

D. Diver 101

Chapter 101

We're all alone in this desolate dungeon, it's just the three of us.

The axe-wielding lightning user yells out while arcs of electricity begin flowing off of his body.

"You two are really asking for it!!!"

I keep my bright red blade pointed at his head staring the man straight in the eyes. The hooded figure has him cornered from behind with his daggers at the ready.

I release an attack. With a swift and powerful swing of my blade, I release a wind-powered slash of dark fire magic straight at him.

With a rigid movement of his axe and an explosion of lightning, this monster of a man turns the trajectory of my attack to narrowly twist his body out of the way.

In doing so, it leaves him open from behind. The hooded man darts in with overwhelming speed. I hear the faint sound of blades slicing flesh, then see the axe-wielder fall to his knees coughing up blood while the rogue pulls a dagger from his side.

The mystery man grins at me and darts backward putting away his daggers while reaching into his item box as the lightning mage yells out again releasing arcs of dark yellow energy.

I produce another fiery slash of magic sending it hurdling at him.

He grits his teeth and raises his axe to block my attack.

The wave of fire makes contact with his weapon making a loud clang almost like metal on metal.

He barely fends off the crescent of dark magic as he's pushed 3m backward attempting to stand to his feet.

"ARRGHHH! THIS IS IT YOU RUNT!"

I watch him explode with anger as he manages to deflect my attack off track once again narrowly avoiding death.

His bloodshot eyes meet mine as he sends a bolt of electricity at me.

There's no blocking these attacks... I must endure it.

My vision is filled with yellow light and I'm hit with an immense wave of lightning once again. It burns my skin and leaves my insides sizzling, but I keep running forward.

CLANGGG

With a yell, I jump towards him to clash sword against axe.

My dark red aura filled with flames collides with his yellow static energy.

We're at a stand still.

Both of us push forward with all our might. I release wave after wave of intimidation while erupting into flames.

He holds his ground while shocking me to my core.

We both let out yells as neither of us wants to lose this brawl.

Again, I hear faint footsteps in the distance.

Then a whistling sound...

My eyes are locked on my opponent, so I can't keep an eye on the rogue. It seems like he's made his move.

The lightning user lets out a final shock wave as I release another enormous display of flames. I fall to my knees. After taking 3 full-on attacks, My HP is nearly 0. I look up at my opponent while reaching for an HP potion.

He's burnt to a crisp as well. The slash from earlier did a lot of damage, the dagger to the side was a good hit too, and my excess fire residue from our clash couldn't have made it any easier on him.

One more solid attack from either of us, and the other would be finished.

I cough up another mouthful of blood and bring the HP potion to my lips as he lifts his axe high in the air.

The axe wielder lets out a yell while releasing a final lightning-axe combo. Then... Moments before his blade comes down on me, I watch a glowing white arrow pierce through the side of his head.

The lightning mage's eyes widen as a white light flashes and he disappears into nothingness before the arrow can even make it through to the other side.

I'm left half kneeling on the ground in shock. I gulp down the rest of my HP potion to twist my head toward the direction that glowing arrow came from.

The rogue's low and clear voice rings out again.

"Good fight, you set up the perfect shot."

I see the hooded man standing 20m away holding a bow with another white glowing arrow loaded.

He grins as I look at him in awe.

"Uh- No prob. You know... I could have handled him!"

He laughs.

"Ya know what, I think you could have. I just wanted in on the fun too!"

I grit my teeth and walk over to him still covered in a dark red aura of flames. I point my glowing blade at his head.

"What do you want? Why'd you even help me in the first place?":

The cloaked man puts his bow down and the arrow disappears. He puts one hand up in the air to pull the hood off his head.

It reveals him to be a young tan-skinned man with short silver hair. His eyes are very light blue, and he wears a pair of thin black dangling earrings.

He smiles at me again while placing both hands in the air.

“Woah there. I just watched you sacrifice yourself for your teammates so I came to enjoy the show. It’s not that deep.”

My eyes and lips tighten for a moment, then he continues.

“My name is Arie. Nice to meet you.”

I stare into his light blue eyes for a moment, then lower my sword.

“I’m Jay.”

He puts out his right hand.

I stare at it for a moment, then take a step forward to shake it.

“Nice to meet you too. That’s a neat bow by the way, and the arrows are... interesting as well. I’ve never seen anything quite like it.”

We both let out a light sigh of relief as the tension lessens. He picks up the bow and summons an arrow pointing it off into the distance, then lets it soar.

“Yeah, it’s a unique skill actually. And- well, It’s a legendary grade.”

He winks.

I raise an eyebrow, then use Inspect and Appraisal.

[Lv. 300]

Active Items:

[Cloak of Swiftess] +60% Speed +60% Agility

[Lesser Demon’s Dagger Set] +40% Strength +40% Agility

[Enchanted Ring of Defense] +55% Defense

[Enchanted Ring of Magic] +55% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Ranger’s Bow] +400 Strength +400 Speed

[Earrings of Alignment]

[Rodrigo’s Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Dagger Mastery

Spirit Archer [Legendary Grade]

I reply.

“A unique skill huh? And a legendary grade? That means... what exactly?”

He smirks, then crosses his arms.

“Let me join your party.”

“Hey! Wait a minute- I asked you a question!”

“You have a unique skill too right? Or at least a special grade of some sort. I know for a fact that wasn’t regular fire magic.”

I eye him carefully.

“I-uhm... It’s mostly my blade. It has a fire aspect buff.”

I lift up my sword, hoping he’ll believe my bluff. The real reason my flames are so special is because they’re powered by half a dozen skills at once...

He examines it carefully, then rolls his eyes.

“Figures, I got my hopes up for nothing. Anyways, let me join your party.”

“Hey, I-”

“You need a ranged hunter, I’ve seen you all fight.”

I gulp.

“You’ve got a point.”

“...”

“Hey- when did you see us all fight?!”

He grins.

“See? I’m great at stealth missions too. What do ya say? Add me as a temporary member, come on!”

I pause for a moment to think.

“Fine. There’s only two more floors anyways.”

He smiles and turns towards the back of the dungeon.

“Great! Let’s get going!”

His entire demeanor has drastically changed. Moments ago he was a dark and dreadful stealth rogue, now he’s grinning cheerfully with heavy footsteps.

I don’t fully trust the guy... but he’s strong. It’s better to ally with him now than to be pointless enemies.

“I guess- Yeah, let’s get going.”

We walk side by side deeper into the dungeon.

I use enemy detection to locate my team. They’re roughly 600m away, straight ahead. Arie speaks up as we pick up the pace.

“Did you guys find any monsters in this dungeon?”

I shake my head.

“Unfortunately, no. Odd right?”

He nods.

“Very.”

We continue onward.

I keep a distance between us and continue gripping my sword to be ready for battle at any moment, but the tan-skinned bow wielder just continues to merrily half-skip along side me.

I don’t sense any hostility, and he did kind of save my life. I would have been fine, but he definitely helped me out....

I let out a sigh as the faint sight of 4 hunters comes into view in the distance.

They stop moving and draw their weapons. I reply by pointing my sword in the air and shooting off a ball of flames to show them it’s me.

I watch the swords drop, then a flash of blue light comes running at me, it stops 30m away.

Maria stands before us covered head to toe in a thin layer of Ice with squinted eyes.

“WHO IS THIS GUY!?”

I grin and point to the bow-carrying rogue with an open palm.

“Maria, meet Arie. Arie, this is Maria.”

He grins.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Maria lifts her sword.

“Okay, and...? Again. Who is this guy?!”

We slowly walk over to her as I speak up again.

“He helped me out with the battle earlier. He’s just tagging along for now.”

“You sure about this jay?”

“I’m sure.”

“Hmmp. Okay.”

Maria lets her sword down as we walked past. She lets out a sigh, then looks me in the eyes.

“I’m glad you’re okay Jay. I- I mean I knew you would be, but ya know...”

I let out a chuckle and smile as she turns to walk with us.

“Good to see you again too.”

The rest of our team members arrive soon after.

The three of them stand in a line sharing similar confused expressions while eyeing the tan rogue up and down.

I nod to all of them, then look over to the hooded man.

“This is Bruce, Nessa, and Abby.”

He nods.

“Guys, this is Arie. He’ll be our temporary ranged fighter. He may turn out to be a solid ally, so keep an open mind.”

They all nod hesitantly, but Bruce breaks the awkward silence with a thud from his hammer hitting the ground.

“Jay, if you think he’s a good fit, it works for me!”

I smile.

“Great. It’s settled. Arie, welcome to the team.”

The six of us head off to the dungeon’s boss room. As we travel forward, the small talk continues. The others begin to lighten up to Arie a bit.

He’s an interesting character... only time will tell how he fits in with the crew.

Chapter 102

As we walk closer and closer to our destination, the odd feeling of being watched from a distance doesn’t change at all.

The air feels rather dense with mana, almost like a dungeon break... but not quite.

The peculiar dark floating particles become much more visible in the air.

I hear Abby’s high-pitched voice call out from the front of our formation while watching her green ponytails bob up and down as she jumps in the air.

“Look! It’s right there! We made it!”

My eyes perk up as I see the faint glow of a boss room portal twisting and fluctuating on the horizon. There’s only one hunter beside it, the exam monitor.

Maria replies to her in an optimistic tone.

“Exciting!”

Then scrounges her nose and clicks her tongue lightly.

“But... are we ready for this..?”

I smirk.

“I am. I’ve been itching for a fight.”

Arie chuckles.

“You just had a pretty intense battle.”

I roll my eyes and look back at him with a scowl, then a playful smile.

“Yeah, but it was cut short! Somebody had to jump in and save the day.”

He sighs.

Maria laughs.

“I’m sure we’ll get a good fight, and win! I’m confident in my abilities.”

She looks over to Bruce, Nessa, and Abby with concern plastered across her face.

Abby’s face goes red as she replies.

“Hey! What are you trying to say? I can handle whatever is thrown at me too, just watch!

Nessa tightens the grip on her sword nervously as Bruce smirks and replies while lifting his left wrist in the air.

“Don’t worry about us, we’ll fight until the end no matter what. Even if we face an opponent too tough, we’ve got-”

He looks Maria up and down, then locks eyes on her left arm.

“Where’s your bracelet?!”

She hides her wrists behind her back.

“I-Uh The thing is-”

I cut her off.

“It’s a long story... I’m surprised it took you this long to notice.”

Everyone’s eyes are focused on Maria, but she breaks the silence after a few seconds bringing her hands back to her front side.

“As I said, I’m confident in my abilities! You all just worry about yourselves.”

She blushes a bit, and the group takes it as a sign not to push her any further.

We continue forward and I hear Arie whisper something under his breath.

“Very, very interesting...”

As the six of us approach, the monitor waves us down and calls out.

“Welcome, welcome! You all know the rules, line up.”

Abby looks back and gives us all a firm nod.

“I’m going first.”

I look over to Maria to see her sifting through her item box. She pulls out over half a dozen MP potions and splits them between Bruce, Abby, and Nessa.

“Just in case. I want them back once you all make it through! It’s... Really, just in case.”

They accept them hesitantly.

Then Abby replies with a grin while glowing bright green.

“Thanks. I appreciate you, Maria. I’ll see all of you on the other side.”

She jumps through without another word.

Bruce and Nessa stand up front. Maria is behind them, followed by me, and Arie patiently waits at the back of the line.

“Next!”

One by one my teammates jump through the swirling portal in front of me.

“Next!”

The monitor nods to me, then I jump through with my sword held tightly between my palms.

I step through the twisting wall of energy to find myself in a very similar environment on the other side. The ground is flat and stretches out in all directions. There’s no end in sight.... The black particles floating off the ground are even bigger and more visible.

The eerie feeling of being watched becomes much more intense. I can feel the weight of ten times the eyes watching my every movement. There is malicious intent, but whatever is observing seems to be more curious, than eager for a brawl.

I grit my teeth and begin activating all my relevant skills. A dark red aura forms around my body as I scan the area with inspect, enemy detection, and appraisal in all directions.

I feel a shift in the energy as the gaze upon me blinks momentarily.

“So you don’t like it when I look back at you?”

I grin as its stats show up in my mind’s eye.

[150m]

[Lv. 310]

Active Items:

[Amulet of Protection] +50% Defense

[Medallion of Mental Fortitude] +50% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

All-Seeing Eye

Telekinesis

The moment I lock onto my target, I turn my head to look in its direction. To my surprise, the moment I do, an eruption of rock takes place 100m or so in front of me obstructing my vision.

I smirk and ignite my sword into a dull flicker of flames while darting off in the direction of the flying rock.

Within a few seconds, I close the gap between us to under 50m. Another explosion blows chunks of stone up to 3m wide up in the air. They seem to float for longer than normal, letting whatever beast is behind the barrier of rubble slip away unnoticed.

“Come on out! Let me get a good look at ya!”

I burst into flames while cutting through the flying rocks making my way closer and closer to the elusive monster.

The piles of large black rocks begin reforming as I cut them down slowing me as I draw nearer and nearer.

“Telekinesis huh? Two can play that game!”

I stop in my tracks while focusing on the floating debris all around me. The force of a monster with incredible mental strength is controlling these slabs of stone. The rocks shift and begin closing in toward me from all directions.

The aura around me darkens and I release a wave of telekinesis to sense all the mounds of earth hurdling my way.

An invisible force of artificial unwavering gravity pushes these stones at me while watching from a distance. The monster feels my mind attempting to push back but doesn't give me much attention at first. It's focused on a singular task. It must eliminate the threat without being seen. That threat is me....

I let out a loud yell while straining my brain to gain control of the walls of massive incoming rocks. With a violent release of my intimidation skill, a wave of energy is sent out into our battlefield's mental ether. The invisible wave of energy travels through layers of stone for over 50m before hitting its target.

Then, I feel the monster experience a moment of shock and awe...

The creature's mental grip loosens for a fraction of a second, so I jump in for the kill.

THUDDDDDD

All of the mounds of projectiles fall to the ground with the deafening thud of stone on stone. I strain my telekinesis ability to its limits while clearing a path toward my new prey.

This unknown monster is less than 30m away now and the suspense is killing me. What kind of beast has powers like this?

I continue ripping through fallen rock with a fiery sword while battling the startled monster in a duel of wills.

Its mental strength has fully returned and it's attempting to lift the rocks again. The monster stays in the same place while doing so. Its multitasking skills must be limited while expending this much mana.

I smirk as I come within 10m blasting away the final walls of debris with wind magic and slashes of dark crimson fire energy.

As the dust settles I take in the view of my opponent and let out a declaration of war.

“IT IS TIME FOR THE GREAT REVEA- What... the...”

An enormous floating eye blinks at me two times very slowly as we stare at each other in awe. The top of its body is nearly level with my own. It’s... much smaller than I imagined it’d be...

The monster hovers about half a meter above the ground and has close to a dozen tentacles protruding from its dark green circular body. Its skin is coarse-looking, and the faint rotten smell of old sour bread lingers in the air. Each of the beast’s slimy limbs is no more than a few centimeters thick but they flow outwards in all directions exceeding its actual body’s length by two or three times.

A wide open mouth of razor-sharp jagged teeth directly below its eye growls at me as the creature takes advantage of the break in fighting.

I watch it fly upwards attempting to escape from its imminent demise.

“Not so fast!”

I begin forming dense pockets of air beneath my feet and follow the monster upwards. I step onto nothingness, but continuously use the force of my wind magic under each of my long strides to push me farther into the air.

I grin as I feel the air flow by my face and the rush of a difficult chase fills my blood with adrenaline.

My acceleration stays constant as the distance between me and the floating monstrosity decreases.

My blade begins to glow bright red and my aura burns darker and darker. I creep up to it within striking distance and launch an attack.

The two of us are flying over 20m in the air. I bring my sword down on the creature with a powerful swift motion. Half of its tentacles are under my blade, and it’s surely a direct hit to the main body as well.

As my glowing weapon travels downwards, I feel the odd sensation of being watched again... It’s like there’s eyes on me from all directions. Any way I turn my head, I won’t be able to see where it’s coming from. No matter what I hide behind, these eyes will always see me.

SHINGGGGG

I follow through with my attack despite the odd violating sensation.

My eyes open wide as I watch each individual tentacle twist and turn to avoid my blade by mere millimeters and the large round body makes a 90-degree turn in mid-air to avoid my attack.

The movements look so natural and graceful.

I grit my teeth and kick off an invisible pocket of my wind magic to mimic its sudden turn and follow close behind.

The feeling of being watched from every single fathomable angle does not stop. This must be a result of its “All-Seeing Eye” ability.

It appears this monster is going to be a tougher opponent than I thought.

After our abrupt change in direction, I decide to pick up the pace. With a loud yell and a burst of flames, I push myself forward using swift gusts of wind beneath my feet.

I focus my mana deep within my sword's core and let out a dark crescent of energy from a distance aimed directly at the monster.

At first, it looks like a direct hit. To my surprise, I feel the familiar sensation of being watched grow greater and greater as the slash approached its target.

Just like before, the creature shifts its body in the air ever so slightly to avoid the oncoming attack with incredibly graceful, natural movements. I grit my teeth while watching the slimy tentacles twist and turn to natively avoid my fiery crescent of death like it's a slow-moving pitch.

With another loud yell and an enormous air-step forward, I let out an even bigger slash.

"Take this!"

Then another....

"How about that!"

Then... another...

I release over half a dozen full-force attacks until my MP nears zero. The elusive monster keeps wiggling and squirming around every shot I throw at it with ease.

While taking a deep breath, I reach into my item storage and take out a few mana crystals to plunder my MP back up to full.

The massive floating eye begins slowly changing its direction toward the ground. It's aiming to make its way toward the piles of stone it previously manipulated with its telekinesis skill.

Going down is much easier than flying up. I smirk and follow it with haste. While locking my eyes on the target, an interesting idea comes to mind. If it can't see the attack coming, maybe it won't be able to dodge.

"Wind Summoning."

I concentrate on the monster's main body in front of me as I plummet to the ground behind it. Eight large spears of invisible wind magic form all around me in a circle collecting strength.

Once we're less than 10m off the ground, I let my weapons fly. The dense pockets of wind soar at it from above. The monster doesn't change its trajectory at all. I've finally outsmarted this disgusting creature.

Mere seconds before impact, I feel the heavy feeling of being observed once again. This time, it's with even greater depth. It feels like every last cell in my body is being poked and prodded by infinite invisible eyes.

I gulp, then watch sharp spears of wind whiz around the monster as it spins its body flapping its tentacles around in a mocking manner.

The main eye looks at me and I see its wide smile create a malicious grin showing every last finely sharpened tooth. The ground below begins to rumble as I see it shift and crack forming an uncountable amount of jagged stones.

The monster continues twisting its body out of the way. I manage to change the direction of my wind spears, but they're blocked by a barrage of floating rocks.

I grit my teeth and let out a grunt of frustration as I kick off the air on my left side to follow its movements even further down toward the dark-colored ground.

The air around me pushes my hair back and makes it difficult to keep my eyes open, but I keep pushing forward.

The large pieces of rock begin moving in on me again. I don't bother trying to use telekinesis this time around. I furiously swing my sword in front of me releasing attacks of fire and wind shattering and incinerating the objects flying at me from all sides.

Every explosion gets me closer and closer to this annoying beast!

I wrack my brain for ideas. Longer-range attacks don't work, close-range slashes hardly do the trick, and my mental strength is pretty much equal, so overpowering its mind is off the list too.

I smirk as a last-resort plan comes to mind.

"It's worth a try. I guess I'll test out that skill I've been sitting on.... If I can get close enough."

Another boulder comes flying toward me and I smash it to bits with ease. At this point, they're not threatening attacks, it's just irritating.

My sword glows brighter and brighter red as I smash the incoming boulders in front of me while shielding myself with a layer of wind from my backside. We're no more than 5m above the ground now, and I'm less than 3m behind it.

A constant futile bombardment of stone keeps me swinging my blade as I steadily increase in speed eyeing my prey.

Finally, my blade is within range. I summon a wall of wind around the monster's left side making sure its only option is to go up or to the right.

From above, I swing my glowing fiery blade downward releasing an intense wave of dark crimson flames.

As expected, the monster's perception ability kicks in the moment my threat approaches. I let go of my blade while using telekinesis to carry it downwards at a swift and constant pace. The monster lets out a screech and twists its body to the right side. Simultaneously, I dive into the same open space pushing off a pocket of wind to accelerate my movements even further.

The creature's main eye opens wide as the iris sporadically searches for an open path to slither away through.

I let out a burst of intimidation with a grin ear to ear as I hurdle towards its main body, both arms stretched out wide. I sense its fear as my hand makes contact with its coarse, yet wet and slimy skin.

"Equivalent Exchange."

The moment I mutter these words, my entire body begins to glow white, and a text box appears in my mind's eye.

[Use Equivalent Exchange]

Available HP: [1515/1515]

Enter Amount: [____]

[YES][NO]

My mind starts racing... I grab the monster in front of me tight with my other arm as we fall to the ground with exceptional speed.

“Available HP...”

Time slows down as my previous battle facing a hunter with this skill flashes through my memories. Every time he made contact with me, he'd do damage. It seems like I have to sacrifice my own HP to deal an equivalent attack to my opponent.

I grit my teeth and make my decision. This may be my only chance... I'll go all in.

I picture the number “1500” in the floating text box, and chose yes without another thought.

A blinding flash of white light appears and that horrible sensation comes back with it. Thousands of daggers piercing my skin all over. It fluctuates from hot and cold while sucking a massive amount of health points out of me in an instant.

I let out a scream of agony as we plummet faster and faster toward the ground.

The beast in my hands shrieks with pain as well. Its body convulses and its tentacles flail out of control as I let go and conjure a pocket of wind to stop my descent.

THUDDDD

I watch the monster hit the ground with a bone breaking thud as I hover less than 2m above it breathing heavier than I ever have before.

The beast stares back at me with its now bloodshot eye growling and squirming on the ground hopelessly.

I lift my hand in the air using telekinesis to catch my falling blood-red sword.

With a final smirk and a slight nod of respect, I release a wave of fire cutting the creature in two.

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: All-Seeing Eye

[YES][NO]

I slowly hover down to the ground and choose yes without hesitation, then reach into my storage and item box to take out a few mana crystals and two HP potions.

While healing myself back up to full health, I active “All-Seeing Eye” out of curiosity.

The moment the skill goes live, I can feel a massive amount of MP begin leaving my body... but at the same time, everything around me becomes crystal clear...

The piles of rubble, the small dark floating particles, the dissolving remains of the monster in front of me, everything.... Even the distinct movements of mana flowing through my body and the floor of the dungeon itself.

I look down at my hands to watch the mana course through my bloodstream for a moment, then murmur to myself in awe.

“I... can see everything....”

I gulp and open my status.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju [i]

Level: 303 [i]

Hp: 1520/1520 [i]

Mp: 990/1520 [i]

Strength: 734 [+646] [i]

Speed: 874 [+524][+262] [i]

Agility: 904 [i]

Defense: 655 [+262][+229][+164] [i]

Mental Strength: 734 [+147][+352][+293][+330] [i]

Skills: [i]

Absorption [i]

Swordsmanship [i]

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning] [i]

Inspect [Special Grade] [i]

Enemy Detection [i]

Body Hardening[Special Grade] [i]

Self Regeneration [i]

Spacial Magic[Item Storage] [i]

Plunderer [i]

Telekinesis [i]

Appraisal[Special Grade] [i]

Conceal [i]

Dungeon Walker [i]

Intimidation [i]

Dagger Mastery [i]

Stealth [i]

Bloodlust [i]

Equivalent Exchange [i]

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning] [i]

All-Seeing Eye [i]

-[EMPTY SLOTS]- [i]

Items Equipped: [i]

Golden Wolf Ring [+20% Mental Strength] [i]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense] [i]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed] [i]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+88% Strength][+48% Mental Strength] [i]

Ring of Protection [+35% Defense] [i]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength] [i]

Enchanted Silver Ring [+30% Speed] [i]

Ring of Protection [+25% Defense] [i]

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

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet] [i]

-[NO MORE EMPTY SLOTS]- [i]

[Hidden Menu] [i]

PP: 303 [i]

My eyes scramble back and forth to take in an odd-looking status filled with new numbers and letters.

I deactivate my All-Seeing Eye skill and the [i] ions and extra lines of text disappear from my mind's eye.

I gulp, then reactivate my skill taking in the information in front of me again.

I start by clicking the [i] icon next to my sword.... It's my main weapon, so it takes priority here.

The Flame Emperor's Sword:

[Fire Aspect][+88% Strength][+48% Mental Strength]

Info: A sword crafted from the horn of a Minotaur and the fiery core of a Volcanic Salamander using the Legendary Grade "Crafting" Skill.

Class: B+

Type: Evolution

Durability: 81/100

My eyes light up as I read the text before me, grinning ear to ear.

Next, I curiously click on the [i] icon next to the new option labeled “PP”.

Proficiency Points:

Info: A single Proficiency Point will be earned for every level gained. Use PP to upgrade your skills.

Cost:

[No Grade] -> [Special Grade] : 50PP

[Special Grade] -> [Legendary Grade] : 250PP

[Unique Grade] -> [Advanced Unique Grade] 100PP

My heart starts pounding, and the grin across my face just keeps growing wider and wider.

I look at one of the most peculiar items in my status next.

Rodrigo’s Silver Bracelet:

Info: A bracelet crafted by two magic users by combining the unique “Respawn” skill and the Legendary Grade “Crafting” skill. This item allows the user to respawn back to a specified location after being killed as long as the bracelet is making contact with its user upon their death.

Class: A+

Type: Multi-Use

Durability: 50/100

The monster’s corpse below my feet dissolves and drops a mana crystal, but I pay it no mind as I’m consumed with awe at the possibilities within the brand-new status at my fingertips.

I continue scrolling furiously as I feel my MP being drained more and more by the second.

Moments later, a white flash covers my vision indicating I’m being transported to the next floor.

I deactivate all my skills and take a deep breath in and out to prepare myself for floor 15. I’ll have all the time in the world to play with my newfound abilities later.

Chapter 104

The white light begins to dissipate and I open my eyes to see a single hunter in front of me.

I gulp and look around.

“Arie... Where are the others...?”

He’s sitting on a large rock covered in moss about 2m off the ground. There’s incredibly lush plant life all as far as the eye can see. The twisting green vines cover the dungeon floor with small blooming red, pink, and white flowers. There are blue and purple berries dangling from thick bushes and short yellow-tinted assortments of shrubbery all around us.

I walk forward hesitantly past a massive tree wrapped in plant life with arching branches that cover our view of the sky above.

Arie responds with a neutral tone.

“You’re the first to come out. Well, aside from me at least.”

He shows me a light smile, then looks up at the jungle’s canopy to take in the view.

As I begin to respond, a white light flashes behind us. Maria’s voice rings out and I let out a sigh of relief as I turn to see her wide grin.

“Now that was an annoying little creature. It wasn’t that strong... it just took forever to wear it down!”

I nod.

“Yeah, tricky one.”

Arie lets out a small chuckle and a sigh of his own.

“It was like all the others, one shot, and the boss is dead.”

He bends one leg upwards to rest his arm on his knee while continuing to sit atop the boulder. The cloaked figure stares at both of us curiously while placing his chin down into the bent arm covering the lower half of his face. The only visible features are his light blue eyes and short silver hair.

A flash of light appears once again, and the green-haired healer comes flying out. Maria is the first to greet her.

“Abby!! You made it!!”

She glows bright while healing the massive cuts and blunt force wounds covering her body. She grins and looks up at us.

“What a great fight. That thing was creepy, but it could manipulate rock too so I finally got to go all out with my combat magic!”

She scratches her head, then continues.

“Oh- Maria, about those MP potions... I kind of used them all.

Maria laughs and lightly slaps her on the back.

“Hey, we’re on the last floor, who cares? I had a feeling you’d use them anyways.”

They both walk off over to a small flowing creek about 10m away chuckling about something, not all the details are clear to me. I take a deep breath in and out while staring at the swirling portal at the dungeon's entrance. Arie does the same with his fierce, yet concerned unmoving eyes.

We sit and stand in silence for another 2 minutes straight. My heart pounds faster and faster the longer our wait goes on. I'm not particularly worried about anything bad happening, both Bruce and Nessa have their bracelets on. If they lose this battle, they'll just be sent back to the respawn point.

It's just... This is the first time I've worked together with a group of people as a team and actually enjoyed it. I'd really like to at least see it through to the end of this exam.

I gulp and continue to stare at the portal in front of me as the seconds pass by ever so slowly.

The tree branches sway in the artificial dungeon breeze, Maria and Abby laugh off in the distance by the stream, and the vines around the jungle floor twist and grow in my imagination as an eternity seems to go by.

Finally, I see a flash of light.

My eyes widen as the short red-haired mage comes stumbling out of the portal with a manic grin plastered across her face dripping blood from head to toe.

She looks me in the eyes and murmurs a few words.

"I... I... beat it."

THUDDD

Nessa falls to the floor moments later. Both Maria and Abby come running over. I nod slowly and whisper under my breath.

"Just one more."

Abby immediately begins glowing bright green surrounding Nessa's body in an orb of warm light.

I become a bit more relieved as the life creeps back into the redhead's face, but my eyes keep wandering back to the portal behind them.

With Maria and Abby kneeling over Nessa as she eventually stands to her feet, my vision tunnels on the twisting energy before my eyes.

Nothing else matters right now.

The branches in the great trees above creek and shift to reveal a small ray of light pouring down from the beautiful blue sky.

Time slows down for me even more as I wait patiently.

Then, a flash of light finally occurs and a battle-ridden tank carrying a crimson-stained war hammer appears before my eyes.

A weight is lifted off my back. Nessa slowly sits up as Bruce lets out a bellowing laugh. A small trickle of blood rolls down the side of his forehead.

"Now that one gave me a run for my money. What a boss! What a boss indeed!"

He looks at me with a toothy grin and nods firmly, I nod back.

“Good to see we all made it.”

Arie lifts his chin from his knee, then swiftly jumps down from the boulder above us.

Nessa stands to her feet and drinks an HP potion to finish up her healing process, then I point my sword off into the wilderness.

“This is our last floor. Everyone stay sharp. Let’s all make it through this in one piece.”

Bruce heals up with an HP potion of his own and we get back into a similar formation to begin the trek through the dungeon.

Bruce stays up front with his shield held steady, Abby and Nessa take the lead with him on either side. Maria stays about 5m behind Bruce while Arie and I cover the rear about 5 more meters behind her.

The jungle is silent, aside from the swaying leaves and crackle of branches underneath our footsteps. There are no bugs and no sign of life in sight. Five minutes of ducking and weaving through the thick shrubbery goes by before I strike up a conversation with Arie.

“I really hope this dungeon isn’t like our last one. That was pretty odd, don’t you think? I’ve never seen one with no monsters.”

Arie nods while swiftly ducking under a low-hanging vine covered in pink and white blossoming flowers.

“I’ve... seen some like it before.”

He stares forward as I jump over a log covered in dense green moss growing an assortment of mushrooms across its backside.

“Oh yeah? Which one? There’s a dungeon here in the capital with no monsters? Just a boss?”

He lets out a long sigh.

“No, not in the capital. There’s a few like that near my home village.”

I raise an eyebrow, then grin.

“Oh yeah? Where are you from?”

Arie’s eyes rapidly move back and forth as he scans the surrounding area, then nods speaking in a low tone. There’s a change in his expression, his eyes are filled with sadness, and his voice shakes ever so slightly.

“I’m not exactly from the Vice Region. I just came out here on an independent contract to take the exam.”

The forest falls even more silent as we continue to walk forward. I eye the hooded archer up and down, then crack a thin smile.

“Ya know, I can’t get a good read on you Arie... but, I hope we can be friends. I want to see what that bow can really do.”

We lock eyes for a moment, then he mimics my thin smiles back.

“I’d like that too.”

There seems to be a lot more to unpack concerning Arie’s past but now isn’t the time.

CRACKKKK

I hear a large branch break and Bruce’s deep voice rings loudly throughout the forest.

“We got our first monster! It’s a tough one!”

I grit my teeth and run forward to join the action. While twisting and turning my body through all the fallen trees and heavy greenery a battle is starting without me.

The blue glow of Ice magic fills my vision as well as the heat from a blazing fire. The ground begins to rumble, and I hear a loud clang of something hard slamming against Bruce’s shield.

Arie and I race forward into the small open clearing ahead.

A long slithering snake-like creature comes into view. Its scaly skin is pure white, with a small red diamond-shaped marking on the top of its head. The fast-moving tongue protruding from its mouth is jet black and split in two. To top it all off, its dark blue eyes stare us down the instant we come into view.

The jungle floor turns into a battlefield, split in half covered in Ice where Maria stands, and burning bright alongside Nessa.

Abby stands atop a pillar of stone between the two of them while Bruce charges forward at the beast with no fear. He yells out to us once he notices we’ve arrived at the scene.

“Sit tight you two! This will be over before you know it, enjoy the show!”

The 15-meter-long Goliath of a snake brings its head up in the air to stare down at all of us. The monster lets out a loud hiss and an energy wave of intimidation erupts from its body to show off its immense strength.

The first battle of the 15th floor is about to begin.

Chapter 105

The bone-white serpent opens its mouth to show off a pair of razor-sharp curved fangs then dives in to attack. I hear another clang of metal on metal as Bruce blocks it with his shield.

The tank’s feet dig deep into the ground as the snake pushes his body backward. Maria lets out a battle cry as she jumps in for an attack of her own.

She jumps over the ongoing attack to release an Ice-filled slash with her sword all the way down the snake’s spine. A thick layer of frozen magic forms on the monster’s back as it lets out a hiss and arches back away from Bruce.

I watch Abby run at the beast as well, the ground rippling beneath her feet. Two large spears of stone protrude from the ground on either side of her, with a forceful hand gesture they hurdle at the monstrous snake.

Nessa jumps in to do her part as well, with a fiery slash she aims for the beast’s neck to finish it off.

CLANGGGG

On impact, the spears of stone hardly puncture the tough serpent's scaly skin. Nessa's sword bounces off like a bat on rubber, and the snake violently shakes its body to shatter the layer of Ice on its backside. The beast lets out a loud hiss staring the four of them down with newfound hatred.

Again, a wave of intimidation is released and the battle continues.

The white serpent's perfectly placed scales have been broken in 3 places along its back. Two small wounds drip blood from the spears of stone, and one larger long slash still glows blue from magic Ice residue. Overall, its HP couldn't have dropped more than 10 to 15% in total, but it's a start...

I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 312]

Active Items:

[Serpent's Scale] +40% Mental Strength +40% Magic Resistance

Active Skills:

Intimidation

Bruce charges forward with his shield out front and the massive war hammer at the ready. With a loud clash, the battle continues. Bruce fends off the beast as it angrily bites at his shield while Abby, Nessa, and Maria chip away at its health.

The only one doing any real damage seems to be Maria, but she is still having a semi-difficult time piercing its thick magic resistant armored scales.

The four of them attack and dodge in perfect synchronicity 6 more times in total. Bruce keeps positioning himself at perfect angles to take the brute force attacks while Nessa distracts it from the side. Abby and Maria are the quickest and their attacks do the most damage.

With a final icy swing of her sword, Maria finally freezes the serpent's neck solid. The beast hisses loudly as Abby keeps it pinned to the ground. The blue wave of magic covers its head moments later and the monster stops moving once completely encased in ice.

The 4 of them grin with excitement and open their statuses moments later. I walk over to them as the snake dissolves.

"Did you all gain a good amount of levels? To face one of those alone, you'll need quite a bit more."

They all nod in agreement as a large pink mana crystal drops to the floor. Bruce picks it up and tosses it to Maria, then turns to me.

"Yeah. As a team, that snake was easy to figure out. Alone is a whole different story. We're all going to need to learn how they fight, and grow a bit ourselves too!"

CRACKKKK

The sound of a huge branch breaking makes me whip my head around to see an identical predator slithering our way.

It's breaking down small trees and moving boulders with ease as it charges at us in a fit of rage. It's another serpent from our backside. I yell out to the group.

"Get back! This one's ou-"

I don't even get to finish my sentence....

Arie lifts his bow and conjures a glowing white arrow. The moment it leaves his quiver, my eyes track the glowing energy soar through the air. Fractions of a second later, it makes contact directly in the center of the red diamond atop the new serpent's head.

My eyes widen, and I cross my arms giving the archer a slow head nod of respect as the arrow pierces through its target all the way through. A perfect circle 5cm wide is left on the snake's forehead as it falls to the ground with lifeless eyes.

THUDDDD

I let out a chuckle... then a laugh. Then hit Arie playfully on the back as the others stare at the remains of this one-shot kill. That is the same beast that took all 4 of them an entire battle to defeat.

"Nice one. Let me in on the action next time."

He turns to me with a thin smile.

"Fine with me."

We all walk over to the fallen beast moments later and Arie collects his mana crystal.

Abby interjects.

"H-Hey! You're like- Really strong!!"

Nessa continues to stare wide-eyed at him.

Maria eyes his bow with a jealous red face.

Bruce nods.

"I agree. That was impressive."

As we turn to continue walking through the dense green forest, Arie replies.

"Appreciate it, but we'll all have to get much stronger sooner or later."

A few mouths opened attempting to reply, but there wasn't much to say it that. He's right... But it's just an odd response considering he defeated that monster with 0 difficulties. We all nod in silence.

I break up the awkwardness and point my sword in the air towards the direction we were headed.

"Let's continue."

The deeper we walk into this jungle, the denser it gets. We stay in formation, but slashing through the thick plant-life gets a bit annoying after a while.

No more than 20 minutes in, another large serpent monster appears. Using my berserker, bloodlust, wind, and fire magic, I'm able to create a pretty deadly slash. On contact, I slice its head off in one hit. With all my added buffs, I still let out a struggle-filled yell, and there was a bit of resistance

while cutting through the first thick layer of scales. I basically had to use all my strength. In the end, I still managed to take it out in one shot.

[Level Up]

Arie sports a wide grin and I see a glimmer of emotion in his eyes once again, this time it looks like hope.

“Not bad, not bad....”

I give him a firm nod back before replying.

“Thanks.”

The others stare at me with a bit of awe as well. Maybe they’re now realizing the true power level gap between us... even Maria. Although, she can’t see the monster’s 40% magic resistance buff. Taking out a monster like this relies more on brute strength than pure magic power.

I read the room and turn to the others.

“Well, looks like you four will be upfront for the rest of our trek to the boss room. A few more levels and studying their movements will do the trick, you’ll be ready for the boss in no time.”

They all let out a long sigh in unison accepting the fact that I’m right. The only way they’ll beat this incoming boss is to level up and sharpen their skills.

The four of them travel up front for the rest of the journey through the dungeon.

The trees get even thicker, the jungle gets hotter, and the battles get tougher. After 2 hours of burning, slashing, and smashing the vines and fallen trees in our way we’ve finally made it near the dungeon’s end.

I know this because while using enemy detection I can only sense one target ahead of us. It has to be the monitor...

After 7 total fights, they’ve all passed level 300. So far, Bruce and Maria are the only ones that have taken on a solo battle of their own. Bruce’s hammer and natural strength buffs work very well against these magic-resistant monsters. With just half a dozen clean hits to the head, the tank can take out a serpent on its own.

Maria has also improved greatly. One of the serpents from earlier dropped a scale, with her wearing one of these, she’s able to outpace the snakes and freeze them solid in under 4 hits. With her speed, agility, and overpowered natural magic buff, she’s more than ready for a tough opponent even with its resistance to her skill.

Abby’s use of the surroundings allows her to trap the snakes whenever they’re on solid ground. The rocks she summons are made of actual stone. When puncturing the beasts, it seems the 40% buff isn’t taken into account with actual solid material. She hasn’t fought one solo yet, but I’m confident she’ll be able to take one on, no problem.

My only concern is Nessa. She’s gained a few levels, and her sword can now puncture its scales... but barely. The fire magic she uses has no real benefits in a battle like this. Facing a serpent one on one will definitely be difficult for her. Not impossible, but close to it....

I speak up.

“Hey, we’re nearing the boss room guys, so, here. Take these!”

I reach into my item box and take out 6 HP potions. I know Maria is stocked up, so I don’t bother giving her any. I hand 2 each to Nessa, Abby, and Bruce.

“Just in case. I have a feeling this will be a tough fight.”

They all accept them graciously, but I can tell Nessa is nervous.

I open my mouth to say something to her, but Maria’s loud high pitched voice interrupts me.

“Hey look! We made it!”

She’s standing on top of a moss-covered boulder about 10m in front of us that peers over a small portion of fallen trees.

“I see the boss room!”

The whole group excitedly runs up to where she’s standing. Nessa stays back and looks me in the eyes speaking in a nervous tone.

“Hey uh- I don’t know if I’m ready for this. Do you have any other ski-skills... I could borrow?”

I let out a sigh, then think to myself for a moment. I speak to her in a low voice while handing her another 2 bottles of HP potions.

“Here, let’s start with these. A few more HP potions will help. Now, skill... Let me think...”

She knows I have more than three skills from our previous hunting sessions. Plus, if she’s been paying any attention to me, Nessa has definitely seen me use quite a few during this raid. If she’s able to watch me activate skills with her mimic ability, who knows how many she’s seen? She has kept her mouth shut for this long, I can trust her with one more.

I let out a sigh, then smile.

“This may hurt a bit... but mimic it. Trust me.”

I place both my hands on Nessa’s shoulder and whisper.

“Equivalent Exchange.”

[Use Equivalent Exchange]

Available HP: [1525/1525]

Enter Amount: [____]

[YES][NO]

I enter “5” and choose yes.

White light flashes and I feel a familiar but dulled-down sharp pain, it subsides very quickly.

Nessa's eyes open wide.

Then I hear Maria's voice yell out.

"Are you two coming or what?"

The others have already climbed over the rock to the other side, Maria waves to us from above. I wave back, squinting my eyes.

"Yeah! We're on our way!"

Maria smiles and bobs her head, then jumps down from the rock out of sight. I nod to Nessa, then briefly explain how this skill works, and warn her about how much it hurts.... She's shocked at first but catches on quickly.

Nessa has the speed and agility, plus enough HP potions to kill one of these snakes five times over with her new skill. Even with magic resistance, guaranteed damage is better than fire that can't break the snake's scaly skin.

With a grin on each of our faces, we jump over the large green boulder to see the rest of our team standing in front of a swirling portal of magic energy.

The test monitor in front of the boss room speaks up.

"This all of you? Who's up first?"

I turn to my group.

"Are we all ready? This is the final room... it's not going to be easy."

Bruce grins ear to ear and steps up to the portal with his hammer over his shoulder.

"I'll go first. I'm as ready as I'll ever be."

Abby stretches her arms and cracks her knuckles.

"I'm next. This will be a fun one."

Maria smirks, nods, and gets in line behind her without saying another word.

I turn to Nessa. She looks a lot more confident now. The red-haired girl walks over and gets in line behind Maria while drawing her sword.

"Ready."

I turn to Arie. He just motions for me to go first with a serious look across his face. I step in line behind Nessa and the archer follows.

It's time to face the final boss of our second test.

Chapter 106

The line slowly moves forward as my teammates jump through the boss room portal one by one.

"Next!"

The friendly-looking monitor gives me a firm nod as I walk up to the oval-shaped swirling mass of energy and take a step through.

I keep my sword ready by my side as my future battlefield comes into view.

Surprisingly, I see a semi-open grass field in front of me. There are enormous trees lining the back walls of the boss room dungeon all around me creating an open circle about 100m in diameter.

The lush green leaves curl out over the flat land to create shade on the edges, but near the center, there's a large portion of open blue sky above.

Large boulders and small trees are scattered around the open area, but there's no sign of a boss monster in sight.

I scan my surroundings using enemy detection and inspect, but still, there's nothing....

I walk forward with my sword out in front of me looking around cautiously as I go.

CRUNCHHHH

I hear the sound of something hard breaking under immense pressure and turn to face the noise.

Nothing...

I squint, hold my breath, and keep walking slowly and steadily toward the center of the jungle's natural arena.

CRACKKK

There it is again...

I turn my head to watch a small tree collapse and splinter under an invisible heavy pressure. The ground around it creaks as some unknown force approaches.

I grit my teeth and ready my blade while glowing with the dark red aura of my berserker and bloodlust skills. My perception is naturally boosted, I can tell where the enemy is, but not what they look like.

Unless....

"All-Seeing Eye."

I temporarily activate my new skill while holding my sword flickering with flames in two hands. My eyes shift over the open plain as the skill activates.

The light pink and pure white orbs and string-like patterns of mana flowing through the dungeon floor look incredible. The air is filled with millions of particles containing a similar substance. My eyes shift back and forth to take in the immaculate view until the creature making all that noise comes into my line of sight.

Less than 30m away from me, the clear outline of an enormous creature becomes clear to me. I can't see its actual body, but the perfect outline of its flowing mana makes it visible enough to fight...

A 20m long serpent is slowly slithering my way. The inside of its body glows brightly with mana, but its outer shell seems to be partly invisible still even to my All-seeing eye. This must be a special "magic resistance" trait.

I attempt to use inspect and appraisal again, then grin ear to ear as it works perfectly this time around.

[Lv. 325]

Active Items:

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

[Serpent King's Fang] +50% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Intimidation

Stealth

Without hesitation, I run at the monster while channeling mana into my sword. It begins to glow bright red as I let out a wave of intimidation to declare war on the boss before me.

The moment I do, the serpent arches its back upwards and stares me down while countering my declaration of battle with a wave of its own intimidation.

I smirk and activate stealth to disappear as I approach within striking range.

The beast hisses and strikes with its fangs outreached.

I dart away from its incoming blow with ease watching the massive serpent's head crash into the hard ground. Immediately, mounds of dirt and rock are thrown in the air as the creature cracks the dense earth while hissing in frustration deactivating its stealth skill.

Another intense wave of intimidation hits me as I deactivate my own stealth skill. I face my now very visible opponent and turn off my all-seeing eye ability as well.

The massive snake's eyes are easily the size of my head and a deep dark blue that almost looks black. Its fangs are just over a meter long each, and look razor sharp. That same blood-red mark appears to be on this snake's forehead as well. The scales on this beast are on another level than those regular dungeon snakes, they're the purest white I've ever seen. The sunlight from above reflects off each scale creating a glimmering shine like flawless diamonds.

I couldn't help opening my mouth in awe to take in the view for a moment.

As I do, the serpent lets out a ferocious hiss while waving its pronged jet-black tongue back and forth. It dives forward at me without a hint of holding back.

I nod, close my eyes, take a deep breath in through my nose, exhale from my mouth, then ignite into an extravagant ball of flames.

As I open my eyes I use a dense pocket of wind magic to push me forward while creating a dark crescent of fire magic to release from my red-hot blade.

CLANGGGG

My sword makes contact with the serpent's upper jaw in mid-air as I push against its hard scales narrowly avoiding the deadly fangs on either side of my body.

I let out a yell while pushing downwards with all my might releasing fire into the monster's open mouth.

CRACKKK

A series of scales on its nose begin to shatter as I sink my sword into its flesh. Blood gushes out, and I see the monster's pupils sharpen.

All of a sudden, the beast lurches backward and closes its mouth with a loud snap. I make the split-second decision to jump away and land on the ground about 5m back as the snake twists and turns its body digging its nose deep into the solid ground to smother my flames.

As it turns to me, I can see the anger burning in its eyes. Again, an intense wave of intimidation hits me as it lunges forward.

I smirk and murmur to myself while gearing up for another intense exchange.

"They never learn...."

I launch myself upwards with a gust of wind making contact with its already cracked and bloodied upper jaw. With an incredible release of fire magic and a whole lot of pure brute strength, the remaining layer of scales breaks as I slice its head in two.

The beast attempts to close its open mouth and roll to the side like before, but I air-step to follow its movements continuing my deadly slash. Once its magic-resistant scales were punctured, the snake cuts like butter and I let out waves of fire into its exposed flesh.

THUDDD

The two halves of the well-done Serpent King fall to the dungeon floor.

[Level Up]

I deactivate my skills with a grin and wait patiently for the boss to disappear.

"Two hits... It should have been one."

I let out a chuckle.

Moments later, after thoroughly admiring my work, the loot drops. There's a heavy mana crystal that I put in my item storage, but also a shimmering white scale with a jet-black string attached to it making the item into a wearable necklace. I use appraisal.

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

"Not bad..."

I put it around my neck, but don't feel the added buffs at all....

I open my status and activate my All-Seeing Eye.

The new item doesn't show up.... The only data under where it should be says: "NO MORE EMPTY SLOTS".

It's self explanatory I guess...

Now that I think about it, there have been a few people that have mentioned the equipped item limit. It really is 10.... I hit the limit...

With a sigh, I decide to take off my weaker "Ring of Protection" with a 25% defense boost.

Immediately, I feel the new buffs activate, and “Serpent King’s Scale” appears on my list of equipped items.

I toss my ring up and down in my hand a few times, then throw it in my item box. The white light of transfer magic fills my field of view as I deactivate all of my skills.

Moments later, I open my eyes to a brand new world.

Floor 16.

I look around to see an eerily dark black sky, with no sign of even an artificial sun in sight. The floor is blood red, and it feels as hard as stone.

My eyes wander around to see oddly shaped towers of jagged dark crimson rocks and valleys that fall deep into the darkness of what I could only guess is an endless abyss.

The air feels dry, but the temperature is so hot my forehead immediately begins to drip with a thin layer of sweat.

I gulp, then hear a familiar voice as I turn to see Rodrigo walking towards me. The tall man in a bright red suit with a short black cleanly shaven beard speaks up.

“Congratulations, number 34. You’ve made it to the third and final test of your exam.”

He shows me a thin grin as I put my hand out assuming he has something to give me.

“There will be no tags or special gifts this time around. I applaud you for making it this far though! It seems you have passed the first test of luck and perseverance with flying colors. The second test of self-induced growth producing a high enough skill level in such a short time seems to have been a breeze for you as well. The third and final test will be all about teamwork, so make sure to find yourself a good group of trusted allies. More information will become available soon.”

I nod slowly, then look up at the man’s emotionless white eyes...

“Hey- Why are you even here?”

He raises an eyebrow.

“Excuse me?”

I gulp again, then wipe my forehead to clear the accumulated sweat before it rolls into my eyes.

“Why are you running this exam? Why didn’t they just put some random B or even C class on the job? I’m not trying to-”

He cuts me off.

“It is rude to pry.”

“I-”

“Congratulations on making it this far, please join the others. There’s only one rule, for now, no fighting.”

The powerful A Class examiner turns his body and points an open palm behind him as the familiar ripple of light distorts the air. Behind this veil, there are a few dozen hunters all sitting around wooden tables trading and showing off their gear from the floors below. This time around there's no large white tent for cover, I guess they're traveling light...

"Understood, thank you."

I walk forward and the first thing I see is Arie giving me a head nod of respect, with a grin across his face.

"Good to see you made it. Did you finish it off in one hit as well?"

I look him in the eyes as I walk over and reply begrudgingly in a low tone.

"Two..."

He lets out a chuckle.

I cross my arms then turn and wait for the others without saying another word. Eventually, I produce a small grin.

It seems like I finally have some friendly competition.

Chapter 107

Arie and I stand about 10m away from the lined-up wooden tables waiting for the rest of our team to make it out.

The rippling light that seems to be Rodrigo's doing distorts the view of the dungeon at large. I want to see what we're up against, but it'll have to wait.

The first to arrive is Maria. She appears out of thin air from the rippling illusion of light with a grin across her face still glowing blue.

"You two finished before me again? Well, it was a fun fight anyways!"

She spins a serpent's fang on a long black string around her finger while walking over and standing next to me.

The next to arrive is Nessa. Arie and Maria look very surprised as she walks over to us without a scratch on her.

"That stealth skill doesn't work so well when I can literally see trees being crushed to bits in front of my eyes. I don't know what I was so worried about!"

I laugh and give her a warm smile.

"I guess you're right... It was pretty easy to track."

I used other means to do so, but watching the plant life being crushed probably did the trick just fine.

She grins and walks past me whispering softly while giving a sly wink.

"Thanks Jay."

Mere seconds later, the green-haired healer comes strutting towards us with a confident, but serious look across her face.

“Now that one was a challenge.”

Abby lets out a sigh and eyes the tables behind us eagerly, she looks exhausted. Maria puts an arm around her shoulder and giggles.

“Let’s go sit down and save a seat for the others.”

She looks up at me, then I give her a firm nod. Nessa follows as well, leaving Arie and me to wait for our final teammate.

The tan-skinned archer turns to me.

“Did all of you come to the exams together?”

I chuckle.

“No, I only came here with Maria.”

He nods and doesn’t reply. I continue.

“I knew Abby and Nessa prior to this test though, Bruce is the only new teammate. Plus, you of course. Did you come here with anyone?”

He lets out a sigh.

“No, I came alone.”

I tighten my lips.

“Assumed so.”

We wait in silence for a moment longer, then I speak up again.

“So... where are you from? Your home village, if you don’t mind me asking.”

I hear an audible gulp as Arie turns to me.

“You’re the strongest hunter I’ve met in this exam so far... and... your team seems to trust you very much, can I trust you too?”

He looks at me again with the same saddened stare from earlier.

I nod firmly one time and look the hooded archer in the eyes.

“Sure, as long as I can trust you.”

He lets out a sign while whispering in a low voice.

“I grew up in the Dark Continent. I’m only here to find trusted allies and rise through the ranks of the Hunters Association. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

By the end of his sentence, the tone became very serious... almost angry...

I reply.

“Understood. Well, I- I don’t fully get why, but I understand you have your reasons...”

He nods and turns his head back towards the rippling light and grins slightly. It feels like a small weight has been lifted off his shoulders. I smile back and turn to wait for Bruce as well.

Internally, my mind is moving rapidly trying to piece this new puzzle together. The Dark Continent is a lawless country that’s mostly closed off to the rest of the world. It’s known for having monsters roam free and is home to a variety of crime syndicates, that’s what I’ve read in the newspaper at least.

It is literally blocked off from all civilized society. About a decade ago, several of the A-Class Hunters teamed up to surround the quarantined area with what is now known as the “Great Ravine”. It’s a massive kilometer-wide, endlessly-deep hole in the ground that stretches hundreds of kilometers around the entire continent.

This is used to keep dangerous monsters from escaping to any protected countries. This keeps many humans trapped there too. It’s very uncommon to find anyone entering or leaving that place. Apparently, Arie grew up there...

While deep in thought, the wall of rippling light in front of me starts to move and a grinning tank walks out with a shield by his side and a bloodied war hammer over his shoulder.

“Hey! Hey! I made it to the final round!”

I can’t help smiling, Bruce always lightens the mood.

“We all made it, glad to see you in one piece!”

He lets out a laugh and throws his hammer into the item box around his waist, then pats me hard on the shoulder.

“I’m starving! Let’s sit down and get some grub!”

“Haha- Sounds good.”

I turn to Arie to give him a reassuring nod.

“Let’s take a well-deserved break.”

The three of us walk over to the table that the girls prepared. They already have mountains of dried food and water bottles at the ready. MP and HP potions are lined up and a few items are being passed around.

Abby is the first to wave us down with a face full of food.

“Hey!! We all made it through, come on! Have a seat!”

The six of us take a load off for the next two hours. We fill our stomachs, lay down for a bit, and make guesses about what this final test could possibly be.

Every minute that goes by builds my excitement. This is the final test... it has to be hard... right? Everyone that’s made it this far is much stronger than any regular C Class hunter would ever have to be.

Most of the C Classes I've met were well under level 300. This exam is different from the others, Rodrigo even said so... That the Hunters Association is testing for something specifically this time around.

As I digest my food, as well as my wildly scattered thoughts, more and more hunters appear from the dungeon's entrance to sit at the various tables all around us.

I hear the A-Class examiner's voice wake me up from my daydreams. He's standing on top of one of the tables and attempting to get everyone's attention.

"Everyone, everyone. Please, listen up! Only 73 of you have arrived so far, and according to my monitors, there are some stragglers, but they may take hours to arrive. If they do, great we have 27 more slots. If they don't that's unfortunate. There's no time limit for this final test, so if we begin now, there's no huge advantage for all of you."

The hunters begin gathering around and chattering softly to each other as Rodrigo continues.

"This is your final test and happens to be the final dungeon in this labyrinth.... Well, there is the boss floor above us, but none of you are ready for that."

A small grin appears across Rodrigo's face, and I see a glimmer of excitement in his eyes. This is the first time I've seen him show any signs of genuine emotion. He continues.

"You may group up into teams of as many hunters as you wish, there is no hard limit. Your only objective is to clear the boss room.... Together."

The crowd of hunters erupts in confusion. Rodrigo slowly nods and continues.

"As I said, this is the last dungeon floor. It will be a tough challenge, but not impossible. Plus, there will be a twist at the end. While in the boss room, I will be giving every hunter a personal handicap based on the data accumulated from my monitors. It will force you into difficult situations, relying on your trusted teammates to cover for the abilities you lack."

Irritated whispers come out from the crowd. Rodrigo carries on.

"I will personally be watching each and every one of your fights with this final boss. If you can take it out as a team following my handicap rules, you shall pass. If even one team member dies or breaks the rules, your whole team will be disqualified. Understood?"

Nods and replies of agreement follow as Rodrigo continues to speak.

"You may train for as long as you need, but considering you all made it this far I assume you aren't the types to wait around. There will be no handicaps while training so go all out. I encourage you to try out some unorthodox fighting methods in this dungeon, you may need the practice sooner than you think. I will be waiting at the

boss room portal to run down the rules with you one last time and watch your final fight.”

He lets out a sigh.

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t kill each other on this floor, but I guess it’s still not against the rules. Anyways, good luck. I’ll see you at the boss room for your final test.”

With a smile, a flash of light blinds me and the bearded man disappears. The rippling light surrounding us dissipates and the full glory of the dungeon becomes very clear.

Those tall red towering mountains of rock from before look like ant hills compared to the monstrous peak before my eyes. The jagged mountain of endless dark red stone pierces through the sky higher than my eyes can even see.

Rivers of red-hot molten rock slowly gush down the sides of the towering structure as it gets thinner and thinner the higher it rises up into the jet-black sky.

A few winding trails lead up the mountain. My eyes follow them upwards in awe.

“So this... is the final dungeon...”

Chapter 108

Hunters all around us are separating into groups, readying their gear to climb the towering peak before us.

I turn to my team and draw my sword, it crackles and flickers with flames waiting patiently for battle.

“Ready to do this?”

Bruce and Nessa lead the way. Abby and Maria follow close behind. Arie and I take the rear.

About two dozen hunters make the trek upwards before us in groups ranging from three to six. I don’t see any larger, or smaller.

A good amount of the exam participants stay back at the lined-up wooden tables to continue readying their weapons and potions, while others seem to be watching the entrance nervously waiting for their fellow hunters to arrive.

I point my sword in the air and let a wide grin appear across my face.

“Let’s face this final dungeon!”

With that, we begin trekking forward.

There’s a flat trail about 5m wide that twists and turns up the mountain. It’s lined with a dark red jagged rock wall on both sides. There are occasional gaps every 50m or so falling off into either massive pools of lava flowing in from above, or an endless ravine leading into an abyss further than I can even see.

As soon as we leave the resting area, the temperature rises immediately.

Beads of sweat start rolling down my forehead, but I'm more concentrated on examining the bizarre dungeon around me.

The air gets thicker the higher we climb, and the sweat starts flowing more and more down the sides of my face. Now, it is starting to get annoying, but I'll manage... It's been about 20 minutes, and there's still no sign of any threats.

I hear a yell from the front of the group, it's Nessa.

"Hey! Which way should we go?"

The six of us come to a standstill lined up in a row. I cross my arms and look at the path in front of us split into three separate trails.

"Hmmm."

I place my hand on my chin and think while activating enemy detection. I let the radius of my search stretch all the way to the end of the dungeon.

It seems like the teams ahead of us all picked separate paths, and there are also enemies to fight on every one of them.

"I don't think there's a wrong decision here."

I grin as a team of 4 high-level targets pops onto my radar closest to us on the right side. The teams ahead of us have been picking off all the monsters, these are new spawns...

"I think turning right would be our best bet for now."

I point my sword down the twisting trail to the right.

Arie shrugs while Abby and Maria nod in unison. Nessa turns to lead the way as Bruce lets out a laugh.

"Sounds good to me!"

We continue onward right toward the danger. I give them a warning.

"Keep your weapons at the ready, our first fight could be around any corner."

Plumes of steam and smoke rose from our left side indicating a lava pool must have shifted or burned up some type of organic matter.

Other than the crackle of fire from my sword, the only noise stimulating our senses are our own footsteps. We march forward for another 5 minutes or so.

The trail in front of us begins to widen and turn slightly to the right side, then makes a sharp left twisting around the backside of the mountain. This is the exact location of those high-level monsters I was sensing earlier.

I let the dark red flames grow hotter and hotter on my sword as we begin to round the corner. I yell out to Bruce and Nessa up front.

"Get ready. There's something up ahead!"

Nessa points her sword forward, while Bruce positions his shield to block any surprise attacks.

Maria and Abby glow blue and green. A light hint of steam starts to come off of Maria's feet as some of her Ice magic boils the moment it touches the dungeon's floor.

Arie takes out his bow and scans the area, I continue walking forward tracking the monsters ahead with my enemy detection and inspect skills.

[75m]

[Lv. 320]

[Lv. 320]

[Lv. 320]

[Lv. 320]

Cautiously, we all make our way around the bending pathway upwards.

[50m]

A section of flatter ground extends the path even wider creating a very open area. There are half a dozen large sharp pillars of rock scattered around that look like stalagmites growing up from the floor. Yet, there's no cave ceiling, just an endless black sky.

We all stand still in silence for a moment taking in the view... Then a loud roar followed by the clanging of hard metal on rock echoes throughout our eardrums.

Four hideous beasts appear from behind various rock structures and lock eyes on us. They're humanoid creatures.... And seem to be a meter or two taller than me at most.

I smirk and use appraisal on the one running straight at me while it glows golden yellow.

[Lv. 320]

Active Items:

[High Ogre Steel Sword] +350 Strength

[High Ogre Steel Shield] +400 Defense

[High Ogre Armor Set] +500 Defense

[High Ogre Ring] +50% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Extreme Strength

Bufs:

[Extreme Strength] +50% Strength

[High Ogre's Resistance] +60% Magic Resistance

[Body Raised in Fire] +60% Extra Fire Resistance

I burst into flames activating my berserker and bloodlust skills while calling out to the others.

"Split up, be careful, and only take shots you're sure you can hit. These are some heavy-duty tanks. Slow movers, but one hit from them could take us out for good!"

I run forward at the approaching High Ogre.

It stands about 3m tall, but it's packed with dense muscle mass. I can feel the deadly aura emanating off it from over 20m away.

The monster's skin is a similar color to the rocks all around us, dark red. The shiny metal armor covers its chest, shoulders, wrists, and groin area.

In the beast's left hand there's a large steel shield, and held steady in the right is a long silver sword.

The High Ogre's eyes burn red with anger and its sharp yellow-white teeth stick out from its bottom jaw.

The monster's frame is much slimmer than that of a hulking tank, but its gear suggests it's a defense type. Those buffs say so too....

The golden glimmer of its Extreme Strength buff reflects off my eyes as I eagerly approach it. That skill is soon to be mine.

Suddenly, Arie darts off to my right side towards an Ogre of his own to face off. Without a hint of hesitation, he runs at it with a glowing white arrow at the ready.

Maria and Abby begin charging at a monster of their own. The blond-haired mage leaves a trail of Ice behind her that erupts into steam melting seconds later. The green-haired healer shakes the ground as she summons two large spears of stone by her side.

Lastly, Bruce and Nessa sprint off to the far left to take on the final High Ogre. It lets out a roar glowing bright golden yellow. I watch Bruce ready his shield and swing the massive hammer around in the air. Nessa glows with the same golden aura as the monster in front of her, it looks like she's testing out that strength buff for herself.

I grin, knowing my team can handle themselves and face off against my newest opponent.

The High Ogre locks eyes with me and darts forward with impressive speed. I air-step forward kicking off a dense pocket of wind magic to boost my speed for our first clash.

We rocket at each other as my blade burns bright red while letting out a wave of intimidation.

The Ogre roars and lifts its shield while swinging its sword downwards at me, I grit my teeth and let my blade whistle through the air at my opponent as well.

CLANGGGGGG

A deafening clash echoes through the battlefield as our match begins.

My vision tunnels and all I see is the monster before me. I grin ear to ear as I push my sword forward slowly overpowering the beast.

It lets out a loud grunt, realizing it's in a troublesome situation. The High Ogre twists its body with incredible precision letting my blade crash against its shield.

Another metal-on-metal clang rings out as the beast jumps backward to stare me down once again.

It grins at me showing off even more of its disgusting jagged teeth, then charges forward.

I do the same.

This time around, I'll have to try another method. The straight-on brute force attack won't be so easy... Its defenses are high and its battle technique is rather intelligent. I have to throw it off its guard.

I smirk and fly at the beast with my flaming sword raised high above my head. About 3m before impact, I kick off the air with my right foot making a 90-degree turn in the air. This is to position myself on the far side of its shield.

The monster shrieks and swings its sword as a last resort defensive measure while twisting its body to attempt a block.

I reach into my item box to take out a single dagger in my left hand. My item limit has been hit, so no extra stats are added, but it'll still suffice for the time being.

The High Ogre brings its sword downward as I lift my new black shining blade up to hit it.

CLANGGGG

I block its oncoming attack above my head as it continues to turn its shield to try and cover its open mid-section.

I grin and thrust my fiery sword into the abdomen of the beast as it struggles with my dagger.

The monster lets out a roar as blood spurts from its wound. It slams its shield against my long blade fractions of a second later, knocking it loose, but the damage has already been done. I see a shift in the Ogre's eyes as it jumps backward again. Fear fills those glowing red eyes as it takes in the actual strength of its opponent.

The monster freezes for a second, then snaps out of it and snarls again shining with that same golden light showing me its crooked smile.

I smirk and let the black dagger rest by my left side, as I point my sword forward getting used to this new fighting style. The combination of my Swordsmanship and Dagger Mastery skills makes it feel oddly natural....

Our duel has just begun.

Chapter 109

The red-skinned golden-glowing High Ogre stares me down 5m away at most.

I can smell its breath from here.

The grip on my left hand's dagger tightens as my sword glows red hot in the other.

We analyze each other for another couple of seconds, then simultaneously charge forward aiming our blades at the other for a kill shot.

CLANGGGG

The monster learned its lesson from our last clash. My sword collides with its shield as my dagger blocks the long silver sword. Scraping metal noises fill my ears as I push the beast forward. Sparks fly, but the creature grunts and jumps back before I can manage to land an attack.

Blood still drips from its abdomen from my earlier hit. I watch the heavy-breathing monster analyze my stance and come charging at me again.

I run forward as well, thinking of ways to switch things up this time around.

Moments before impact, I air-step using my right foot, turning 90 degrees mid-lunge mimicking the movements of my first successful attack.

The monster's eyes track my change in direction and it counters with its shield, painfully remembering its previously failed attempt.

I grin, then air-step again with my left foot launching me about 4m in the air just above my opponent's head. It lets out a grunt and shifts its shield in confusion while craning its neck to follow my flight path.

I throw my dagger straight ahead as I fly over the beast. It continues to lift its shield and watch me from above as I abruptly shift the dagger's trajectory using telekinesis.

The High Ogre's eyes are open wide with fear once again as it stares at me from below. A shining black blade flies toward its open neck.

I create a dense pocket of wind magic above me, then push myself down with a red-hot glowing sword at the ready.

It raises its shield while simultaneously being stabbed in the neck by my surprise dagger. I created the perfect distraction...

CLANGGGG

The massive hulking Ogre lets out a roar as blood spurts from its neck and my blade hits its shield. Its long silver weapon attempts a swing at me, but I twist my body out of the way while controlling my telekinesis to push the dagger deeper and deeper.

I let out a laugh as I stand 3m away from the rage-filled blood-soaked monster. With an outstretched left hand, I pull my blade from the beast's neck, tearing away even more flesh. It flies through the air back into my grip covered in a thick crimson liquid.

The gold-glowing Ogre is a tough one, I've got to give it that. Even with my insane stack of buffs, it can still take 2 good hits from me and almost rival my strength. I hear its blood gurgle in the back of its throat as the beast breathes heavily and grunts while continuing to stare me down.

The High Ogre runs forward again holding its blade steady and its shield held high covering its wounded areas. It's a much more defensive attack strategy, but there's no other way for it to win this brawl otherwise.

I look up at the charging monster and whip my dagger at it using telekinesis while covering the blade in a dense layer of wind magic.

I use this quick moment before our collision to take a deep breath in through my nose, then exhale through my mouth. I concentrate a steady flow of mana into my long sword allowing it to glow bright red.

Dark flames and dense swirls of wind magic engulf my sword growing hotter and hotter as they fuel each other draining me almost completely dry of my entire mana supply. I raise my blade high up above my head while watching the shiny black dagger whistle through the air at the monster ahead.

The light clash of metal on metal followed by the scraping sound of my dagger against its sword is my sign to strike. Now all I have to do is finish this battle in a single blow.

With a yell, I bring my blade downwards releasing all the energy built up inside. A demonic-looking dark red crescent of flames covered in a sharp white aura of wind emerges from my sword and rockets at the monster in front of me.

I watch in awe as the High Ogre struggles to keep my dagger at bay while lifting its shield to block the incoming deadly strike.

The beast attempts to move its sword to block the incoming wave, but my dagger slides downward threatening its neck, keeping the long blade occupied.

On impact, the dense wind energy cracks its shield instantly, splintering metal fragments off in all directions.

An echoing roar fills the air as the wind blade filled with dark fire slices through the Ogre's heavy chest plate as well.

The beast is thrown backward as it takes the full-force attack head on....

I was expecting it to slice clean through, but my eyes widen as I watch the beast dig its feet into the ground while being pushed back over 10m.

The High Ogre cries out and struggles in agony until it finally twists its body out of the way....

SHINGGG

The dark crescent of energy slices off its arm at the shoulder before arcing upwards and disappearing into the wide-open black sky.

I grin and reach into my item storage to pull out a few mana crystals, plundering their MP.

THUDDD

The smile leaves my face slowly as the dust settles and I watch the mutilated body of a flaming Ogre drop to its knees.

The slash took off about a full third of its left side. Arm, shoulder, and all. The beast's armor and shield are destroyed beyond use. It's losing blood at an alarming rate and cannot continue.

I sigh and walk over to my defeated opponent.

It glares at me coughing up more blood and readying its blade with its good arm.

I nod slowly.

"I commend you for your resolve, but this is the end."

With a flick of my left wrist, I use telekinesis to summon my fallen dagger. It flies through the air and lands directly into the High Ogre's neck.

The monster's eyes become cold and its sword falls to the hard ground.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Extreme Strength

[YES][NO]

I smirk and choose yes while taking the dagger out of my former opponent's neck and placing it into my item storage.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 307

Hp: 1540/1540

Mp: 1535/1540

Strength: 744 [+662]

Speed: 886 [+532][+260]

Agility: 916 [+412]

Defense: 664 [+258][+232]

Mental Strength: 744 [+149][+365][+298][+335]

Skills:

Absorption

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Self Regeneration

Spacial Magic[Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal[Special Grade]

Conceal

Dungeon Walker

Intimidation

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength

Items Equipped:

Golden Wolf Ring [+20% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+89% Strength][+49% Mental Strength]

Ring of Protection [+35% Defense]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength]

Enchanted Silver Ring [+30% Speed]

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

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

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

I look around as the adrenaline from my battle begins to wear off.

To my right side, Arie stands about 20m away with his arms crossed examining the corpse of his fallen creature with 3 white glowing arrows sticking out of its forehead.

I grin then turn to my left.

Abby and Maria are about 30m ahead still battling with their High Ogre.

Steam fills the air as Maria creates walls of Ice to block while making "smoke screens" for Abby to attack it blind.

Abby does the same once the steam cloud clears. She creates half a dozen spears of stone to keep the creature occupied while Maria attacks head-on.

They're both much quicker than the Ogre, each attack slices away at the monster's thick flesh. In time, they will win.

I nod slowly while turning to see Bruce and Nessa handling a beast of their own.

Bruce is holding off the Ogre shield to shield and sword to hammer. They both grit their teeth and let out battle cries.

This is a battle of the tanks, I like it.

Nessa darts around in circles landing cheap shots while glowing with the same golden light as her opponent. Bruce has the natural strength and defense to hold it off, while Nessa is much faster and

better at landing guaranteed hits. They have this battle in the bag as well, we'll just have to wait it out.

I smile and watch my teammates fight as my monster dissolves next to me dropping a large mana crystal at my feet. I pick it up to place it in my item box as I hear Arie's voice from behind me.

"These Ogres aren't bad. Rodrigo was right, this dungeon may have a quite difficult boss."

I turn to see the tan-skinned archer grinning while watching our teammates duke it out with the Ogres.

"Yeah, that was a pretty good fight. It stood no chance, but still, it wasn't boring--"

"Yes, I watched the end of your duel, it was definitely not boring."

Arie nods slowly while staring forward.

I do the same. Gold, green, and blue lights flash before my eyes as the battles continue.

Chapter 110

After a few minutes, the two High Ogres my teammates were fighting fall to their knees and face defeat.

One stands skewered by countless spears of stone while the other is beaten and mutilated by a hammer and sword.

Although it took both teams of two close to a dozen hits each to defeat their opponents, the fact that we can all take down level 320 monsters is an impressive feat.

I can't help smiling with happiness knowing my allies are growing stronger by my side.

It really wasn't that long ago that I brought Maria to her awakening exam and she discovered her Ice Summoning ability.

Now look at her, less than 2 months later and she's defeating C-Class monsters.

I continue to grin admiring their success as the corpses slowly dissolve dropping large mana crystals on the floor.

The four of them walk over to Arie and me soon after while drinking MP potions to get ready for future battles.

We briefly talk about our fights and share tactics about the Ogres' unique shield and sword movements. With a round of head nods, we got back into our simple formation and carried on following the winding path upwards.

Over the next hour and a half, we spiraled up the tall mountain one High Orge battle at a time. There were 4 more groups we faced off against. Each time we'd split the monsters up naturally according to our growing abilities.

I fought one battle with Nessa and another with Abby. The other two were solo brawls. I felt it was necessary for us all to switch around partners if we were going to fight as a team against the boss. So, Arie fought with Maria and Bruce one time each as well.

Our chemistry is okay, but It could be better. We're all pretty overpowered. Our gear and skillsets make these battles pretty simple.

The more we fight, the easier it is to predict the Ogre's movements. All new spawns are exactly the same. We as hunters learn more every battle, while they stay stagnant.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I gain 4 levels in total, bringing me to level 311. It still takes three solid hits to take one of these Ogres out, but it is much less difficult than my first fight.

The air continues to get thicker and thicker. Not only do the steam and smoke from the lava pools around us make it hard to breathe, but the mana levels in the air up here also create an odd sensation similar to a dungeon break.

All of the previous 3 diverted paths have connected as one about halfway up the climb. We've circled around the mountain 6 full times now and are definitely nearing the top.

Sweat covers my arms and slides down the sides of my face. Every few steps, droplets fall to the ground creating a sharp hissing noise as they evaporate on contact with the hot red rocks below.

All six of us are breathing heavily, but honestly, it's more of a workout than an actual painful experience.

The hot air may be a little uncomfortable, but I'm almost used to it by now... It's like we're walking through a massive sauna.

Nessa's voice rings out from ahead.

"Hey! Guys! I think I see it, I think we made it to the top!"

Our orderly rhythmic footsteps come to a halt as we round the final bend.

A crowd of hunters waits patiently in a line directly in front of the large light grey circle of energy.

I count 3 teams in total. None of them look too familiar, but they're all stacked with impressive gear and have made it this far as well.... They must be excellent hunters.

A flash of white light appears in front of the portal as we get in line behind another group.

Rodrigo returns with a team of 3 other hunters. He nods to them with a thin smile. They exchange a few words that I can't make out from here, then another flash of light blinds me.

The 3 of them are gone...

"Did... they pass the exam.. or not?"

Arie speaks up from behind me.

"That's what I'm wondering."

Maria turns around and smiles at me eagerly.

"We're so close! I'm excited Jay!! I'm really excited!!"

She's jumping up and down grinning ear to ear.

I smile and nod while looking forward to see what exactly is happening at the front of the line.

"Me too, me too."

Rodrigo begins pointing to each of the team members in the next group telling them something that visibly surprises each member. Then, they all jumps through the portal together to face the boss.

The line moves forward and we wait in silence.

Another 10 minutes pass and the same white light appears. This time, only one hunter comes out with Rodrigo. The remaining team member is covered in near-fatal wounds.

Rodrigo speaks a few inaudible words, then that light flashes and the hunter disappears.

I gulp while watching the next team go through the exact same process while entering the portal.

We all step forward in line, then wait another 10 minutes or so before the full team returns with the examiner.

A flash of light later and the final group in front of us enters the portal. During all of this, 2 other groups got into line behind us. It seems like pretty much everyone that made it to this floor is very capable.

Moments later, the white light flashes, and only Rodrigo comes out of the portal. He shakes his head back and forth slowly.

"Well, that was unfortunate."

He walks over to us with a long sigh.

"You 6 are up next? Let's see here..."

He sticks his hand into the left pocket of his suit and pulls out a small white piece of paper.

"All right. First things first, do you all remember the rules? You must defeat this final boss together as a team. I will be giving each of you a handicap and if even one of you fails this trial, all of you fail as well."

We all look at each other and nod without saying a word, Rodrigo continues while looking down at the small sheet of paper.

"So, first we'll start with Nessa. Apparently, you can mimic skills, and you're an impressive sword wielder. So... you're only allowed to mimic the boss' skill."

She smirks.

"This will be easy, th-"

"And you can't use your sword either."

She stops to think for a moment, then nods firmly one time while putting her sword into her item box.

"If that's your rule, I'll comply."

Rodrigo turns to Bruce.

"The tank of the group, Bruce, am I correct?"

He nods.

"No shield for you during this battle, you'll have to either rely on an offensive fighting style or find other ways to block."

Bruce grins, putting away his shield and swinging his hammer up onto his shoulder.

"Sound good to me."

The examiner faces Abby.

"Hello Abby, I've heard good things about you. I wouldn't have expected a member from the association to team with a group of randoms."

Abby rolls her eyes.

"Nice to meet you too."

Rodrigo grins, then continues.

"You'll have to change up your style. No earth magic is allowed. You must become your team's healer, or finding another weapon to wield if you'd like to deal any damage."

Abby gulps, then nods.

"I'll make do."

He nods back.

"Maria. You have some incredibly impressive Ice magic, it is not allowed during this battle."

Her eyes widen. I'm sure she saw this coming, but I guess it would still be a shock. Maria's magic is her only overpowered quality, taking that away will make for a pretty difficult fight.

She nods slowly.

"Understood."

Rodrigo eyes Arie and me.

"You two... are an interesting couple."

He looks down at the small sheet of paper, then back up at us.

"You know.... both of you are in the top 10 for most hunters killed during this exam."

We both look at each other, then back at Rodrigo as he continues.

"And I mean killed. Not just sent back to the spawn point, literally killed."

We both face forward and give simultaneous shrugs, then I speak up.

"You... did say that wasn't against the rules."

The tall man toughens his lips, sighs, then speaks up again.

"Anyways, Arie you can't use your bow or archer skill. Jay, any use of fire is not allowed."

Arie nods, placing his bow into his item box while taking out a pair of daggers.

I pause for a moment, then look down at my sword. I lift it in the air to show Rodrigo. It flickers with fire residue.

"So... this is a sword fused with a fire stone. If I concentrate any amount of mana into the blade, it produces flames... Technically they're not mine, could I-"

"No. No use of flames is allowed."

I frown slightly while putting away my sword, then take out a pair of my own black shining daggers.

"These will do."

Rodrigo eyes them curiously for a moment, then turns around to face the portal.

"Very well, follow me. Your final test begins now."

The tall man wearing a well-fitted red suit walks forward through the fluctuating mass of energy in front of us.

I grin and speak up.

"Let's do this. It's time to finally become C-Class Hunters. "

The 6 of us follow close behind stepping through the portal one by one.