragon's awakening.

"Time to move."

Without hesitation, I took cover behind one of the larger stone structures, crouching low as I let the shadows fold around me, fortifying myself with [Shadowborne]. I braced for what was coming, knowing that this was only the beginning.

The egg's cracks widened, light spilling from the fractures as mana surged and coiled within. The entire cavern pulsed, the immense energy ready to erupt as the creature within stirred to life.

CRACK! And with a loud voice, the egg cracked. BOOM! Followed by an explosion. "SCREEEEECH!" And then, followed by a screech of a monster. Indeed, the fight was about to start.

Chapter 647 142.3 - Void Dragon

"SCREEEEECH!" The dragon's screech tore through the cavern, a sound so piercing it rattled my bones and forced me to brace myself. In that instant, I activated [Shadowborne]'s defensive form, [Shadow Embrace], and felt the comforting shroud of shadows coil around me, forming a protective layer that absorbed some of the incoming force. The explosion's shockwave hit me, fierce and unyielding, pushing against my body like a physical wall.

I gritted my teeth as the pressure settled on me—a crushing, suffocating weight, unlike anything I'd ever felt. Every inch of the air was saturated with the Void Dragon's raw, ancient mana, filling the cavern with an almost tangible presence. It was as if the very essence of the Void itself had come

alive, pressing down on me with a relentless force that seeped through my defenses and settled heavily in my chest.

"SCREEEEECH!"

The sound was deafening, reverberating through every corner of the cavern, threatening to shake it apart. My ears rang, my vision swam, and I fought to maintain my focus, knowing that this was only the beginning.

And then, as the dust settled and my senses adjusted, I saw it.

The Void Dragon.

The creature before me was a monstrous sight, its scales dark as the deepest night, seeming to absorb every trace of light in the room. Veins of void energy pulsed along its massive body, glowing with an eerie, purplish hue that contrasted sharply against its pitch-black form. Its eyes, glowing like twin void stars, fixed on me with an intelligence that sent a chill down my spine. The sheer size of it was indeed huge; each breath it took caused the ground beneath my feet to tremble, the dense mana radiating from it distorting the air around it.

The dragon's wings unfurled, vast, and shadowy, each membrane stretching like a dark curtain that seemed to blend seamlessly with the surrounding shadows. The tendrils of void energy danced around its body, giving it an almost ethereal, otherworldly quality. It was both terrifying and mesmerizing—a primordial force given form, ancient and unyielding.

I couldn't afford to be distracted.

Taking a steadying breath, I tightened my grip on Celestalith, feeling the familiar hum of mana as it responded to my intent. My instincts screamed at me to retreat, to find cover, but I knew there would be no running from this. This was a battle where every moment counted, and I couldn't waste a single one.

The Void Dragon tilted its massive head, looking around to sense the presence of the mere intruder that dared to disturb its slumber. As I steadied myself, peering through the haze of mana and dust, I took in the Void Dragon's form. The sheer power emanating from it was staggering, but there was something... incomplete about it. Comparing it to the fully realized monster from the game, I noted the differences. This version was smaller, lacking the complete majesty and terror of its future self. Its dark, shimmering scales, though formidable, had patches where they appeared thinner, as if still

developing. The massive tail, which in the game had been an impenetrable weapon, looked a touch shorter, less armored.

The most noticeable difference, however, was its wings. A mature Void Dragon should have two pairs, each one casting vast shadows capable of blotting out the sun. But here, only one pair was fully formed, while the second set barely extended past its back, stunted and skeletal, pulsing with incomplete veins of void energy. The dragon's body was still growing, still in the midst of its rebirth—a sign that my gamble had worked, at least partially.

But if the Void Dragon was aware of this, it wasn't happy about it.

"SCREEEEECH!"

Another piercing roar ripped through the cavern as it flailed, its wings smashing into nearby rock formations and sending boulders crashing to the ground. The dragon's eyes blazed, sweeping the cavern with furious intensity, searching for the intruder who had dared interrupt its slumber. Veins of void energy pulsed along its form, glowing angrily as if sensing its incomplete state and raging against it.

Each strike of its claws against the stone was thunderous, and I could feel the fury radiating from it. Shadows pooled at its feet, surging with each frustrated movement as the dragon's half-awakened strength struggled to stabilize.

I took a slow, measured breath, keeping my form concealed in the shadows, my grip tight on Celestialith.

'No need to waste any more time.'

The more the dragon went berserk, the more dangerous it would be for me, as there is a chance that it can find my presence, or discover me. 'I shouldn't rely on Shadowborne, as if it is omnipotent.'

That was why, it was the time to act. Without hesitation, I drew Celestialith, shifting it smoothly into its rifle form. The weapon hummed in my grip, resonating with my mana as I focused my aim on the Void Dragon's head, targeting its blazing, furious eyes. I poured compressed energy into each shot, feeling the familiar surge as the rifle prepared to unleash its devastating force.

-PIU! PIU! PIU!-

Three bullets shot from the rifle in quick succession, streaking toward the dragon's head with deadly precision. Each shot left a faint green trail in its wake, Celestalith's unique ability marking the path with ethereal tendrils that guided my vision to the target. I could see the trajectory clearly, the mana-infused bullets zeroing in on their mark.

The Void Dragon's eyes flared as the first shot hit, exploding in a burst of energy that forced it to reel back. The second and third bullets followed, striking just above its eyes and sending tendrils of green energy cascading down its face. "SCREEEEECH!" The impact forced the dragon to halt, its head snapping back as it let out a furious roar, shaking the very foundation of the cavern.

But I had only seconds before it would find me.

The Void Dragon's enraged gaze turned sharply in my direction, its blazing eyes narrowing on my location. Its instincts were sharper than I had expected; it sensed my presence instantly, its void energy swirling as it prepared to retaliate. Without a moment's hesitation, it raised one massive claw and slammed it down toward the spot where I stood, the sheer force sending cracks radiating across the ground.

WARP! I activated [Shadow Leap] just in time, vanishing into the shadows and reappearing several meters away. The dragon's claw struck the stone with a thunderous impact, shattering the ground beneath it and sending debris flying in every direction. Dust and fractured stone filled the air, obscuring its vision as I moved further back into the shadows.

The Void Dragon let out another screech, its frustration evident as it lashed out blindly, the half-formed wings on its back twitching with a rage that made the air vibrate. It twisted its head, trying to pinpoint my new location, but I remained hidden, silent in the shadows as it scanned the cavern, its every movement tinged with a primal fury.

Knowing my element of surprise was gone, I decided to press the advantage while it was disoriented. I shifted Celestalith back to its rifle form, preparing for another round of shots. 'Analyze.'

The fight had begun, and I didn't have much time to think. 'The bullets don't have much effect. As expected. I either need to go into close combat range, or I need to use Blasting Arrows.'

The dragon's incomplete state made it less formidable, but each second it remained active allowed it to stabilize, to draw strength from the ambient void energy.

'I need to be fast.'

I took a steadying breath, activating [Eyes of Hourglass]. Immediately, time seemed to slow, the rush of mana surging into my eyes sharpening my senses to a razor's edge. The Void Dragon's movements, once a flurry of terrifying speed, now appeared almost sluggish as my perception accelerated. My brain worked at a rapid pace, analyzing every detail as my vision began to pierce beneath the dragon's thick, pulsing hide.

'What? Just what is this?' But, beneath its dark scales, a complex network of mana pathways glowed faintly, each line of energy coiling and twisting through its colossal form like rivers of power. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen—an intricate web of void energy, far denser and more complex than any creature I'd encountered. Every line was alive with mana, fueling the dragon's strength.

My eyes darted across the dragon's form, tracing the intricate patterns, but even with my heightened perception, I struggled to pinpoint any weak spots. The sheer complexity of its pathways was overwhelming; its mana structure was layered, dense, and woven in such a way that it defied any quick analysis. Weak points were there, but hidden, each one embedded deep within the framework of its body. I only had seconds to make sense of it.

'Focus,' I told myself, pushing through the disorienting rush of information. My vision sharpened further as I studied the lines of energy with intensity, zeroing in on the faint disruptions in the flow.

'This.....'

Finally, I managed to mark five potential weak points—areas where the mana seemed less stable, where the flow was disrupted for the briefest of moments before stabilizing again. I burned their positions into my memory, mapping them out in my head.

'It is coming.'

The Dragon also noticed my new location, as I could sense its eyes and body starting to move. I tightened my grip on Celestalith and took aim, channeling my mana into the rifle as I locked onto the first weak point. Even with my slowed perception, each shot needed to be precise, hitting those exact marks to verify if they were indeed vulnerabilities.

-PIU! PIU! PIU!-

The bullets tore through the air, each one streaking toward its target, striking the dragon's form with pinpoint accuracy. The impacts resonated against its hide, faint pulses of green energy signaling where each shot had hit. The dragon roared in response, the vibrations shaking the very ground beneath me. SWIRL!

But that wasn't enough as instantly, just as the green energy pulsed against the dragon's hide from my shots, I sensed a sudden shift in its mana. The air around it thickened, condensing rapidly into a point just above its head. My eyes widened as I realized what was coming—a beam of condensed void energy, aimed directly at me.

Even in slow motion, the beam surged with terrifying speed, a searing streak of darkness that seemed to slice through space itself. I had only a fraction of a second to react, and instinct took over.

I activated [Shadow Leap], vanishing into the shadows just as the beam tore through the spot I had occupied. The air sizzled, the edges of the cavern stone melting under the sheer force of the blast as it continued past, carving a searing line into the wall behind me. The explosive force from the impact rocked the cavern, sending cracks spidering across the walls.

I reappeared on the opposite side of the room, catching my breath as I steadied myself. I could feel the residual heat of the beam, even from a distance, and a shiver ran through me at the near miss.

"SCREEEEECH!"

The Void Dragon's furious screech reverberated through the cavern, its blazing eyes snapping toward my new position. The beast twisted, clearly enraged by yet another missed strike. And then its eyes shone brightly for a split second, and then....

I felt something inside me, disappearing. 'Shadowborne.'

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A cold realization washed over me as I felt the familiar presence of [Shadowborne] vanish from within. It was simply... gone as if it had been erased from my very being. My instinctual reliance on the shadows, my ability to vanish and strike from concealed positions—all of it had been stripped away.

This was one of the Void Dragon's abilities, a terrifying attribute of void energy itself. It could erase the very essence of things, nullifying powers it found troublesome, leaving opponents vulnerable. The dragon had sensed [Shadowborne] as my most elusive strength, the one that had frustrated it again and again and had chosen to erase it entirely.

I clenched my jaw, my mind racing to adjust. This was exactly why I had restrained my attack, focusing first on marking the dragon's weak points. If I had revealed my full strength too soon—if my offensive abilities had been nullified instead—I would have been left defenseless against this creature.

'This is the power of the Void Dragon,' I thought, feeling the weight of the situation settle around me. No more escaping into shadows, no more slipping away at the last second. It was now a battle in the open.

'Heh....That is why, you Primal dogs are weak.....You can't think.'

It was really ironic that one of the strongest beings in this world would make such a mistake. 'Now move.'

I channeled my mana into my legs, using the [Cyclone Stance]'s footwork. SWOOSH! Feeling mana surge through my legs, I blasted forward, crossing the cavern with blinding speed. The Void Dragon's blazing eyes locked onto me as I closed the distance, and with a thunderous roar, it surged forward to meet my advance. SWOOSH! Its massive, clawed foot came crashing down, a strike that would have crushed me if I hadn't twisted at the last second, narrowly slipping past its lethal reach.

CRASH!

The force of its swipe left a gust of wind in its wake, nearly throwing me off balance. But I maintained my momentum, now only meters from the beast, and reached into my pouch, fingers wrapping around the throwing daggers Kieran had provided me. Each blade was crafted with perfect weight and balance, designed for swift, accurate throws—ideal for the kind of precision strikes I needed now.

My gaze locked onto the weak points I had marked earlier, the faint green tendrils from Celestalith's energy still lingering, guiding my aim like threads of fate.

'Perfect.'

With a flick of my wrist, I released the first dagger, watching as it soared through the air, aiming for the dragon's exposed neck where the scales were thinnest. The blade struck true, embedding itself into the weak point. I didn't waste time; in quick succession, I threw the remaining daggers, each one slicing through the air toward the marked weak points along its body.

-THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!-

Each dagger found its target. Yet, the dragon wasn't idle.

With a furious roar, it swung its other massive claw toward me, a strike so powerful that the very air seemed to compress around it. BOOM!

I leaped back, aiming to evade, but the shockwave from the force of the swing caught me, slamming into my body like a hammer. Pain erupted along my side as I was thrown backward, crashing into the hard stone floor with a force that rattled my bones.

I grimaced, clutching my side as I rose to my feet, feeling the sting of the injury. The dragon's raw strength was overwhelming, and even an indirect hit left its mark.

'The daggers.'

But then I had finally, allowed myself to take a look at the body of the monster itself. 'Tch.'

I gritted my teeth, feeling the sting of disappointment as I took in the sight of the Void Dragon. The daggers I had thrown, despite striking the marked weak points, hadn't embedded deeply enough. My strength alone wasn't sufficient to pierce through the creature's dense hide completely. The Void Dragon's natural armor was formidable, each scale layered with hardened mana that resisted my attacks as if mocking my attempts.

SWOOSH! But before I could adjust my strategy, the dragon let out a furious, guttural roar, its massive body coiling as it prepared to launch forward. I barely had a second to brace myself as it surged toward me, jaws wide open, razor-sharp teeth gleaming in the dim light. RUMBLE!

The cavern trembled under the force of its charge, and I realized I wouldn't be able to evade fully.

BITE! I moved as fast as I could, ducking and twisting, but the Void Dragon was relentless, its jaws closing in on me with terrifying speed. SLASH!

I felt the edge of its teeth graze my side, sharp as blades, tearing through my armor and scraping against my skin. The pain flared as blood trickled down, but I managed to shove my foot against its maw, pushing myself free with a fierce kick.

As I leaped back, I focused, calling the daggers back to me. In midair, they shifted, slicing through the shadows as they flew back to my side. I caught my breath as I landed, but there was no time to dwell on the pain. The Void Dragon was still on the offensive, its eyes blazing as it readied itself for another attack.

Without hesitation, I transformed Celestalith into its bow form, drawing the string and infusing a cluster of arrows with highly concentrated mana. The weapon hummed, green tendrils flickering along the arrows as I released them with precision, each one aimed directly at the dragon's eyes.

-THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!-

The arrows shot forward, guided by the green energy of Celestalith. They struck the dragon's eyes with perfect accuracy, but to my shock, there was no explosion. The arrows seemed to vanish upon impact, their energy dispersing into nothingness as if they'd been swallowed whole.

'Void nullification... again.'

The dragon's void energy had canceled out my attack, erasing the mana as if the arrows had never existed. Frustration coursed through me as I realized that, even with Celestalith's enhancements, I was still only scratching the surface of the Void Dragon's defenses.

"SCREEEEECH!"

The Void Dragon let out another enraged scream, the sound vibrating through the air as it gathered energy in its maw. Void energy began to condense, swirling into a dense, pulsing mass that crackled with dark intensity. The air around it grew cold and oppressive as the dragon prepared to unleash a ranged attack, channeling the beam toward me with deadly intent.

'This....'

With Shadow Leap gone, I did not have any other way to defend myself aside from evading the strike. 'Adapt!'

And, I did so. I steadied myself, watching the Void Dragon's eyes and the gathering void energy in its maw. In that instant, I realized its intent—it wasn't targeting me directly, but rather the path I'd instinctively choose to evade. The beast's instincts were sharp, honed by a primal intuition that read my movements as if it knew my intentions. This could be a mindless creature, but it was the epitome of a Hunter. A dragon. 'So, that's what you're doing...'

But if I could read it reading me, I could turn this against it.

As the beam erupted from its maw, searing toward the side I would normally choose for escape, I pivoted, pushing myself to the opposite side at the last second. WROOM! The beam narrowly missed me, scorching the ground where I'd been standing and leaving an ashen trail across the cavern. I rolled with the momentum, using the evasion to position myself better as I rose to my feet.

This was my window, however small.

Without hesitation, I activated [Eyes of Hourglass], mana flooding into my eyes as the world slowed to a crawl. Every detail of the Void Dragon's form sharpened in my vision, the lines of mana pulsing through its body, each weak point illuminated like a faint constellation. I could see its focus shift, the dragon's gaze locked onto me with a burning rage, but I knew it was drawn primarily to protect its most vulnerable spots—its eyes.

With this in mind, I pulled back the bowstring, channeling mana into two arrows and releasing them with precision aimed straight at its eyes. They shot through the air, green tendrils trailing as they flew. The dragon's attention snapped toward the incoming arrows, instinctively moving to counter them, its gaze locked on the threat.

But I was already moving.

I shifted my aim, sending three more arrows toward the other weak points I'd marked earlier along its neck and joints. If my theory was correct, the dragon would prioritize its eyes, ignoring the other arrows. And if those landed, they might destabilize its defenses enough for me to strike deeper.

The first two arrows hit their mark, the Void Dragon's eyes flashing with void energy as it nullified them, dispersing their power into nothingness.

But as it focused on those, the second volley found their targets unimpeded.

-THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!-

The arrows embedded in the weak points along its body, each impact resonating with a deep, pulsing glow.

And then followed by a BOOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Sounds of explosion. The explosions rippled through the Void Dragon's body, each impact resonating with a deep, pulsing blue glow before erupting into violent bursts. My mana had done its job, destabilizing the weak points I'd marked, and the force of the blasts left the creature writhing in agony. The dragon's furious scream echoed through the cavern, its voice thick with rage and pain.

In retaliation, the beast raised its massive claws, void energy swirling around them as it condensed into two enormous, shadowy spears. The dragon's eyes flashed with deadly intent as it lifted the spears high, gathering power with every second before slamming them down toward the ground with devastating force.

-THOOM!-

The spears struck the earth, unleashing a massive shockwave that tore through the cavern, sending cracks racing along the stone floor and walls. The sheer power of the impact vibrated through me, the ground beneath my feet heaving as the wave of energy barreled forward.

But instead of fear, a smirk tugged at my lips. The pain and damage from the explosions had disrupted the dragon's defenses, leaving the weakened areas exposed. This was my chance.

With quick precision, I pulled out the daggers Kieran had given me, feeling their familiar weight in my hands. As the dragon's immense body began to descend, momentarily vulnerable from the agony that wracked it, I flicked my wrists, sending the daggers flying toward the exposed points with lethal accuracy.

SWOOSH! SWOOSH! Each blade sliced through the air, guided by the green tendrils still lingering from my previous attacks, the ethereal lines leading them toward their targets.

But before the daggers found their marks, the shockwave from the dragon's impact reached me, slamming into me with crushing force. BOOM! I staggered, the blast driving me back, my body jarred from the impact...

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The shockwave blasted toward me, but just as it closed in, I activated [Aegis Guard] from the [Storm Stance], channeling energy around my body in a protective layer. In the same instant, I shifted Celestalith into its [Martial Artist] form, feeling the weapon respond and morph into a shield that expanded before me, absorbing part of the impact.

-BOOM!-

Despite the layered defenses, the sheer force of the dragon's attack overwhelmed me, sending me hurtling backward. I flew through the air, slamming into the cavern wall with a bone-jarring impact. Pain exploded through my body, my vision blurring as I felt the blow reverberate deep, churning my insides. I tasted the metallic tang of blood as it filled my mouth, spilling over my lips with a violent cough.

"Cough...." For a moment, the world was a blur of pain and sound. My body felt battered, every muscle screaming from the impact. But I forced myself to focus, my eyes locking onto the Void Dragon. 'Heh...' The daggers I'd thrown before the blast had found their mark; were embedded deep in the weakened points, each one pulsing with mana that disrupted the flow of void energy within the creature.

"SCREEECH!"

The dragon's agonized scream echoed through the cavern, a piercing sound filled with fury and desperation. Its massive form shuddered, scales twitching erratically as if caught in the throes of a berserk state. The void energy within it, once an unstoppable force, was unraveling, disrupted by the effects of my attacks and the Void's Bane that laced the daggers.

Through my blurred vision and battered body, I activated my [Eyes], focusing on the chaos within the creature's mana pathways. The once-stable flow of energy inside the dragon was spiraling out of control, twisting and convulsing, unable to maintain its usual coherence. The Void's Bane had taken root, spreading through its veins like poison, breaking down its defenses from the inside out.

I smirked, feeling a grim satisfaction despite the pain. Everything was finally coming together.

Each dagger pulsed within the beast, radiating the toxic mana of the Void's Bane, amplifying the disruptions and forcing the void energy to go berserk. The dragon's eyes rolled with agony, its body convulsing as it struggled to maintain its form. Veins of energy bulged beneath its scales, glowing faintly as the poison wreaked havoc within its system.

The Void Dragon's attacks grew frantic, clawing at the ground and slamming its tail against the stone in a frenzied attempt to shake off the growing pain. But the damage was done. "Hehe.....Now, here I come." I reached into my spatial storage, fingers brushing against the cool, smooth surface of the [Overdriving Pill]. Without hesitation, I popped the pill into my mouth, feeling its potent contents dissolve and flood my system. Almost instantly, a surge of raw energy coursed through me, mana converging around my body like a pulsing aura. My muscles tightened, revitalized by the intense boost. The injuries I'd sustained still throbbed beneath the surface, but the pain dulled, becoming more bearable, at least for now.

The effects were undeniable: a staggering 35% increase in my stats for the next three minutes. I felt my senses heighten, my reaction time sharpening, and my strength returning in full force.

The Void Dragon seemed to sense the shift in my aura, its vertical slits narrowing, glowing with a fierce yellow intensity. "ROAAAAR!"

The creature's body convulsed as it struggled to control the berserk void energy wreaking havoc within it, pain and fury blazing in its gaze. Driven by rage, the dragon roared, shaking the cavern as it charged toward me with terrifying speed.

SWOOSH! But this time, I was ready.

With the heightened agility granted by the pill, I sidestepped its attack, feeling the rush of air as its claws scraped past me, narrowly missing. The world around me felt slower, my movements sharper, more precise. As the dragon's claws dug into the ground, I twisted out of its reach, maneuvering around its massive form with newfound ease.

The Void Dragon lashed out again, its strikes wild and furious, but I weaved between its attacks, faster than it could track. Each motion felt fluid, and controlled—no longer a desperate attempt to survive but a calculated assault.

SWOOSH! The beast's pain and anger grew with each missed strike, and I could see its movements becoming more reckless. 'You are in pain.'

And when a beast is in pain, it becomes erratic. That is the basic rule.

SWOOSH! The Void Dragon raised its colossal body, channeling the ambient mana that filled the cavern. The void energy in the atmosphere, unleashed from its own disrupted pathways, began to converge, swirling around it like a vortex of dark power. Its eyes glowed with renewed intensity, and its form seemed to blur, growing faster, more dangerous.

In one of its massive claws, the dragon summoned a spear of condensed mana, dark and pulsating with void energy. With a fierce glare, it swung the spear toward me, a powerful arc of energy trailing behind it. But this time, I didn't just evade.

I reached into my spatial storage, retrieving the daggers Kieran had provided, each one coated in Void's Bane. The toxic mana shimmered along their edges, ready to slice through the dragon's defenses with deadly precision.

SWOOSH! As the dragon's spear sliced toward me, I leaped into the air, twisting just out of its reach. The force of the swing sent a gust of wind rushing past, but I was already moving. HOWL! While airborne, I cast [Grapple], sending a thread of mana latching onto the dragon's rough hide. With a sharp pull, I changed my trajectory mid-air, shooting toward the dragon's exposed underbelly.

In the blink of an eye, I was face-to-face with the vulnerable area I'd been aiming for.

Without hesitation, I drove the daggers into its flesh, both blades piercing through its thick hide with the added potency of Void's Bane. The poison acted swiftly, spreading through the dragon's veins, amplifying the disruption in its energy flow and pushing the creature's berserk state even further.

The dragon let out a bone-rattling roar, its body convulsing as pain surged through it. The void energy around it flickered wildly, destabilized by the concentrated poison of the daggers.

Gripping the hilts, I twisted the blades deeper, feeling the dragon's blood pulse against the metal as its body shuddered. Its defenses were breaking down, its energy spiraling out of control as Void's Bane continued to eat away at it from within.

"RRRRROOOOOOAAAAAR!" But, that wasn't the end. A dragon was a dragon after all. The Void Dragon's furious roar reverberated through the cavern as it smashed its tail into the ground with bone-shaking force. The impact sent tremors racing across the floor, throwing me off balance for a split second—just long enough for the dragon to take advantage.

Its massive tail whipped around in an arc, aiming straight for me. I reacted instantly, casting [Grapple] to hoist myself out of reach. But just as the mana thread extended, it vanished—nullified by the dragon's ability to disrupt spells.

TAK! Before I could adjust, the tail struck me with crushing force, sending me hurtling across the cavern and slamming into the wall. The impact churned my insides, and I felt another mouthful of blood rise as I hit the ground.

'Can't waste any time. Wake up.'

Ignoring the pain, I forced myself to my feet. I didn't have the luxury of recovery; the three-minute window from the Overdriving Pill was quickly ticking down. My options were narrowing with each second.

Since [Grapple] was no longer an option, I channeled the remaining mana into my legs, amplifying my speed and power. SWOOSH! CRACK! With a burst of energy, I launched myself toward the dragon once again, weaving through its onslaught. The dragon's spear came down in a deadly vertical arc, but I sidestepped at the last moment, feeling the rush of void energy as it struck the ground beside me.

It lashed out with its claws next, but I ducked beneath the swipe, narrowly evading the jagged talons that sought to tear me apart. Then came the tail once more, sweeping through the air with deadly intent, but I managed to leap over it, my heightened reflexes keeping me just ahead of each strike.

And there it was—the opening I needed.

With a final burst of speed, I closed in on the dragon's belly, pulling another pair of daggers from my spatial bracelet. The beast's void energy flickered wildly, struggling to stabilize, but its massive form was still formidable. I drove both daggers into its exposed underbelly, feeling the resistance as they sank deep, their blades infused with Void's Bane.

But this time, I didn't linger.

Sensing the dragon's impending counterattack, I immediately released the daggers, abandoning them as I pushed off from its body, creating as much distance as I could. The dragon roared in agony, its eyes blazing with a renewed fury as the poison took hold, further destabilizing its energy.

"ROOOAR!"

And then it finally used one thing that it had not been using. Its wings. The Void Dragon, in a final attempt to escape its torment, unfurled its wings, the dark, shadowy membranes stretching wide. With a powerful beat, it tried to lift itself from the ground, desperate to take to the air and escape the poison ravaging its system.

But I wasn't about to let it.

"YOU ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE!"

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But I wasn't about to let it.

"YOU ARE NOT GOING ANYWHERE!" –Umbralith.

I shifted Celestalith into its purple form, [Umbralith]. The weapon thrummed with power, responding instantly to my intent. I focused on the dragon, channeling mana into Umbralith's unique ability.

In an instant, gravity around the Void Dragon doubled, forcing it back toward the ground just as it started to lift. Its massive wings strained, and the beast roared in defiance, fighting against the force.

But I wasn't done.

With a surge of energy, I increased the gravity further, the force quadrupling around the dragon's struggling form. It thrashed, its wings beating furiously, void energy flaring as it tried to counter the overwhelming pressure. But I pushed harder, the gravity intensifying to eightfold.

The Void Dragon screeched, its body shaking violently as it struggled to remain airborne. The cavern itself seemed to tremble under the immense gravitational force, cracks spidering along the ground beneath the dragon's massive claws.

"Fall!" I roared, pouring every last ounce of mana into the weapon. The gravity spiked to sixteenfold, an insurmountable weight pressing down on the dragon's form. Its wings buckled, unable to withstand the pressure, and with one final scream, the creature plummeted to the ground, crashing into the stone floor with a thunderous impact.

BOOM!

It was all thanks to the fact that my stats were increased further by %35. Just as I held the Void Dragon pinned under the crushing force of [Umbralith], I felt the gravitational field dissipate abruptly. –Null.

The dragon's eyes glinted with cunning as it writhed, free from the field's crushing grip. The nullification cooldown had ended, allowing the creature to dispel my last tactic. It rose slowly, void energy flickering weakly along its scales, but the battle was far from over.

But this was all the time I needed.

Without hesitation, I shifted Celestalith into its crimson form, dual daggers that glowed a deep, bloody red. As they materialized in my hands, a surge of raw power washed over me, the edges of my vision tinged crimson. The injuries I'd sustained pulsed with energy, amplifying my strength through the weapon's unique bond—the more blood spilled, the stronger I became. The pain, now less a hindrance and more a source of power, coursed through me like fuel.

I reached into my spatial storage, pulling out the Void's Bane concoction. With a swift flick of my wrist, I dripped the toxic liquid onto the daggers' blades, watching as the crimson metal absorbed the poison, veins of dark energy pulsing along their edges. I tossed the empty vial aside, gripping the daggers tightly as they thrummed in my hands, alive with power and purpose.

"Here I come." The Void Dragon's gaze sharpened as it sensed the threat, but it was too late. SWOOSH! With a final, steadying breath, I braced myself and dashed forward, the crimson-tinted world narrowing to a single point of focus: the dragon's weakened, pulsing form.

Each step brought me closer, my body moving fluidly despite the bruises and gashes. The power of Celestalith's crimson form pushed me past my limits.

The Void Dragon lashed out, its claws raking through the air, but I ducked and sidestepped, closing the gap with lethal intent.

'Slow.'

But it was slow. Just slow. –SWOOSH!

The Void Dragon swung its massive claw toward me, but I slipped past it effortlessly, my body a blur as I blasted forward. I saw the panic flicker in the dragon's eyes as it leaped back, desperate to avoid the inevitable. Its wings began to beat frantically, each powerful stroke lifting it off the ground.

But just as it started to rise, the dragon let out an agonized scream, its wings seizing mid-motion. The once-mighty creature faltered, its wings stiffening as the void energy flickered erratically along its form. I allowed a grim smile to spread across my face, knowing exactly what was happening.

Void's Bane had taken root in one of the most critical pathways I had targeted earlier. The nerves running through that specific weak point connected directly to the muscles that controlled its wings. With the poison spreading through those delicate, essential channels, the dragon's wings were rendered useless, paralyzed by the toxic mana coursing through them.

This was why I had taken the risk in the first place. The initial strike had been more than just an attack; it was a strategic gamble. Trading blows and enduring the dragon's strikes allowed me to target this vulnerability, knowing the payoff would be worth it.

CRASH!

The Void Dragon crashed back to the ground, its wings now limp, useless appendages that dragged along its sides. Fury and pain burned in its gaze as it glared at me, the once-mighty beast now grounded and struggling, its defenses shattered and its movement sluggish. I tightened my grip on the crimson daggers, each step bringing me closer to its exposed, vulnerable form.

The dragon had nowhere left to run.

"heheheheh..."

It couldn't escape.

It was completely trapped.

But what to do? Every living being has an instinct to leave, that is how the world works. The Void Dragon let out one last, primal roar, its entire form trembling as it gathered every last ounce of void energy, directing it toward me in a final, desperate attempt. I could feel the intensity of its power, the forceful attempt to disrupt my movements, to render me still. But it wasn't enough. The dragon, in its not fully developed state, couldn't command the strength necessary to nullify my actions.

After all, if it were to do that, it would have done it long ago. I continued my advance, undeterred, my eyes locking onto the creature's agonized gaze. Each step was purposeful, the crimson daggers humming with energy as I raised them, closing the distance. The Void Dragon's void energy flickered one final time before it sputtered out, the remnants of its strength ebbing away, leaving it vulnerable, defeated.

Standing before the beast, I took a deep, steadying breath, feeling the weight of the moment settle around me. I closed my eyes, centering myself, channeling the remaining mana within me as the crimson world around me sharpened, amplifying my senses. My grip tightened around the daggers, and a calm resolve washed over me.

—"Onslaught of Crimson Moon."

I unleashed my final move.

I struck with precision and relentless fury, each slash of the daggers carving through the beast's flesh with lethal intent. My movements were swift, almost a blur as I danced around its vulnerable body, the daggers leaving crimson arcs in the air as they cut through its hide. Each strike was methodical, aimed at vital points I had marked in my mind, the void energy within it collapsing with every blow.

The dragon's body shuddered, each pulse of the Void's Bane working its way deeper into its core as the crimson onslaught continued. Finally, with one last, decisive strike, I drove both daggers into its heart, feeling the creature's life force ebb beneath the blades.

The Void Dragon let out a final, weakened roar, its voice fading into a faint echo as its body went limp. The battle was over, and as I pulled the daggers free, the beast collapsed, void energy dissipating like mist into the air.

The victory was mine, hard-won and absolute.

Then, out of nowhere, my heart thundered with a single, brutal THUMP!

A wave of dizziness overtook me, and I felt the strength drain from my limbs, my body suddenly heavy and sluggish. The pill. The [Overdriving Pill]'s effects, which had granted me that extra edge, had finally caught up with me. My vision blurred as the intense crash hit, and my senses dulled and unsteady. It was as if someone had flipped a switch, cutting my power and leaving me with a body that felt alien, and weak.

I stumbled, clutching my side as I tried to steady myself. "Haaaaah...Haaaaah....."

My stats had plummeted, and the hibernation state of the pill's aftermath took hold, draining a staggering seventy percent of my strength. Every movement felt like dragging lead, and I had to force myself to stay upright, each breath laborious.

'As expected...Just a second late and I would no longer be able to live.' I made one mistake in the fight.

A single mistake, where I couldn't predict the fact that the dragon would have [Nullified] my [Grapple]. Had I made more than one mistake, I would not be here breathing right now. The timing had been everything.

The end of the pill's effects, the initial strike, and every precise maneuver—all of it had to be executed flawlessly. Had I slipped up even once more, the three minutes of enhanced strength would have ended in the heart of battle, leaving me exposed, and helpless. If I hadn't planned my movements down to the second, I wouldn't be here, standing victorious.

But that didn't matter now. What was important was that I had survived, the Void Dragon was defeated, and I'd managed to emerge from the fight in one piece—barely.

Despite the crash of the [Overdriving Pill] draining most of my strength, my injuries had largely healed, thanks to the properties of [Crimson Celestalth]. With each strike, I'd absorbed a fraction of

the dragon's vitality, fueling my own body even as I wore it down. I could feel that essence lingering, an echo of the force pulsing within me, knitting together wounds that would have otherwise left me struggling.

'Fortunate,' I thought, steadying myself, forcing my breath to slow, to find a rhythm again.

Just as I steadied myself, feeling the faint pulse of the Void Dragon's vitality knitting me back together, an unexpected surge of energy struck me like a tidal wave. It was powerful, overwhelming, and unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

A torrent of demonic energy flooded my body, dense and intense, carrying with it the raw essence of the Void Dragon itself.

It wasn't just demonic—it was something deeper, something primal. The energy surged through me, unrelenting, filling every cell with an almost unbearable pressure. My body reacted instinctively, my mana channels opening wide to absorb it, but the force was too much, too fast.

My vision blurred as the world around me spun, and I could feel my senses dimming, unable to handle the onslaught. The dragon's life force was like a wildfire, searing its way through me, merging with my own mana in chaotic pulses. My heartbeat quickened, each beat more strained than the last, struggling to keep up with the new power rushing through me.

My knees buckled, the strength leaving my limbs as the energy overtook my mind, overwhelming every sense, every thought. I fought to stay grounded, to keep some semblance of control, but the energy was too vast, too all-consuming. I could feel my consciousness slipping, fading beneath the relentless flood of power.

And then, darkness.