

D. Diver 171

Chapter 171

In the blink of an eye, I'm back. I open up my item storage and use enemy detection to scan my surroundings. Ember flies out and stretches his wings.

"We're back."

I smirk.

"Indeed we are."

I've been climbing the Labyrinth floors for hours. Too many hours... but I can't let any more time be wasted. I have plenty of energy left and I'm itching to use it all up.

Reaching my enemy detection skill to the depths of the 19th floor, I locate that red-skinned 4m tall level 408 creature once again.

I place my hand on Emebr's wing and teleport back to that glossy square-shaped battlefield. Waiting patiently, the respawned Berskerer Giant going turns its head to me, showing off that toothy grin I know so well.

Its green eyes lock on me and the beast begins charging forward at once. Ember flies up into the sky to let me handle this one alone.

I take out my blade and begin powering up a strike as the monster approaches from roughly 100m away. Its heavy feet crack the ground as runs at me showing a murderous look in its eyes.

I smirk, standing in place while I grip my red glowing blade.

The beast comes closer and closer. I feel the ground shake as it approaches, but continue to focus on refining my attack to its full potential.

In just 10 seconds, I manage to charge up over 450 MP worth of energy into a paper-thin strike. With a yell of excitement, I let the black crescent of mana fly.

It's silent, soaring through the air with ease as the Berserker plows toward me not thinking twice about the powerful energy attack aimed straight at its torso.

Moments before impact, I watch the dense mana shielding appear as my attack threatens to make contact with the monster's chest plate.

Without a hint of resistance, it glides right through.

Less than 10m in front of me, I watch my dark blade of fire slice this Berserker in half without slowing down for a second.

The creature's eyes open wide as it realizes its fate. Both halves of the beast still rocket toward me with impressive momentum. I air-step out of the way to watch the bloody mess roll to a stop over 30 meters behind me.

Letting out a chuckle, I look up to the sky to see Ember watching with great satisfaction. He speaks to me through our link.

"It looks like your month of training has definitely paid off. Shall we continue to climb?"

I grin at the dark black Dragon in the sky. I can tell he's just as eager to gain more levels, just like me. His next rank-up is definitely one of the only things on his mind. I admire Ember for that, he doesn't care about much else...

Me neither.

I walk over to the dissolving corpse and pick up the lone mana crystal it drops. I throw it into my stash and drink an MP potion from my storage.

There's nearly an unlimited supply of these Association-funded potions, it'll take me forever to run through them. I'll use them while I can.

I begin air-stepping up to the Dragon hovering high in the sky, then get on Emebr's back. We begin soaring around the 19th-floor dungeon for the next hour or so hunting Berserkers on sight.

Most of them are around levels 402-404. I vary my energy slashes and begin to keep a record of how well they perform. The minimum amount of MP used while at the correct hair-thin width is just about 300MP. I can manage one of these in just about 3 seconds now. Any lower than that, and the monster in question needs to be weakened before a less-charged slash can do any damage.

Once my tests are complete, I've farmed around 5k MP worth of crystals and the two of us fly off to the boss room together. The longer I charge my attacks top for, the less MP I'm able to efficiently store into the attack.

Soaring deeper and deeper into the back of the dungeon with grey skies and a jagged glossy black landscape below my excitement grows.

I grip my sword tightly. Both Ember and I burst into flames as the spinning grey portal comes into view.

The Dragon's voice rings out in my head through our telepathic link.

"I believe you're more than ready for this, but it would still be wise to stay cautious. Would you like me to leave the battling to you?"

I smirk.

"Take out the lesser mobs if any spawn in my way. Leave the boss for me."

"Understood."

We continue to soar downward, and I jump off Ember's back to hit the crystal-like ground with a loud thud. Fragments of dark stone fly up in the air from beneath my feet as I face the spinning portal of energy less than 3 meters away from my face.

"Let's do this."

I begin to shine red and gold while my sword glows crimson and the flames burn hot all around me. Ember does the same, glowing red and burning with dark flickering flames.

We step through and enter the 19th-floor boss room.

As we do, I look around at the odd environment we've stepped into.

The floor, curved walls, and dome-like ceiling are all made out of the same fragmented black crystal-like rock. There's no sign of a light source in sight, but the inside of the room is well-lit.

The floor area is circular, about 100 meters in diameter, and the ceiling goes up about 50 meters into the air.

It's deathly silent. All I can hear is the light crackling of my flames. Ember flaps his wings and flies up into the sky while speaking to me through our link.

"Here it comes... There seems to be only 1 boss. I'll take care of its dozen or so underlings."

The moment Ember's words hit my inner ear, my enemy detection senses start to go off like crazy.

The monsters are here...

From the back of the Boss room, I see a stampede of 4m tall Berserker Giants come charging towards me. They're all levels 402-408. Each one of them stares at me with jagged teeth, sharp green eyes, and long silver swords.

I watch Ember swoop down from above, letting out a thick beam of dark fire magic from his mouth. It collides with the incoming hoard of monsters and half of them are engulfed in the hot flames.

Some jump in the air to attack the flying Dragon, but Ember is fully prepared. With his dark crimson mana-imbued claws at the ready, I watch 3 red-skinned Berserker Giants get torn in half in a matter of seconds.

The battle is on...

I grin, facing forward as a menacing figure approaches from the back of the room.

Heavy footsteps make the ground shake, and I hear the thuds approaching through the screeches and cries of Berserkers getting mutilated by Ember.

I air-step forward to face whatever monstrosity approaches. I'm shaking with excitement and eager for a hard battle ahead.

I fly over the pit of flames and destruction below to finally see the enormous beast in all its glory.

It resembles the Berserker Giants I've faced before but stands over 6m tall plated head to toe with silver armor tightened with thick leather-like straps and lined in golden accents.

Its chest, arms, and legs are all covered but its bright red skin bulges at the seams with large muscles and thick veins.

The monster glows red as it wields a long shining silver sword.

The creature's white teeth, long tongue, and sharp green eyes stare deep into my soul as I hit the ground with a thud. My feet crack the glossy black floor on impact.

With a dark burning fire behind me, and a 6m tall Giant in front, I use Inspect and Appraisal to see what exactly I'm dealing with.

[Lv. 421]

Active Items:

[Berserker King's Armor Set] [Blood Bonded] +73% Defense

[Berserker King's Long Sword] [Blood Bonded] +1250 Attack +600 Agility

Active Skills:

Swordsmanship

Berserker

Final Breath [Special Grade]

My eyes light up as my flames all grow higher and higher engulfing everything around me in a 5m radius. My dark red aura mixed with shimmers of gold clashes with the Berserker's red glow. It spots me and lets out a murderous roar.

I grip my flaming blade and begin to charge MP into it as the monster before me starts making its move.

Cracking the hard ground with every step, it jumps my way with surprising speed. I dodge to the left, assisted by wind magic to increase my speed while narrowly avoiding its long silver sword.

I continue to charge up my attack.

Gritting my teeth I watch the monster turn the moment it realizes its attack has missed, swinging its long blade with scary precision toward me without hesitating for a second.

It's working off of pure battle instincts, and it's very skilled. While the monster's movements are quick, its long arms make each swing very predictable.

I air-step further away, putting distance between myself, and the beast. Fires rage on behind me as Ember continues to massacre the Berserker's minions.

As the Boss makes its move in for a third attack, my first 10-second charge is ready to release. Roughly 450MP is stored up in a thin black blade. I let it fly.

The massive Berskerer King keeps its trajectory moving forward without batting an eye. A slash that can cut its underlings in half like butter rockets toward it without making a sound.

As the crescent of mana hits the monster's chest plate, a grin creeps across my face. I watch it sink in without any resistance.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye, watching my blade of fire penetrate the dense armor's built-in mana shielding.

Next, there's a white flash of light followed by an enormous explosion of dark red flames. The King roars from inside the bright ball of fire that appears before my eyes.

I air-step back up into the sky. The monster doesn't slow down in its charge one bit. The Berserker plows forward engulfed in a ball of flames swinging its long silver sword.

I smirk, charging up my blade again. It looks like this boss is tougher than I predicted.

The flames slowly clear and the monster turns to face me as I air-step back down to the hard floor.

My smirk widens as I catch a glimpse of its chest plate torn to shreds and cut clean down the middle. My attack destroyed it almost completely in one shot. A long open wound is visible across its chest where the armor broke. Fire burns around the bloodied area and dark red liquid drips to the ground as the flames burn the gash shut.

I've charged up another attack almost halfway when I see the armor begin to glow with a dim white light...

The Berserker King stares me down while putting out the flames on its chest with an open palm. Each time it pats the dark fire a white glow shines.

Its armor begins to shine with this same white light.

My jaw drops as I watch the chest plate that I just sliced in two meld itself before my eyes. Each half comes together in a brilliant white glow before fading away to show a completely undamaged set of armor.

I grip my blade tighter and imbue more mana inside it, readying myself for the next stage of our battle. Gritting my teeth, I stare right back at the beast before me and whisper under my breath with a grin.

"It seems like this is going to be a good fight."

Chapter 172

I can feel the heat of Ember's fire burning hot behind me as he tears the group of Berserker underlings limb from limb.

I'm faced off against the Boss. A 6m ball red-skinned Giant with armor that heals itself after being struck. This monster is even able to put out my advanced fire magic with its bare hands.

My excitement is hard to contain.

I continue to charge up my blade, air-stepping to the side as the agile monster jumps forward at me.

By now, I've plotted enough jump points in this Boss room to begin using my Dungeon Walker ability instead of just air-stepping around.

I grab an MP potion from my item storage as the long-limbed monster turns to fly at me again. It shows its sharp white teeth, stares forward with unwavering green eyes, and swings its long silver sword with incredible precision.

Unfortunately, I'm too quick.

This mid-range battle style I've been using lately isn't my preferred method of getting my much-needed adrenaline rush. Until I can master this new mana control technique, I can't just jump in with my blade swinging.

I'd be no better off than the Berserker going mad for a fight right in front of me.

I teleport away as the beast slashes at me again. It follows through into empty space letting out a frustrated roar.

It's been nearly 20 seconds now, I've charged up over 650MP into one attack. I'd like to get a full 60 seconds in, but it'll be tough in this environment. I let the mana strike soar from a distance.

This monster may be strong, and agile in its own right, but my speed and skillset have it outmatched. There's over half a million MP in my storage ready for use, I can keep this up all day.

As the thin blade of highly compacted mana flies toward the monster it runs at me with the same rage-filled glare. The red-skinned, crimson-glowing beast storms toward me again, this time focusing its attention on the incoming black blade of fire.

This Berskerer may be crazy like its underlings, but it seems to have some brains.

Or so I thought...

The red-skinned Giant raises its silver sword to block my incoming mana attack. I activate my All-Seeing Eye to watch the clash of magic take its course.

A thick layer of mana shielding is summoned all around the monster's sword. Similar to its chest plate.

I gulp, but watch eagerly.

"Is it really about to try and block a strike with this much power...?"

My eyes open wider, and my clenched jaw tightens as the crescent of blackened energy gets closer and closer to the monster's shining silver sword.

Then... it makes contact.

A loud metallic clang begins echoing throughout the dome-shaped boss room.

The collision in question isn't exactly what I expected it would be though....

As my energy blade hits the Berserker's dense mana shield around its sword, the crescent of fire slides through without a sound....

Its trajectory stays on course for the monster's neck. The surprised creature in question regrets its decision to block almost immediately.

It realizes its lapse in judgment and attempts to move its body out of the way. Unfortunately for the Boss, its too late.

My slash hits its left shoulder at point black range slipping through its armor like butter. A white light flashes, nearly blinding me on the spot. A loud clanging sound of mana on mana echoes throughout the boss room...

I hear a roar from the beast as it's clearly hit by my slash.

Through the bright light, I watch the top half of its silver sword fall to the ground with a clang. The sliced area shows off a glossy texture just like the rocks I cut in half while training.

As the sword's broken part hits the ground, the white glow from before explodes into an eruption of dark flames.

It took well over a full second to explode... This might be a good sign.

I air-step back as I watch the fire dissipate and the growing red aura of the Berserker King grow in size. Without thinking twice, I reach into my item storage to grab another MP potion, bringing me up to a full bar.

I begin charging up my blade again.

A murderous roar fills the dungeon's Boss room completely.

I air-step higher and higher into the sky, looking down at the beast. A toothy grin creeps across my face as the monster's left arm falls to the ground with a thud covered in dense fire residue.

Screeching with fury, green eyes locked on me, from over 30 meters below me, I watch the beast's blood boil. Its eyes tighten their gaze on me, and it continues to show me all of its shining white teeth. It squats down, then launches itself upwards, attempting to meet me in the air.

I air-step even higher, but the monster's launch velocity outmatches my current flight speed. With a missing arm, flaming left side, and desolated army of minions below this monster doesn't flinch for a second to jump right back into the fight.

I Dungeon Walk back to the glossy black floor below. The ground is cracked and shattered from our short brawl. I look to my side to see Ember sitting on a pile of defeated Berserker corpses torn to shreds. Not a single one remains in one piece.

A loud crash sounds from above. Large black boulders and shards of hard crystal fall from the sky as the Berserker King collides with the top of the dome.

I grit my teeth, plant my feet, and continue to charge my blade. It's been almost 10 seconds, but this isn't even close to enough charge to take out this creature.

I look up as I hear the loud bang followed by splintering stone. A wide crack appears in the ceiling above and portions of it begin to fall. A dark red aura seeps out from the area that the Boss collided with directly above me. It seems to be lodged deep into the rock structure at the top of the dome.

I smirk.

"I'll have just enough time."

Pushing my body and mind to the limits, I glow gold and red while concentrating with my All-Seeing Eye to create a precise slash.

The massive chunks of rock that fall from the sky all around me begin to hit the floor with loud thuds, shaking the ground from all angles. A roar from the Berserker King shakes the room, adding to the chaos.

I begin to do a combination of air-steps and Dungeon Walks to avoid the falling rubble while keeping an eye on the glowing red crater above me.

After 5 seconds of dodging fallen dungeon mass goes by, my opponent finally joins in on the fun.

I watch from afar as it peeks out from its crater in the ceiling to once again lock its sharp green eyes on me. I dart across the Boss room floor and it follows like a hawk stalking its prey.

I take a deep breath in and out as the monster leaps out, jumping from each falling boulder to increase its speed of decent. It loosens up the last remaining rocks above, creating what looks like a falling wall of stone behind it.

The shattered sword in its hand begins to glow with a faint white light, then the shine begins to grow. It gets brighter and brighter, just like the armor piece from before.

As it nears, the full length of its silver sword comes into view once again. It grew back...

"This fight is just getting started."

I let my attack full of 650MP fly once again.

The last one of this magnitude that I threw was powerful enough to take the Berserker's arm clean off. This creature is falling straight at me. It has no way of dodging a mid-air strike.

I grin, air-stepping backward to move out of the way of more fallen rubble as I watch my thin black blade soar toward the monster above.

With my perception skill on full blast, I eagerly await the beast's next move. It raises its sword to activate its mana shielding.

A dense wall of mana forms, but yet again, my slash glides right through.

It doesn't slow down one bit.

Filled with rage, the monster's eyes widen, and its red aura seeps out even more as it realizes its fatal error for the second time.

My dark fiery slash hits its chest plate head on, slipping through its next layer of defenses with ease.

Once it makes contact with the Boss monster's skin, hitting its final mana shielding, a bright white flash envelopes the entire beast. An explosion of dark flames follow, lighting up the sky with red and white light.

I Dungeon Walk away, near the side of the boss room where Ember and I entered. I need to get as far away from the blast-zone as possible.

The monster hits the Boss room floor with a ground shaking thud. The wall of heavy boulders and rock fragments follow its decent crunching the beast, piling up over 15 meters high. Flames surge from beneath the rock pile, making their way through to the surface.

I let out a laugh and raise my sword, waiting for the familiar sound of leveling notifications to ring out in my ear.

A few second pass.

The flames burn bright, but my satisfying rings never come.

I begin to slowly walk over to the pile of rubble while charging my blade up once again.

"This is a tough one isn't it...."

I'm standing about 30 meters away. Rocks from above have mostly stopped falling. There are small fragments still making their way down, but the bigger boulders have all hit the floor.

Dark red fire crackles beneath the pile of fallen stone.

I clench my jaw, moving closer and closer with my sword at the ready.

Then... I hear it.

Near the backside of the massive pile of stone, shifts in the debris begin to move the rubble.

Flames rise and fall. The Berserker King tears its way out of the stone prison.

Rock is thrown into the air in all directions and a loud murderous roar echos throughout the Boss room once again.

It rises from the grave and begins walking toward me with slow and calculated ground breaking steps.

Surrounded by a new jet black aura, the Boss now sports a deep bloody wound across its chest along with its missing arm from my prior strike.

The Berserker King stares me down with those sharp green eyes like our battle is just beginning.

I stare back grinning ear to ear, glad that it finally has.

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The 6-meter tall menace stands before me bloodied and torn to shreds by my last attacks. It's missing an arm, has a wide open wound in its chest, and can't possibly be on more than 10% health after the avalanche of rock that fell on it from above.

A dim light glows around its right hand and torso. The fragments of sword and armor that remain on its beaten body begin to materialize back into their original forms.

The jet-black aura that surrounds this beast reeks of death. It must be one of its skills.

Still charging my own blade, ready for battle, I stare the monster right back in its sharp green eyes. They almost look like they're glowing through the thick dark cloud surrounding the Boss.

I blink and the creature is gone. My heart skips a beat...

In what seems like no time at all, this beaten beast sprints toward me with blinding speed. It must be twice as fast as before...

I watch its silver sword come dangerously close to my mid section, less than 2 meters away. I Dungeon Walk to a safe distance the moment my brain catches up to the situation at hand.

Now, on the opposite side of the Boss room I put these new pieces of the puzzle together in my mine. It's 3rd skill...

"Final Breath."

Even from its name, it sounds like an ability that boosts the users stats at a moment just before death. The creature is on its final few HP, so that must be a trigger to activate this skill.

All I have to do is land one final hit, but all it has to do is land one me....

I grin with excitement as the red-skinned monster with a veil of black glowing mist all around it tracks me down and begins to run full force in my direction.

Waves of rock fly up in the air on both sides of the charging menace. Its speed is astounding. With a trail of dark aura streaming behind it, I have to Dungeon Walk out of its way to dodge mere seconds after its sprint begins.

It clears over 100 meters in the blink of an eye.

Black stone crashes to the ground, leaving a long hole all the way across in the center of the Boss room.

I grit my teeth as it circles back and runs at me again. Keeping my weapon charged, I continuously adjust my aim to never turn my back on this beast.

I air step upwards, trying to gain distance while drinking MP potions to keep all of my abilities fully charged.

The monster jumps up to follow along without a second of hesitation. The 50 meter high ceiling doesn't limit its range in the slightest.

I blip around the battle field, trying to avoid its constant attacks. Burning through MP potions and charging my attack up to 650MP. My Dungeon Walker skill is being pushed top the limits. My blade is glowing hot, fully charged.

I lock eyes on the menace as it tears through the rock below, making our battlefield more and more of a war scene by the second. Deep pits and high piles of rock are being thrown about as I Dungeon Walk across the sky and landscape below.

Using my All-Seeing Eye, I follow the fast moving beasts movements as it follows mine.

It lunges into the air for another strike.

"This is it..."

I let my attack soar.

The 650MP black blade of flames comes rocketing out of my sword, and I Dungeon Walk away to safety. Looking up at the sky from below, I watch eagerly for my attack to finally blow the Boss to pieces.

It will at least damage the monster, I'm betting on that.

The Berserker flying at my attack knows the painful feeling of colliding with this black blade very well. It's taken two of them at point blank range in the past.

For some reason, it wants to take this attack head on anyway.

A grin creeps across my face as I watch the approaching crescent of dense flames collide with the silver sword of the Berserker King. Fully expecting it to glide right through and finish the monster off, I thrust my sword in the air to celebrate.

"..."

I stop mid-thrust with my eyes and mouth wide open. An ear shattering clang rings out in the Boss room...

"It... Blocked my attack..."

The strike that previously took off its arm and shattered its armor without a problem is being held back with ease by the monsters long silver sword.

A bright flash of light appears on impact as my slash comes to a halt against the mana shielding around its blade. It lets out a roar, pushing its blade upwards and defecting my attack up to the already shattered ceiling.

It explodes into a display of dark flames, knocking more rubble loose from above. The beast learns from its previous fall and begins jumping from boulder to boulder, staying high up in the air to avoid being crushed under the rock pile this time around.

I grit my teeth, beginning to charge my blade up again in frustration while Dungeon Walking away to avoid the incoming fallen ceiling.

Burning hot with flames, I watch the beast form afar. It blocked that attack with ease... Meaning its newest skill has even boosted its mana control capabilities.

Such a skill must come with a cost. It may have near unlimited endurance and heighten abilities now, but it'll run out at some point. Energy can't just be created from thin air... Can it?

I open up my telepathic link.

"Ember, can you hear me?"

"Of course, Master."

From the backside of the Boss room, patiently waiting atop a pile of dissolved Berserkers, the black-scaled Dragon stretches its wings and hovers over to me.

I watch the King above begin to fall towards us, its eyes Locked on me from across the rocky arena.

I hear a light thud behind me as Ember lands, crackling with a light layer of flames surrounding its body.

I smirk.

"We're going to take this Boss out together, keep it busy while I get an attack ready. No matter what, I need to have the final hit."

Ember flaps his wings with a toothy grin.

"Understood."

I drink an MP potion, focusing on my sword while I watch the 7 meter long glossy black Dragon fly towards a falling monster surrounded with a black aura of death.

Gritting my teeth, I get ready to step in and teleport Ember out of danger in case this creature is too much to handle.

My worries are lifted seconds later as the loud clang of mana on mana echoes through my ears. Ember's red claws collide with the heavy silver sword of the Berskerer King.

My All-Seeing Eye picks up on two dense mana shield clashing, but Ember's is by far the dominant force.

A flash of white light is followed by a ball of dark flames to come shooting out of the the Black Dragon's mouth. He flaps his wings and flies Into the sky leaving the Boss engulfed in flames and roaring with fury. It's unable to put out the dense advanced fire magic.

I smirk, air-stepping closer watching my battle partner toss around the Berserker with ease.

The monster completely changes its focus, jumping up into the air, following Ember to the sky. The Dragon blows another attack full of flames down to cover the beast on its way up, then blocks its incoming sword with a graceful swing of its clawed front leg.

Another flash of white light blinds my view as a roar from the King sounds out.

I watch it fall to the ground with a loud thud.

More rock flies and the beast jumps up again in retaliation, trying to catch the dangling prize up the sky. Ember continues to dodge its futile attempts and blocks its sword with precise movements.

The Berserker is definitely faster, but Ember is picture perfect with every black and uses denser mana shielding than anything I've ever seen.

There seems to be many more perks from absorbing full pocket detentions worth of mana than just the levels...

Without the pressure of having to dodge endless attacks from the Boss, charging up my own is much easier. Another half a minute goes by and Ive managed to ready a strike even more powerful than the one that pierced Fisher's shielding. There's over 1200MP stored in this attack.

I'm not messing around. This will be the one to end it, and I'm making sure of that.

I call for Ember through our telepathic link.

"Play time is over, let's finish this."

Locking eyes with the flaming Dragon from over 70 meters away, I take in the full view of the battlefield. Ember is high in the sky and the Boss is preparing for another jump.

I Dungeon Walk above Ember, matching his flames and gripping my glowing blade.

"Dive."

Without a word, Ember's flames explode into an even more dazzling display and he tilts his head to the ground.

The Berserker below sees us, locking its sharp glowing eyes on me through its ominous aura. I see its jagged teeth gleam with a white shine as it jumps in the air.

It rockets up, us as we soar down.

With a yell, I jump off of Ember's back and fly straight at the beast. My smile widens even more than the battle friend I'm facing.

Swinging my sword across my body with all my might, I let the full-powered slash fly.

A dense black blade shoots from my sword, I follow through close behind it.

The thin crescent of energy slices through the air in silence as the Berserker readies its sword to block. Full of confidence in my abilities, I continue to fall, watching the collision happen right in front of my eyes.

It makes contact...

Then glides right through.

Its shining silver sword doesn't slow the dark crescent of fire down one bit.

Neither does its armor....

Lastly, its final layer of mana shielding is pierced without a hint of resistance.

My attack glides straight through without a sound. The monster's eyes widen, but it's too late to react, this battle is over....

The beast splits in two before my eyes.

I continue my descent as the monster's halves pass me on both sides.

Before hitting the hard black ground below, Ember swoops in to catch me on his back. Simultaneously, the sweet sound of leveling notifications finally hits my inner ear.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I let out a joy-filled yell, thrusting my sword in the air annoying victory for real this time.

The two halves of the flaming Berserker corpse hit the ground with loud thuds moments later as we soar over to check out the body.

Two boxes of blue text fill my vision as we approach.

[Use Absorption[Special Grade]]

Skill: Final Breath [Special Grade]

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption[Special Grade]]

Stat: Strength

Amount: +81

[YES][NO]

We glide down to the ground, and I choose yes on both options without batting an eye.

The Black aura surrounding the fallen monster fades and the beast dissolves into the Boss room floor almost Immediately.

The sound of metal hitting rock fills my ears as I see a silver and gold set of lightweight armor hit the dungeon floor next to a large mana crystal.

Immediately, I use Appraisal.

[Berserker King's Armor Set] [Unbonded] +73% Defense

Hopping off Ember's back, I examine the Berserker King's item drop. It's a full set of armor, and will only take up one item slot...

I'll have to talk to Briana, the Legendary Crafter, about this Blood Bonded vs. Unbonded item tag. I can only assume she would know about such a thing.

Grinning, and placing the full lightweight armor set into my item storage, I open up my status to look at how much I've grown.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 412

Hp: 2065/2065

Mp: 720/2065

Strength: 1096 [+1217][+548]

Speed: 1194 [+716][+597]

Agility: 1291 [+581][+646]

Defense: 902 [+361][+451]

Mental Strength: 1015 [+609][+406][+457][+832][+508]

Skills:

Absorption [Special Grade]

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

Self Regeneration [Special Grade]

Spacial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength

Dual Wielding [Special Grade]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Final Breath [Special Grade]

Items Equipped:

High Ogre King's Ring [+60% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength]

Serpent King's Scale [+45% Agility] [+45% Magic Resistance]

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

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+111% Strength][+82% Mental Strength]

[Greater Demon's Core] +50% All Stats

[Lenses Of Illusion]

White transfer magic appears moments later, and we disappear from the 19th floor.

When my vision returns, I let out a light gasp as I find myself in a dimly lit hallway about 5 meters wide. Dark rock lines the walls, and the light flickering of Ember's flames allows me to see all the way to the end.

It leads up to another Boss Room portal no more than 30 meters away...

Chapter 174

"This place seems familiar..."

I peer down the long narrow hallway at the grey spinning portal near the back edge. The place feels oddly similar to the small dark hallway that I crossed to get to the Boss room during the C-Class exams.

It's just like the Boss room portal at the top of the Labyrinth.

I open my link with Ember and hear the Dragon's voice in my inner ear.

"It seems we've made our way to a Lower-Floor Boss. You did say this was the 20th right?"

I nod, walking down the hallway while I reply.

"It should be the 20th, yes... I wasn't exactly expecting this... What's a Lower-Floor Boss?"

Ember's flames fill the narrow room, illuminating our surroundings as he explains.

"In larger Labyrinths, levels of difficulty are usually split into 20-floor segments. Each segment has a floor boss, protecting their assigned portion of the Labyrinth. It allows the Demon and Dragon up top to safely continue absorbing mana, while hunters face the bosses below."

I grin, coming face-to-face with the portal at the end of the long hallway.

Ember continues.

"These boss rooms are usually pretty big and intricate. There tend to be more monsters to farm inside, you'll be able to train before the fight if you wish. I'd like to do some hunting myself."

I step through the mass of spinning mana, motioning Emebr to follow.

"Sounds good to me."

Moments later both of us slip through into the 20th Floor. Or rather, the 1st Lower-Floor Boss' Lair.

Immediately, I go back into attack mode from the extreme heat that shocks my system.

It feels like I've been thrown into a pit of flames.

In fractions of a second, sweat beings to drip from my pores as my body attempts to cool itself.

I hit the floor with a thud.

The black-scaled Dragon and I both land on a hard dark grey rocky surface.

It's a fairly flat stone that juts out about 20 meters in all directions. The exit portal spins right behind us, and the view before my eyes leaves me in a state of shock.

For as far as I can see in all directions, there's a bubbling pit of lava. It's dark red and orange, with hot steam coming up in the air. It makes the atmosphere waver in my line of sight.

Small boulder-like islands just like the one we're standing on peek through the molten rock every couple hundred meters for as far out as I can see.

It'd be near impossible to navigate this dungeon without a flight ability...

I can't picture any normal hunter making it far into this hellscape without burning to a crisp.

I gulp, but grin soon after, opening my link with Ember.

He's the first to speak.

"The Floor Boss isn't far, the one you call the Behemoth. It's about 3km in that direction."

Ember points a front claw off into the distance. I nod with appreciation, but I could have easily figured this out myself... There's something else he wants to say.

I look up at the Dragon, who seems to be deep in thought.

"What is it...?"

"..."

Ember replies after a pause.

"Well, that was a good battle we just fought. Though, to face what's ahead your mana control needs a lot of work."

I stare out into the open lava pools, spotting the shadow outline of an ominous structure towering high in the sky near the back of the dungeon.

I reply.

"Understood. We're just getting started."

I air-step upward to hop on Ember's back, continuing my thought.

"Let's see what kind of mobs spawn in this dungeon. You're right, I'll need to get some training in before we face the Behemoth but let's at least get to that structure back there so I can set a Dungeon Walker spawn point."

I pause for a moment.

"If worst comes to worst, we can make a quick pit stop by the Great Plains. I'm sure there's been more than enough time for at least one Titan to come crawling back."

I smirk as Ember nods his head.

"Agreed."

With a strong flap of his wings, Ember lifts off from the island in the middle of an ocean of lava. We begin our flight towards the back of the Lower-Floor Boss room just like that.

This is the final boss of my assignment. The monster at the back of this dungeon separates the normal hunters of the world, from the Elites.

I can't hold back the smile that creeps across my face. One life-threatening battle after the next.

I missed this so much.

Although Ember is right, I need to work on my control. Charging up attacks for a full minute isn't exactly a technique I can use for every battle. It'll become rather troublesome the higher up I progress.

To be honest, It already has... It's just hard to admit it.

I speak to Ember through our link.

"How exactly do you produce mana shielding? In that last battle, I watched you make a shield denser than anything I've seen before. You even covered your claws with it to use as an offensive technique. Could you teach me how to do this too?"

As we soar up into the sky and the air gets much cooler. The lava pit below is the source of this dungeon's immense heat.

Ember responds.

"Mana shielding comes naturally to me. For you, it's not such an easy task."

"Why's that...?"

"Monster's are much more adept at shielding and other mana techniques at lower levels than humans because we're made entirely from pure mana. Humans were born into a realm of pure mass, only to be invaded by foreign mana from our realm."

I pause, taking in this information as the Dragon glides further into the Dungeon and closer to the shadowy rectangular-shaped outline that keeps getting bigger and bigger.

"Humans are able to wield mana, but aren't entirely born from it. It has seeped into your atmosphere and become one with the world you live in. You'll need to consume much more pure MP if you'd like to master this technique. There are workarounds, but you don't possess the skill necessary at the moment. You'll just need to consume more mana. That's the only way."

I remember back to when Fisher said that mana shielding was a Tier 1 technique. He also said I'm a Tier 0...

It seems Emebr and Fisher are in agreement here. I need more mana, and much more training with said mana.

"I need to get stronger."

We continue to fly higher up, further from the bubbling rock below us making our way toward the backside of this dungeon in the meantime.

It's much cooler up here. The hot stream from below rises and dissipates more the higher in altitude we climb. There's no ceiling to this dungeon, or at least not one that I can sense.

I take a breath of fresh air as the wind flies by me on all sides.

Looking far into the back of the dungeon, now that the heat waves and stream clouds are below us, that ominous structure comes into full view.

I whisper under my breath as I take in the sight before me.

"Is that... a castle?"

The outline of an impossibly large stone castle looms in the distance.

Ember flies downward to get a better view.

It sits on a large land mass that rises high above the lava pools below, making steep cliffs. The circular island looks to be 1km in diameter and juts up over the lava about 100 meters high.

The stone castle at the center of the high-risen island looks desolate and gives off an eerie hum of mana.

There seems to be a wide-open arching gate at the entrance that leads to an abandoned courtyard. Touches burn on high pillars welcoming us toward the massive structure before us...

Ember flies down to hit the hard ground, 50 meters or so in front of the open front door, begging us to come inside.

I jump off his back, gripping my sword and beginning to charge an attack out of instinct.

Something about all of this doesn't feel right.

There's a dense sensation of mana in the air all around me, and a light buzzing noise fills my ears. Something is definitely nearby...

I activate my All-Seeing Eye along with my enemy detection skills and I'm hit with a whirlwind of notifications. There's dozens of level 430 monsters nearby, but they're nowhere in sight.

I gulp. Still charging my sword and inching closer to the stone archway in front of me.

Ember follows.

We make our way through the gate. My jaw is clenched and I hold my breath, darting my eyes back and forth to try and spot one of these enemies popping up on my radar.

The ground in the courtyard is made of square stones. There's a high wall another 40 meters away with a tall locked gate.

It's the main entrance to the castle.

Looking left and right, the wall stretches to the far side of the island and curves around it on each side. I stare up at the high wall and think about air-stepping over to get into the inner castle walls.

My thoughts are rudely interrupted by the heavy clicking sound of metal on metal from behind the front gate.

I watch the massive iron doors slowly open and a glimmer of silver armor peeks through. The heavy doors scrape across the stone floor as it opens letting out a disturbing sound.

I continue to charge my blade and move closer in toward the danger. The enemies behind the Iron door finally come into full view.

"It looks like someone came to greet us."

Chapter 175

Through the heavy Iron doors, I watch over two dozen 3-meter-tall suits of silver armor walk out.

They all seem to have humanoid-looking bodies, but there's no gaps in the armor at all. I can't see what their base forms look like. They carry silver swords and make loud metallic thuds of metal on stone with every step.

They march out in a line without missing a beat.

The buzzing sound and tingling feeling of mana in the air begins to grow making it hard to hear myself think.

I boost my perception skill, along with Inspect and Appraisal to analyze the opponents before me.

[Lv. 430]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Armor Set] +1750 Defense

[Enchanted Long Sword] +1750 Strength

Active Skills:

[NONE]

With a puzzled look on my face, I scan each and every one of the slowly approaching armored guards.

They're all the same. Exactly the same.

Every last one of them is level 430, and they all have the same armor and sword without a single skill.

"What... is going on here...?"

My sword is charged up nearly halfway, a 30-second burst of about 675MP. My recent level-ups have given me a slight boost in charging speed.

I continue to slowly approach, watching one of the Knights break their symmetrical line formation and begin moving at me with increased speed.

I let out an exhale, then run forward at the Knight to match its speed. I wanted to test out the base mobs here, so that's exactly what I'll do.

Once within a 10-meter range, I swing my sword and let the blade of energy fly.

Cautiously, I Dungeon Walk backward to watch the attack unfold.

It collides with the Silver Knight's long sword, letting out a clang, followed by a flash of white light, then the dazzling display of a fiery explosion.

Before the dust even settles, I hear the heavy metal footsteps of the Knight running through the fire at me with its sword at the ready.

"Hardy a scratch..."

There's a small dent in the side of its chest plate. A few fragments of metal hit the floor, but the attack didn't hit its body, only the armor. Unfortunately, this is nowhere near enough to penetrate its defenses fully.

I scoff, teleporting back even further away from this battlefield, and call out to Ember.

"You're up, take a crack at them."

The black-scaled Dragon nods while flapping his wings and lifting off into the air to join the brawl.

He dives down on the Knight that attacked me, clawing at its armor. After the sounds of metal breaking and mana shield collisions the silver Knight's arm tears off completely.

Ember flies up into the sky as I start to charge my blade again, hesitant to even join in on this battle.

My mana control is nowhere near refined enough to be of any help.

I grit my teeth, watching the Dragon swoop down and claw off its other arm, heavily damaging the Knight's chest plate in the process.

My eyes widen as I see what's inside the suit...

Or... what isn't inside may be a better way of putting it.

"It's empty..."

I gulp, watching the Flaming Dragon tear the armor suit to shreds as the army of them stands by letting their soldier die what looks to be a painful death.

Almost a full minute passes, and I charge 1250MP into my sword.

Ember has successfully turned the empty suit of armor into a pile of scraps. I turn my vision to the line of Knights still standing by...

"Why aren't they attacking..."

I turn my head back to the fight between Knight and Dragon to see the armored scraps begin to move across the ground.

A scraping sound fills my ears as I watch the junk metal form together and create a full suit once again.

I can clearly see the cracks still there, but the suit is back together in its original form.

This isn't the same as the Blood Bonded armor from floor 19... Something else is definitely at play here. Ember flies down, shattering the fallen Knight into hundreds of tiny pieces once again.

Then, I hear another loud metallic clanging as a second silver soldier breaks formation and begins running toward me. I hear my telepathic link open up as the knight approaches.

"Master, these are not beings we can defeat right now."

"I'm aware now, you're right. Let me try one last thing, then we're out of here."

"Understood."

The Knight that broke formation runs toward me with its sword at the ready. I run at it too. My last attack was half as powerful, and it hardly even made a scratch. I'd like to see what a full-power slash can do to these empty metal monsters.

I run closer and closer while swinging my blade across my body, letting an attack fly, then Dungeon Walking a safe distance away to see the aftermath unfold.

It collides with the enemy's blade, then glides right through. I smirk, watching the black fiery crescent slide through the monster's entire body next without a sound.

My attack curves upward and flies off into the sky.

The Knight halts for a moment, then turns to my new position and continues to run at me like nothing happened...

My stomach lurches as I see the slash mark appear across the soldier's chest. I split it in two, but somehow the armor set is still held together and it seems unfazed.

Turning to Ember, I watch him fight off hundreds of armor fragments that continuously reform into the suit and sword, swinging attack after attack at the flaming Dragon.

I hear Ember's voice again.

"Master, I recommend we come back another time..."

I grit my teeth, looking up at the Castle wall. The large iron gate that let out the army of knights has slowly shut.

The mana in the air only gets denser and denser the further into the castle I sense. The Behemoth is back there.

I can't even make a scratch on its welcome committee, so there's no chance of putting up a good fight against it as I am now.

"You're right. We need to get much stronger."

I Dungeon Walk over to Ember, placing a hand on his back, then teleporting us back to the grassy rolling hills of a Dungeon I begin to like more and more every time I visit it.

We're back in The Great Plains...

Ember bows his head as I scan the surroundings using enemy detection.

"This was the right move, I can assure you."

I smirk, rolling my eyes while finding 2 large blind spots on my radar along with a familiar pesky duo of hunters.

"You're right, this is our best bet... There's 2 Titans in range. One of them is occupied by a few hunters at the moment, so it looks like we only have one option."

Ember shows me a toothy grin, replying through the link.

"It's time to get back to work."

I smirk, air-stepping onto the Dragon's back.

"I have about 30 days worth of food and water on my right now. Let's stay in this Titan for the full time..."

"Understood, 30 days it is. I'll adjust my mana absorption rate accordingly.

We blip to the far side of the dungeon with Titan less than 500 meters away.

Without a word, Ember flaps his wings and begins flying toward the jet-black 30-meter-tall walking mana pool.

I just left this Domain for the 2nd time and I'm already going back. It seems like I'm spending more time in the pocket realms than I am in the real world lately.

We both dive into the black being before us, plunging deep into the bottomless abyss.

"I'll do whatever it takes. This is the only way."

After a familiar free will, we're back in the white-walled prison that recently I've come to call home.

My first order of business is to get some sleep. Ember curls up in a ball and begins to glow red. I get ready for another long month of training

Once I wake up the next day back in my white-walled training room, my routine begins. The 8-hour sessions start immediately, and I'm able to run through 850k MP on day 1 and push my training cycle to 4 days on and 1 day off. It only gets better from here.

I make a mental note of each day's mana consumption while hyper-focusing on a single task. Getting strong enough to defeat the Behemoth.

I need to prove to the Association that I'm not just some new recruit they can push around. If they want to slap the title of Elite on me and try to use that as a collar, I'll bite back...

I just need to be strong enough to do so without being thrown in a cage.

Day 1: 850k MP

Day 2: 875k MP

Day 3: 885k MP

Day 4: 890k MP

Day 5: 200k MP

Day 6: 910k MP

Day 7: 915k MP

Day 8: 915k MP

Day 9: 910k MP

Day 10: 200k MP

Day 11: 915k MP

Total MP Consumed: 8.465 Million MP

By Day 11 I find the new limit to my consumption capabilities. Even after a second day of rest, it doesn't seem to raise. I've gained a few levels since the last time I trained in here, so the initial increase makes sense. A daily output of 915k MP is more than enough to make solid progress.

I continue training.

Day 12: 915k MP

Day 13: 910k MP

Day 14: 915k MP

Day 15: 200k MP

Day 16: 920k MP

Day 17: 905k MP

Day 18: 910k MP

Day 19: 915k MP

Day 20: 200k MP

Day 21: 915k MP

Day 22: 920k MP

Day 23: 905k MP

Day 24: 910k MP

Day 25: 200k MP

Day 26: 915k MP

Day 27: 915k MP

Day 28: 915k MP

Day 29: 915k MP

Day 30: 200k MP

Total MP Consumed: 22.965 Million MP

Day 30 comes around and I've pushed my mana consumption to its limits. Burning through another 22.965 Million MP in the last 30 days, I've nearly doubled my total lifetime consumption. My body feels like it's bursting with power...

When I activate my All-Seeing Eye I can catch a glimpse of the abyss outside this white-walled prison without even cutting a hole through.

Charging up mana into my blade has never been easier... What took me 60 seconds just a month ago, can be done almost before I count to 3. I'm itching to try this out on an opponent.

I am still inside the Titan's Domain, so once I leave my abilities will be slightly weakened. Even so, when I battle those Knights again in the outside world I'm sure it'll play out much differently than before.

My mana-absorbing loophole has come in clutch once again.

I'll be back soon, I just hope the number of Titans in the Great Plains doesn't keep dropping at the rate it has been recently...

As Ember finishes up with his 30 days of Domain absorption, I release a slash that begins the collapse.

Before we know it, both of us are standing out in the open air of the Great Plains. I activate my item storage and let Ember step inside.

Teleporting to the dungeon's exit portal, I step out while planning to make my way to the Black Market. I need to have a word with Bri about my new armor set that I picked up from the Berserker King before heading back to face the Behemoth and its army of Knights.

Chapter 176

As I step through the dungeon's exit portal, I activate my conceal skill.

I'm supposed to be in the Labyrinth right now as far as the Association is concerned. It'd be awfully suspicious if I showed my face around town.

Not many people know me in the big city, but if I'm spotted by even one person at the Association there may be a few questions brought up that I wouldn't like to answer.

One of the advanced perks of my newest upgrade to [Special Grade] concealment is the ability to put on a temporary camouflage.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye while opening my status to re-check its full capabilities.

Conceal

Info: The [Special Grade] Conceal skill allows the user to edit their status with the same basic inputs as [No Grade]. Without a [Legendary Grade] perception skill, the true nature of these modifications will remain unseen.

The [Special Grade] Conceal skill acts as temporary camouflage. The user may change fine details in facial features, skin shade, and eye color, along with minor height and weight modifications. Without a [Legendary Grade] perception skill, the illusion magic being used will go unnoticed by onlookers.

Grade: [Special Grade]

[Upgrade]

I've used this skill on my arm tattoo from the Greater Demon's Core in the past, but haven't tried it on anything larger scale...

My lenses of Illusion still mask my white eye color without me having to constantly use mana on my concealment skill. I take a look at them while my status is still open.

Lenses Of Illusion

Info: A pair of contact lenses crafted using the Legendary Grade "Crafting" Skill and the Special Grade "Conceal" Skill. This item allows the user to see 25% further, and change their perceived eye color at will.

Class: C+

Type: Single Use

Durability: 6/100

I whisper under my breath.

"It's at 6... out of 100..."

Remembering back to when I bought these off of Bri, she did say they would only last me a few months. It's already been that long for me... To her, no more than a few weeks have passed.

Along with the armor set, I'll need to pick up a new pair of lenses... If she has any left in stock.

I'm standing in the empty black room with a moving stairway ahead of me that leads back to the C-Class gate platform.

I let out a sigh and walk forward. While doing so, I put on a disguise better than any magical concealment item can produce.

I turn my slim physique, black hair, dark features, and light tan skin into something entirely different.

Making my skin pale white, growing my hair out and bleaching it blond, putting on 20kg of muscle, and giving myself bright blue eyes. For good measure, I put on a few years of age and take the train back to the main Dungeon Hub.

I feel exactly the same... I'm just surrounded by intense illusion magic. Passers-by see a completely different person when they look at me.

I walk out of the gate with a grin across my face, looking like your average run-of-the-mill middle-aged tank. No heads turn, and I walk downtown without another thought.

I should use this skill more often...

It's oddly satisfying to walk around as someone else.

I stop by a small local food market as I get further from the city and into a less populated part of the town. I stock up on more food and water, a 60-day supply.

Even with the short breaks in between my last two sessions in the Titan's Domain, it feels odd adjusting back to the real world.

Staying in there for longer than I already have been is just asking for trouble. A 2-month supply in my item storage is enough for now.

I'm getting much more used to transitioning out of the white-walled training room, but even this time around there are some adverse side effects.

It's easy to zone out doing the simplest of tasks. For example, while I'm paying the store clerk for groceries and walking out the market's front door with my cart full of food. For some reason it doesn't seem real...

My mind is somewhere else.

All I want to do is fight and absorb more mana, these menial tasks feel like a waste of time... Although, in the back of my mind I know they must be done.

I shake my head as I walk out the door, realizing my mana bar is running low from using my concealment skill for too long. I open up a fresh MP potion as I store the food and water in my item storage in a small alley behind the shop.

Mumbling under my breath as I finish the potion, my clarity of mind comes back to me.

"This will do for now, but I'll get my real fix soon enough."

The battle against the Behemoth I've set my eyes on will be more than enough of a reward for my hardships.

Grinning, I make my way over to the rougher side of town. Before I know it, I'm approaching the 3-story brick building that houses the craftswoman that's nearly gotten me killed multiple times. I'm less than a full block away.... I just keep coming back.

Focusing on my concealment skill, I shape my body, hair, and facial features back to their original forms.

This may be a building full of crooks, but I trust them more than anyone at the Association. The people that run this underground black market businesses build their clientele by word of mouth alone, If you can't trust that, then you can't trust anything.

There's no reason to screw over a returning customer.

I continue walking forward to see the two large guards out front. The moment I come into view, one of them waves to me and shouts out.

"It looks like we have a real regular on our hands, don't we? You have a meeting scheduled? Or you just going to barge in like usual?"

I confidently walk up to the large guards.

"The usual."

I walk past, giving them a respectful nod as I do. The one who greeted me smirks and opens the door, letting me through.

"Ms. Briana is upstairs. It would be wise to check with Bernard before you disturb her."

I wave the nice security guard goodbye and make my way to the spiral staircase at the back of the first floor.

"Got it. Thanks!"

With a light click, the door closes behind me and I make my way up the winding metal stairs.

As I make it to the second floor I see Bernard sitting at his desk. The tall thin man reads a small book while his blond twin workers diligently sort and file magic items.

I continue up the stairs as he looks up from his mid-day reading.

"Good to see you again Jay. I assume you're here for a good reason."

I nod while continuing to walk up the stairs.

"I am."

He shows me a thin smile and looks back down at his book.

"Very well. Ms. Briana most likely already knows you're here. Enjoy your meeting."

"I will."

After that, I walk up to the third floor to find myself in a dark room... yet again.

Slowly stepping onto the flat hardwood floor, I knock a few times on the wall then speak up.

"Hello...? Bri?"

A white light appears at the back of the room and it begins to spread out, illuminating everything in sight. This is exactly what happened the first time I came here.

Bri's low soothing voice hits my ear.

"Welcome back so soon. I heard you had a Labyrinth mission assigned to you this week, but you're here already... What have you possibly brought me today that's so important?"

The tall olive-skinned woman in tight black clothing approaches with a grin across her face.

I reply while reaching into my item storage to take out the full set of lightweight armor and the sword dropped by the lower level Berserker Giant.

"I got a few interesting item drops I'd like you to look at."

She motions for me to set them on a small coffee table as she sits down on a small couch and crosses her legs.

"Straight to the point, as always."

I place the items down with a light metallic thud. Bri begins to examine them closely. I sit down on the second couch across from her.

After picking up the silver sword and touching the armor all over, she looks up at me.

"You already beat the 19th Floor Boss of the Vice City Labyrinth didn't you...?"

I give her a firm nod but don't say anything back. Bri continues.

"So, do you want to sell these? Or get them bonded?"

Bri continues to eye the silver Berserker Giant's Sword, then speaks up again.

"It would be more of a waste to bond this sword, your two weapons are already bonded with the same capabilities. This one just won't have any elemental perks."

The craftswoman looks down at the armor set.

"This too... Unless your mana control is nearing Tier 1 proficiency, this armor set won't be more than a stat buff for you. Although, 73% defense is not bad."

I assumed as much for the sword, but will this armor set really not have any special advantage even if it's Blood Bonded? It may still be a good investment for the future to do so now...

Letting out a sigh, I respond.

"Just the armor set, I'd like it bonded. What'll it run me?"

Bri grins.

"How about this sword? That's more than enough pay for me, the Association doesn't let items like this slip out of Labyrinth too easily. Usually, Rodrigo is my only in. You're becoming more and more of an asset, you know that Jay?"

I shrug.

"Sure, take the sword. But uh- could I get another pair of those lenses of Illusion? Just in case."

Bri eyes me curiously, then gets up and walks over to her desk to reach into the bottom drawer. She throws me another small humming containment case with an exact replica of the lenses I purchased from her before.

Bri replies.

"I won't ask questions I don't need answers too. The lenses are yours, free of charge. The sword covers it. Now, put out your arm."

Bri walks back over to me holding a glass jar and a sharp knife.

I gulp, letting out a murmur.

"Here we go again..."

The craftswoman slices open my wrist to draw blood, beginning the bonding process with my lightweight armor set.

I use self regeneration on the wound before I bleed too much and take a seat back on the couch without a drop of blood hitting the floor.

"Ya know, I'm sure there's an easier way to do all this!"

Bri smirks.

"I'm sure there is."

I sigh and let out a reply.

"So... Should I leave? I know this process usually takes a while."

Bri looks down at the armor set without replying. It begins to glow with a bright white light.

It even blinds me for a moment. I look away as it gets brighter and brighter over the next few seconds before fading completely.

Bri lets out a chuckle.

"You're all set. Try it on!"

I blink a few times, looking down at the newly bonded armor set using Appraisal.

[Berserker King's Armor Set] [Blood Bonded] +73% Defense

"Already...?"

Bri responds as I pick up the chest plate, revealing an empty glass jar behind it.

"Blood bonding without an element stone is a much easier process, it doesn't take long. Plus, it's not like I crafted the sword, I just bonded it."

I nod as she points at the silver set in my hands.

"Try it on, let's see how it fits."

I grin, already in the process of fitting on the gold and silver suit.

It magically fits my torso, arms, and legs perfectly. It almost feels like the armor pieces aren't there... I immediately feel a buff in my defenses as well. This 73% boost is nothing to laugh at.

I also feel it tugging at my mana reserves, just like my sword and dagger. It's asking for a power-up. If this new gear is more than just a stat boost, maybe I'm closer to Tier 1 mana control than I thought...

I smirk, looking up at Bri.

"Fits like a glove."

My next stop is the Labyrinth to face the first Lower-Floor Boss. I have a date with the Behemoth and its army of Knights. The battle is finally about to begin.

Chapter 177

I stand in the middle of Bri's upstairs office with my new Blood Bonded armor set on.

In less than a few seconds, It all magically tightens to fit me perfectly. My arms, legs, shoulder, chest, and back are all shielded by what seems to be a very strong metal.

It's the same armor set the 19th-floor boss was wearing, after all, it took quite the attack to break it open.

I smirk, leaning into the familiar sensation of a Blood Bonded item asking for mana reserves. It only feels natural, so I let a few hundred MP seep out from my stores.

The light hum of mana fills the air.

Surprisingly, it doesn't even feel like it's leaving my body. As the mana travels into the armor set, it just feels more and more like a part of my own body.

I activate my All-Seeing Eye and a wide smile stretches across my face as I watch a thin layer of mana shielding form over the surface of all the armor pieces.

Bri lets out a light gasp.

"You... still manage to surprise once again."

She smirks, looking me up and down as I goggle over my new fancy item.

It is slowly consuming MP, drawing my supplies, but the invulnerability I feel right now is worth every single mana point. I can't wait to test this new armor out on the battlefield.

The battlefield... back in the Labyrinth...

I freeze, then look up at Bri, realizing I've made quite the mistake.

I happened to use conceal to leave the dungeons, but that won't work if I try to re-enter. My ID card still has my face on it... I'd need to scan it to get back in.

Even if I put on my best disguise, it's near impossible to fake a Hunter's ID.

There's no one scanning or ID checking at the entrance of the starter dungeon back in my hometown, but that'll be a 2-3 hour wait that I'd rather not take part in right now.

I reply.

"Hey, Bri... Do you know of any open-access dungeons around the capital? One's that don't ask for an ID?"

The craftswoman walks over to the back of the room, grabbing a small black jacket off the wall and placing it on before replying.

"Of course, there's a few underground Dungeon Hubs for people that want to dodge the Association's tracking systems for various reasons. What difficulty level are you looking for? Higher ranking C-Class dungeons? Or-"

"Whatever is closest. E or D or C dungeons are fine. I'd just like to do a little extra mana crystal farming..."

Bri nods with a smile that tells me she doesn't believe a word that's coming out of my mouth but doesn't care in the slightest.

She chuckles.

"Come on, follow me."

Bri walks past me, making her way toward the stairs.

I nod, following her and taking off my armor. I put it in my item storage for safekeeping. Once I'm back in the dungeons I'll put it back on. For now, I'd rather not be seen in a full set of armor worth multiple gold coins on this side of town.

She leads me all the way down to the basement, with the large metal door that opens up to the underground market.

I haven't been down here in a while...

My only memories of this place are the first time I wielded my fire-imbued sword. It worked out in the end, but my time in the underground fight ring wasn't exactly a walk in the park.

I gulp, speaking up to Bri in a low voice as we take a left and start heading down the semi-crowded corridor full of illegal street vendors and thugs.

"So... I got chosen by the Association to be a part of the newest team of Elites. I'm not sure who else to ask about this, I guess you'd be the best one to give me advice-"

She turns her head back to me while keeping a steady pace forward, cutting me off with a strict tone.

"They chose you?"

I watch her eyes dart back and forth for a moment before she speaks up again.

"My advice? Never show the Association your full hand. What is your mission this week?"

I pause, startled by her sudden seriousness.

"It was to kill the Behemoth. The 20th floor boss..."

Bri keeps walking forward in silence for a moment, her light footsteps echo on the hard floor as passers-by turn their heads to watch her strut through the black market.

Sometimes I forget she's somewhat of a celebrity around here... Though, I'm still not completely sure why. Now isn't the time to ask either.

She finally turns back to me and responds.

"Do you think you can do it?"

I smirk.

"Of course, I think I'll be able to climb even further. This is just the first stop."

Again, Bri speeds up her pace and doesn't respond for a few seconds.

Then her voice rings out in my ears.

"Fail your mission."

"..."

She turns back to me.

"It's best not to get the expectations of the Director too high. The more he likes you, the worse off you'll be in the end. All of the regional Directors are just out to make the Association more money, in the end, nothing else. They care about power and profit, not you."

She lets out a long exhale as we continue even further down the long undergone hallway.

I gulp, thinking about her words carefully.

Another 10 seconds pass before I respond.

"If... I fail, then how will I get more hard missions? The only reason I signed with the Association was to get stronger. I want to prove to the Director and everyone else in there that I'm not just some newbie Elite recruit they can push around."

She sighs, responding in a low tone while turning toward one of the small shops up ahead.

"Unfortunately, you are. No one likes a showoff either. Defeating the Lower-Floor Boss on your first week of Elite training is going to turn some heads. Only Nobles have enough time and money to train their youth to be that proficient in mana control at such a young age."

I stare at Bri blankly as this truth begins to hit me all at once. She continues.

"I assume you didn't show Brutus your full skill list. If you did, they'd surely have a much tighter leash on you. It would take 4 or more days to safely make your way up to the 19th floor and back, that would-"

"Yup... I get it. You're right. I need to be more careful."

I stare at the ground, biting my bottom lip and thinking about the new predicament I've gotten myself into.

She's completely right... I've consumed almost 5000 gold worth of mana in the last few weeks of real-world time. Although it was free to me, that's a fortune even for the lifetime's savings of a seasoned C-Class Association Hunter.

It would be near impossible for a 20-year-old that just awakened months ago to run through that much MP without a special unknown skill...

Even if I had the money, normal people can't absorb mana like I can. Thanks to my plundering and self regeneration abilities I can train many times longer, and my perception skill along with my elemental abilities allow me to train much more efficiently.

Not to mention... My contract with a Dragon. Being able to dive in and out of hyperbolic training chambers is a perk I'm sure many do not have. Probably none...

Sometimes I forget how special my abilities really are.

I gulp, shaking myself out of it, and seeing Bri talk to a store vendor. We've come to a halt.

A short and skinny old man speaks up. He's sitting on a small wooden crate in front of a heavy iron door. There's an assortment of magical trinkets in front of him, but I can only assume this isn't his real business.

"Oh, Ms. Briana, long time no see. You're always welcome here."

Bri smiles.

"Good to see you again too, Silas."

She turns, pointing at me.

"This one gets the green light from now on. Let him in if he ever finds his way back here."

The bald-headed merchant stands up and bows before walking over to the door.

"Certainly, I never forget a face."

With a light metal clicking sound, the heavy door swings open to reveal a narrow hallway in front of us that goes deep into the side wall of the black market. It's dimly lit, and there isn't a single vendor or person in sight. It's empty.

"Have a good hunt you two!"

Bri starts walking forward and I follow after her with a shrug.

The door closes behind us with another click moments later. Our footsteps are the only sounds in this narrow passage. About 30 meters or so in front of us there's an opening, that shines with a dim blue light.

"Is that... what I think it is...?"

I squint, trying to make out exactly what's back there, but it's too dark. All I can do right now is follow Bri and find out once we make it to the end.

About 20 seconds of silence pass, then my assumptions are confirmed to be true.

We walk through the opening and I look around me to see a wide open dome-shaped cavern. The ceiling is high and the air is damp. There are 3 large bright blue spinning portals in front of us just waiting to be jumped through.

I whisper under my breath.

"Underground Dungeons..."

I stare, eager to hop inside one of them.

Bri speaks up as she points to the portals.

"These two here on the left, they're E-Class Dungeons. This one on your right side is a high D-Class, possibly a C. Whichever you chose, have fun, it's none of my business."

I nod as she continues.

"There are plenty more of these scattered throughout the underground market. They're all pretty stable, they've been here for decades."

I turn my head toward the higher D-Class portal.

She grins, then turns to walk away.

"Always a pleasure Jay. I have a feeling I'll be seeing you soon again, so, until next time."

With a wave, and the echo of disappearing footsteps, Bri walks back down the narrow tunnel behind me.

I respond as she leaves.

"Thanks. Appreciate it. You're right, I'll see you soon."

Without another thought, I reach into my item storage and pull out my Blood Bonded Armor.

It tightens around my body, and I let MP flow into the set as I jump through the spinning blue portal. The second I enter the dungeon, I take in the rocky mountain environment to set a Dungeon Walker point here for later.

Fractions of a second later, I teleport away.

I transport myself in front of the large stone arching entrance of the abandoned courtyard on the 20th floor.

Chapter 178

Instantly, I teleport back in front of the stone archway that leads to the open courtyard in front of the castle.

Before stepping forward, I open up my item storage to grab my sword and let Ember fly free. He flaps his wings as I grip the already glowing red blade.

We both burst into flames.

I allow my MP stores to be drained by both my sword and armor as I feel my body surge with power. It feels like excess mana is seeping out of my pores.

"I feel... great...."

Usually, I'd be craving mana at a time like this. Even if my MP bar was completely full. For some reason, this time after stepping out of the Titan's domain, while I'm using my skills and my bar is above halfway full, I feel oddly satiated...

I grin, stepping through the high arching entrance.

The moment both Ember and I reach the halfway point to the Castle wall, the massive iron door begins to scrape the floor as it slowly opens again.

The familiar glimmer of silver armor peeks out before 2 dozen Knights march in a single-file line toward us.

I grin, gripping my blade while crackling with flames.

The first battle begins.

Like clockwork, one of the Knights standing in line breaks formation and begins running at me with its long silver sword ready to strike.

I use Appraisal to double-check its stats.

[Lv. 430]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Armor Set] +1750 Defense

[Enchanted Long Sword] +1750 Strength

Active Skills:

[NONE]

I run forward, charging my blade with ease.

Mana flows through my body so quickly and easily now, it surprises me...

In an instant, my sword has almost 600MP stored into it. By my 3rd step, there's already 1000. My blade glows brighter and brighter as I approach the metal soldier.

I clash blades with the silver suit of armor. This time around, there's an entirely different result than my previous fight. Its sword is sliced in two the second I make contact, and its metal body follows this fate soon after.

The MP from my attack hardly even leaves my blade before slicing my opponent in two. I fly by the Knight, air-stepping past with a grin across my face.

Its sword falls to the ground, and the upper half of its armor slides off its lower legs as it tries to stay on its feet. The metal parts hit the ground with a loud clang.

As I stare down the mutilated Knight, realizing my new strength, its falls parts begin to float up into the air. It reconnects and becomes a full silver suit of armor once again.

The lines where I cut are still there, but the Knight seems completely unharmed otherwise. It readies its sword and charges at me again.

I grit my teeth and run at it too. I slice right through it again with a swift swing of my sword. There isn't even a hint of resistance as I cut the Knight straight down the middle.

This time its two halves fall to the floor with a loud clang of metal on stone. It falls into 4 parts, but reforms back into a full suit moments later as expected.

This is exactly what happened last time when it fought Ember. The black-scaled Dragon tore the Knight to shreds, but it kept coming back.

I whisper under my breath.

"This is fun and all, but it's going nowhere. There must be some trick here...."

I grit my teeth and activate my All-Seeing Eye while air-stepping a safe distance away and drinking an MP potion to use my perception skill on full blast.

I let a gasp, as everything around me becomes crystal clear... I'm hit with the intense sensation of my newly upgraded mana control-powered perception skill.

It seems even my non-combat abilities have been significantly increased in proficiency from this past training session. I did double my MP consumption in a single month, but this is unreal....

I gulp, slowly turning my head to take in the dungeon around me.

The flowing lava below us, Ember patiently waiting behind me, the two dozen knights all standing guard, and most importantly, the impossibly dense mana reading inside the castle.

These stone walls act as miniature mana shields, blocking out some of the MP radiation. There's no stopping what's inside from seeping through, it's much stumper than these walls.

It's... definitely the Behemoth.

I shake my head, then focus my attention back on the silver suits of armored guards. The one I'm facing starts running at me again with its sword pointed straight ahead.

I focus, using up hundreds of MP on my All-Seeing Eye.

"There has to be something."

The fast-approaching guard gets close enough to be an actual threat, so I drink another potion and slash the metal warrior in half once air while air-stepping away.

The mana-infused fire magic seeps out from the edges of my sword. The excess mana looks like a tight bubble around my blade. It lets out energy into the air as my refined attack is released each time.

This is definitely a new phenomenon. With my charge time for a semi-powerful attack being near instant now, it seems excess mana is being wasted on every strike. Although is a minor amount, I'd like to figure out a way to conserve it at some point...

I bring my focus back to the armored Knight, still eyeing it up and down to find a weak point.

In my eyes, it just seems like normal armor. It's covered in a very dense mana shielding, but there's no being inside.

"This makes no sense... none at all..."

I clench my jaw as it turns, charging at me again.

At least I'm some sword training in.

Letting attack after attack fly I get much more used to this natural fighting style. Although it's a completely different attack, it feels like I'm actually fighting with a sword now.

Before, it felt like more of a mid-range weapon firing out shots. I seem to be doing more damage at close range too.

Unfortunately, It doesn't really matter how much damage I do on a Knight that can reform its metal body every time I cut it down...

It continues to charge at me, and I continue to chug MP potions while cutting it into more and more pieces.

My eyes dart across the courtyard as I push my perception skill's abilities to the limit. I reach far and wide for something to focus on while toying with the metal Knight. If I only knew what to look for, this would be a lot simpler.

I turn my vision to the line of Knights standing by near the iron door. All of their armor glows with mana shielding under my perception skill, but an odd detail catches my eye.

"This is new..."

Although the sensation of their glowing mana shields fills my vision, I get the clue of paper-thin strands of mana arching upwards from their exact location and drifting back over the Castle wall.

My opponent charges at me again, but I Dungeon Walk away completely uninterested with it at the moment.

This new discovery is all that's on my mind.

I drink another potion, pushing my All-Seeing Eye even further as I do a full in-depth scan of the area above each Knight's head.

The biggest smile creeps over my face as it hits me clear as day...

I was definitely not imagining it. There are microscopic threads of mana coming off the helmets of each Knight. The strands seem to be feeding them power from the incredibly dense source deep within the castle.

I turn back to the charging silver swordsman and focus on the area above its head.

At first, I can't see a thing.

Then, with enough concentration, it becomes very clear. A small thread of mana, feeding it power just like the others.

I run at the suit of armor with a new plan.

"I'll aim for the source of its power."

As we near each other, its heavy metal footsteps fill my ears and the single thread of mana is the only thing I lock my eyes on.

I jump in the air, propelled by wind magic, and concentrate on a full 1000MP charged slash right at the thread.

As my blade collides with the tiny strand, the Knight attempts to swing its sword up at me.

The loud twang of mana on mana rings out for a fraction of a second before the resistance gives way and my flaming blade releases a black fiery slash to snap the strand in two.

I watch the white and pink thread dissipate into thin air the moment it's cut.

The Knight's long sword stops moving mid-swing and the entire armor set falls to the ground.

I let out a laugh as I land to the floor on both feet with a thud, pointing my sword at the pile of metal fragments in front of me.

"One down, a whole lot more to go..."

I smirk, looking up at the line of Knights guarding the Castle door. The second words leave my mouth, 3 of them begin to charge at me without a moment of hesitation. The battle is on.

Chapter 179

I run past the pile of scrap metal on the floor that happened to be my last opponent and get ready to face off against the 3 suits of armor running my way.

With my All-Seeing Eye still active and burning MP like a furnace, the thin strands of mana above their heads look like glowing targets begging to be hit.

Using my wind magic to propel each footstep forward, I make cracks in the stone tiles below my feet as I rocket at the approaching Knights.

They swing their blades, but I jump in the air and dodge the slow-moving silver swords with ease.

My weapon is covered in mana, seeping out from its already MP-saturated core. Dark red trails of mana-imbued fire magic leave my sword as it glides through the air hitting each strand one by one as I fly over the Knights below.

There's a light buzzing sound on impact, followed by a click as each strand breaks, then the clang of metal armor on the stone courtyard floor.

All 3 of them fall to the ground before I even land myself.

I smirk, looking up at the long line of Knights that all turn their heads to me in synchronicity. All of them lift their swords and charge in a predictable formation.

I let out a laugh as fire surrounds me and I jump back into battle while drinking another MP potion and Dungeon Walking into the middle of a sea of Knights.

With a combination of Air Steps and Dungeon Walks, I zip around the courtyard as the Knights pointlessly swing their swords. My speed and agility outmatch them, and all it takes is a single precise strike to their power source to defeat them completely.

Just 30 seconds and 4 MP potions later, I'm standing on a pile of swords and armor without a trace of mana in sight.

The strands of thin energy fade away into the dungeon air.

I raise my sword up at the iron gate of the castle.

"Is that all you got!?"

I chuckle, letting my flames die down and deactivating my stat-boosting skills to take a look at the scene before me.

Letting out a sigh, my link with Ember opens and the Dragon speaks up before I can get a word in.

"Very good work Master, you've improved a lot since our last battle. I can tell you're still holding back."

I bend down to examine the armor on the ground with a smirk before replying.

"Yeah, I can't wait to go all out..."

Aside from the first Knight I faced, all of these new armor pieces and swords are basically untouched. There isn't a scratch on them.

I walk around the courtyard examining each item, waiting for them to dissolve into the dungeon floor. This is how regular mobs act once defeated... but I guess these aren't regular mobs.

Come to think of it, I didn't even gain a single level from defeating any of these Knights. They're all level 430 right?

"What's going on here...?"

I scratch my chin, continuing to walk around the abandoned courtyard waiting for something to happen.

Nothing does...

Ember speaks up through our link.

"This armor won't dissolve if that's what you're waiting for. It's non-native dungeon armor, most likely from outside this Labyrinth."

I look up, slightly puzzled.

"Non-native dungeon armor? Like hunter's armor?"

Ember nods.

"It looks like it. It could be from an armed guard unit or a Noble family's private army. There are fewer Knights here than last time. The two we damaged in our previous fight aren't here."

My eyes dart back and forth, then I kneel down to feel the cold hard metal of one of the fallen Knights curiously.

I use Appraisal.

[Enchanted Armor Set] +1750 Defense

[Enchanted Long Sword] +1750 Strength

"Look's like we just ran into a gold mine of new gear..."

With money signs practically covering my eyes, I begin opening my item storage and collecting all of the fallen Armor scattered around my feet.

At first glance, while fighting these Knights, it seemed to be shiny pristine gear. Now that I'm getting up close and personal with each one, I see that there are small scratches and dents on some of the pieces.

The stat boosts on this gear are much higher than anything I own. Unfortunately, when I try imbuing mana into the sword and armor set nothing happens. As expected of normal gear.

They aren't even capable of producing mana shields like my armor or MP-imbued attacks like my sword. Whatever the source of their power was before, it gave these items some properties I can't seem to figure out.

"So.... Interesting..."

I place 26 full suits of armor and 26 swords into my item storage while leaving the one that I sliced to pieces behind.

Bri was right, I'll be seeing her sooner than I thought. This time I'll be making some profit.

I smirk, turning back to the large iron door and bursting into flames.

"It's fine to get to the real fight. Come on Ember, how about you open up that door for us."

The black-scaled Dragon grins, then flaps his wings to fly about 10 meters up in the air. With a single fiery blow, dark flames collide with the castle wall and iron door blasting it off its hinges and throwing stone rubble high up into the air.

The dust clears to show a massive gaping hole, the attack busted through multiple walls deep into the castle.

I let out a laugh, running forward to check out the scene. With my sword flaming by my side, I peer into the destroyed castle entrance. Fragments of the large metal door are scattered about and flames crackle on the piles of stone and debris from the blast.

Embers advanced fire magic doesn't go out very easily, just like mine.

I smirk, then take a step into the massive stone structure.

The moment my foot hits the ground, a shiver makes its way up my spine and I activate all my stat-boosting skills along with a view of flames out of instinct.

The dense presence of a malicious beast lurking at the back of the castle feels like it's staring me straight in the face.

I hold my breath and freeze.

Then, it's gone.

My All-Seeing Eye picks up the twisting and fading presence that crawled up my back moments ago. It's in the form of one of the hair-thin mana strands like the ones connected to the Knights. It retreats down a dark hallway and disappears around a corner.

I gulp.

"It senses us... whatever is back there... It knows we're here already."

Ember responds.

"Well, we did just knock down its front door without even ringing a bell."

I chuckle at his response but grit my teeth and continue trying to expand the range of my perception skill.

That feeling just a moment ago... I've never felt anything like it. It's like a monster's mana presence was right in front of me. Then, it was gone. It's almost like my intimidation skill but in a physical form.

I take a deep breath in and out, then speak to Ember through our link.

"Come on, let's go."

We begin to walk down the rubble-filled empty hallways, much more cautiously than our entrance.

I scout out the surroundings, making a mental note of every stone-walled room we pass full of wooden crates and broken armor.

Some corridors are thin and dimly lit while others arch upwards and let in natural light through windows or even open ceilings.

The massive castle twists and turns as Ember and I make our way through.

The sensation of that beastly presence that welcomed me here keeps getting further and further away. I know it's near, but I can't seem to get any closer.

I drink another MP potion and try to raise my perception of the surrounding area again.

The deeper we walk, the more these walls around me keep giving off a mana reading that blurs my mental vision. They're making too much noise.

The more I concentrate, the more the humming and fine grid-like patterns of the mana-shielded walls become the main focus in my head.

It's almost like the presence of whatever is here is just watching me from afar and hiding behind the comfort of its maze-like castle.

I grit my teeth and point at the surrounding walls.

"Take them out, everything. I need to focus on something other than these walls...."

Ember Nods.

"As you wish."

The Black Dragon glows red, shielding my head with his wings and taking out the surrounding walls and ceiling while I continue to let my perception skill map out my surroundings.

The immediate fall of these skill-dampening stones finally gives me a target to lock onto. I sense that dense mana presence again, and won't let it get away from me this time around.

I grin, turning to my right side and peering through a fiery hole in the wall that Ember just created.

Dust, fire, rubble, and smoke fill the air, but my All-Seeing Eye locks onto dense mana readings with 4 paper-thin strands leading to the back side of the castle.

"This way."

I dive through the fiery mess and order Ember to continue breaking through walls as I concentrate on the mana-dense beings that show up on my radar.

We make our way further and further into the castle, paying no mind to its original layout and busting through wall after wall.

"Almost... there..."

A full minute of wall demolition and following the faint sense of mana strands pass before I get close to finding what I'm looking for.

The sound of metal footsteps clanging on the stone-tiled floor nearby sounds like music to my ears.

"Found you..."

Ember blasts through a final wall, revealing a wide open entrance hall along with the enemies I've been tracking...

Orange and yellow stained glass windows cover the arching ceiling, letting light in from above to reveal 4 suits of silver armor pointing their shields and swords at us ready for a fight.

I use Inspect and Appraisal along with my All-Seeing Eye.

[Lv. 440]

Active Items:

[Enchanted Armor Set] +1750 Defense

[Enchanted Heavy Shield] +1750 Defense

[Enchanted Long Sword] +1750 Strength

Active Skills:

[NONE]

"What a surprise..."

Their gear is almost exactly the same as the Knights I faced before, plus the shields of course. The differentiating factor is the density of the mana threads coming off of their helmets.

It hardly takes any concentration to see the dense strands that connect these guards to the looming presence just a single room away.

Less than 30 meters back, at the end of this final hallway, another large Iron door is shut keeping what can only be the Behemoth trapped behind it.

All 4 of the strands connect to a pool of mana with a dark red murderous aura putting out an intensity, unlike anything I've ever sensed before.

It's the exact same presence I felt when I entered this castle. It's time for me to finally see this beast face to face.

Chapter 180

I stare down at the 4 Knights in shining armor before me. They each carry heavy shields and long silver swords.

The hum of mana fills the air as I track their power sources back to the ominous Iron door at the backside of the entrance hall.

It's less than 30 meters away, and that familiar evil red aura seeps out from beneath the crack and from its hinges. The Behemoth is back there...

All around me, there's fallen rubble. Fire creeps up the walls, and smoke begins to fill the room.

There are piles of wooden crates and fragments of used armor lining the wide hallways of the entrance hall on all sides.

Ember's fire magic begins to spread further and further down the edges of the room, shedding more light upon the performance that is about to commence.

Using my All-Seeing Eye, the strands of mana above the Knights' heads are as clear as day.

Their shields and armor give off a similar buzz and I can pick up the presence of mana shielding around their metal bodies.

It's thick, thicker than the guards shielding in the courtyard. Possibly twice as dense. Although its shielding doesn't matter much, all I really have to aim for are the strands above their heads.

I smirk, gripping my sword while focused on the back of the room.

"This should be easy enough..."

One of the Knights steps forward as I begin to run its way. I hear heavy metal footsteps as it draws near holding its shield in a perfect defensive position while readying its blade.

Well, perfect it's a perfect defensive position if an attacker were aiming at its body...

I leap upwards, air-stepping to gain speed and altitude with my eyes and glowing sword locked on the strand above its silver helmet.

The mindless metal suit of armor continues lunging forward as I make contact with the thin white thread of energy. A light buzz, followed by a snapping sound, leads to the loud clang of armor on the cold stone floor.

I hit the floor with a thud, landing on both feet and still holding my fully charged blade ready for more.

I hardly had to let out any MP to sever its ties with the aura behind that door. There was a bit more resistance than the guards outside, but it still broke with ease.

Like clockwork, the second silver Knight comes running at me with its sword at the ready.

This time around, it's holding the heavy metal shield at a higher angle. If I were aiming for its normal vital points, holding the shield up like this would be pointless...

I run at the guard with a puzzled, yet curious look on my face.

While jumping into the air, I lock my eyes on its mana thread. The thin white strand is wide out in the open, calling for my blade to slice it in half. As I swing my sword, a wide grin creeps across my face while watching the silver Knight's next move.

The suit of armor raises its shield, putting it in between my incoming sword and its only weak point. The thread.

I smirk, whispering under my breath as I continue to launch my attack.

"They're... learning...."

I follow through, propelling myself at the Knight with air-steps, increasing my speed and bursting into a fiery ball of flames.

Like a hot knife through butter, my blade glides through the shield of the Knight attempting to block my attack.

There's a loud buzz, followed by my sword stopping for a moment in mid-air. I'm forced to release the full attack I've been holding back inside the blade.

Following through with my swing, the thing blade crescent of fire leaves my sword, snapping the mana thread the moment my black fire makes contact.

I fall to the ground, landing on my feet with a thud. My boots crack the stone-tiled floor while I watch the armor set fall to the ground lifeless and empty.

I stare down at my weapon, questioning myself for a moment.

"Did I not use a full charge...?"

Confused, I reach into my item storage to grab another MP potion while looking up at the two remaining Knights.

As the bottle of pink liquid hits my lips, I feel a pulsing sensation of that same crimson aura fill my mind and body.

The red looming energy at the back of the room glows brighter and it seeps out of the door even further. I watch the two strands of mana connected to Armored Knights glow brighter as the aura expands.

I gulp, watching everything unfold with my All-Seeing Eye taking in the fine details of the entire scene.

The main shielding around the duo of remaining Knights gets stronger... much stronger.

Almost like all of the excess energy from the two suits of armor that fell is now being used for the Knights in front of me.

I grit my teeth, then throw the empty glass bottle of MP potion to the floor, and run forward gripping my glowing sword.

One of the armed guards turns toward me and readies its shield just like the previous Knight did. Instead of guarding its body, it's guarding the thin strand of mana that keeps it in the fight.

I jump in the air, emulating my last attack. The Knight does the same. It raises its shield up high in the air, tracking my momentum as I lock onto its power source even through the dense shielding that covers all of its gear.

I bring my red glowing sword covered in a dense black aura down upon its shield. The strand of mana is no more than a few centimeters behind its thick layer of mana shielding.

To my surprise, on impact, there's a dim flash of white light. My sword faces a bit of resentment while pushing down on the shield.

I charged nearly 1000MP into the blade, yet, this guard is holding off my deadly blow.

I grit my teeth and push down harder, being forced to let out the crescent of fire from deep within my blade again.

Once released, the white light flashes brighter and an explosion of fire and metal fragments fills the room. The shielding gives way on impact and I follow through to let my energy attack slice through its thread

Again, there's a much greater resistance than the previous Knight. After a fraction of a second of pause, there's a metallic twang. It's followed by the snapping sound of a tight thread, then the clang of metal armor on the floor.

I let out a laugh as I hit the stone flooring again and watch the boring fragments of metal Knight hit the floor beside me.

Staring across the entrance hall at my final enemy, I drink another MP potion and point my Blade at the silver suit of armor standing in front of the red-glowing Iron door.

"You're all that's left, show me what you've got!"

The murderous red aura from behind the door pulses again, sending shivers down my spine out of instinct. I watch it seep further out of the doorway and flow into the Silver Knight's metal body.

The mana shielding on its armor glows with the same red aura that comes from behind the door. The strand above its head becomes thicker and much more mana dense.

It lifts its shield and sword, taking one step forward at me.

I plant my feet and do the same.

Reactivating all of my skills, charging my sword up with 1000MP in just a few seconds, and grinning ear to ear, I run at the metal monster before me.

It charges back.

The bloodlust coming off its armor is sickening, but I know it's not the Knight. Whatever is controlling these suits of armor from afar is the real monster...

I'll face it soon.

My boots crack the stone floor with each step as I use wind magic to increase my speed. The Knight's heavy boots send metallic echos throughout the entrance hall.

I focus on it, and it focuses on me.

My sword glows by my side as I run while its armor slowly becomes covered in the murderous red aura behind that iron door.

We get closer and closer until we finally collide.

I aim for the strand above its head, jumping in the air and swinging my blade. The Knight does not change its strategy in the slightest. It raises its heavy silver shield and covers its weak point while aiming to strike me with its sword.

Not wanting to take any chances, I release all the MP in my blade at once. My jet black crescent of fire collides with its heavy metal shield. A dense aura of crimson mana shielding covers it from head to toe.

On impact, the orange and yellow windows above us shatter into a million pieces showering the room in broken glimmering fragments of glass.

The ear-piercing metallic twang of our mana-on-mana collision echoes through the long corridor.

The knight stands in place as my black aura clashes with its red shield. I think quickly, darting my eyes back and forth, then begin to plunder its MP at once.

We're stuck at a standstill.

My attack won't budge an inch, and it can't move its shield because its lifeline is right behind it.

Its red aura seeps into my body, letting me charge my blade with more and more of its own MP.

The Knight doesn't move at all, keeping a steady shield against my blade.

As it begins to raise its own sword, attempting to get in a cheap strike, something odd happens.

It retreats before even throwing an attack.

The moment my plundering ability activates, this Knight has lost its strength. I watch the red aura around the Knight begin to fall back. I'm absorbing some of its energy, but the majority of it is creeping back behind the ominous Iron door.

I don't really care why it's retreating, I'll take full advantage of any weakness it shows.

I push my sword down with more and more force, now, with the black blade of fire pushing close to 1300MP in a single strike.

The dim glow of mana shielding cracking at the seems fills my vision and I let out a yell.

Channeling even more mana into my blade as the Knight's defenses get weaker and weaker, the white light that signifies the end of our battle begins to glow.

Moments later, an eruption of dark flames fills the room as my attack bursts through its final layer of shielding and snaps the thread above its head in two.

The black blade of fire follows through and heads straight at the iron door behind the Knight. With my attack already behind disrupted by the slicing of armor and dense thread, it collides with the metal door and explodes into a fiery display on impact.

The walls in front of me crumble to pieces. Fragments of glass still fall from the ceiling as the stone and iron fly in all directions creating a chaotic whirlwind of debris.

I hear Ember swoop in from behind me as I watch the final Silver Knight collapse to the floor. Its dense thread of mana dissipates into thin air.

I air-step up to jump on the Dragon's back as he approaches from behind me and we both burst into an eruption of our own flames. Ember's dense mana shielding acts as a force field to block out glass and stone as it falls down on us from above.

"Forward. I need to see what's behind that wall."

Without missing a beat, Ember and I fly straight through the fiery entrance that leads to the final room. We dive deep into the murderous red aura I've been searching for this whole time.