

D. Diver 251

Chapter 251

A friendly-looking guard, just above level 300 with a body-hardening skill in a full suit of C-Class grade armor waves us down from almost 10 meters away.

Lydia raises her gaze to meet his as the man yells out.

"You all made it back just in time, and you've brought reinforcements. Even better."

She crosses her arms as we all approach and then comes to a halt right beneath the bold black lettering of the sign spelling out [Restricted].

"Yes, we have made it back. How are things on your end? It seems like we're up to the 18th floor."

The man gulps and his tone completely changes.

"If that's true, the collapses are only happening faster. It was less than 6 hours since the last one."

He pauses.

"A-And 11 or 12 hours before that was the one before.. And almost a full day-"

The white-haired mage cuts him off.

"So, half the time between every collapse. At this rate, it should be completely break in 6 hours... The Director sure does like to cut it close."

He nods in response.

"It seems that way. We don't have any hunters eligible to defeat floor 20 and above right now. We'll have to leave the higher floors in your hands."

His eyes move to me, then Abby, Fisher, Maria, and Arie. He looks back to Lydia before continuing.

"A team of 6 Elites. I'm happy to see all of you here, but are you sure you'll be able to make it up to floor 25? Even split up? That's well past your classification of a B-Class threat."

I raise an eyebrow and interject.

"What do you mean split up? Why would we have to do that?"

Fisher laughs and butts in.

"I mentioned this earlier to your teammates, but you weren't here to listen."

Abby and I turn to each other, then back over to the smug blue-haired hunter as he takes the lead.

"While we climb the Labyrinth floors, the ones we venture through won't just disappear because we've passed it. The entire Labyrinth will only collapse once the final boss is taken out."

I nod slowly, piecing together this information.

The water mage continues.

"So, while some of us continue to climb, others will have to wait behind on lower floors to protect the city from the dangers within. If we just abandon the lower floors before they fully break, monsters can easily run loose through that shielding."

He points to the massive rectangular metal contraption in front of us.

The guard closes his eyes and nods while turning to bang on the side of the silver wall three times.

"Yeah, this thing can hold back level 350 to 400 level threats at most. It's nearly impossible to craft shielding at a higher grade than that in mass quantities without spending a fortune. The surges have never been this bad, we never thought the Labyrinth would break..."

I stay quiet, as the chatter of my teammates and hundreds of hunters in the square all begin blending together.

It seems this is really a one-of-a-kind phenomenon. Labyrinth breaks are this rare, that they never even thought to prepare for it. There must be some incredible loot, and even stringer monsters in there.

The face of that Arch Demon's Body Double flashes in my mind's eye as I grin and mutter to myself.

"Looks like I'll get to go all out."

Fisher throws a friendly arm around my shoulder.

"Yeah, that's right. Let's see if you've improved this week. Maybe you can guard the 18th and 19th floor while Lydia and I finish the job up top."

I reply, seeing my teammates get riled up behind me at this statement.

"Yeah, we'll see what happens I guess."

The B-Class Ice Mage lets out a chuckle, then turns away back to the guard handing him a tablet. He begins to sign off and write information down as I think to myself.

Fisher can't sense my mana control at all.

It makes sense why he'd think I'm still rather weak in comparison to him. Just less than a week ago in real world time, he trained me to finally defeat a monster on the 19th floor of a Labyrinth. Those monsters were barely breaching level 400.

Plus... I'm the strongest of all my team members. If that was my power back then, he must still think even more poorly of them.

In reality, all 3 of them are nearing his mana control level themselves. I'm sure he'll come to his senses once we finally get onto the battlefield.

The corners of my lips begin to curl. The now very stern and serious guard unlatches the thick silver door while speaking up.

Mental on metal scrapes and a blinding white light pours out of the contraption. The light hum of shielding fills all our ears mixed with his steady voice.

"Alright, you 6. On behalf of every Solaran here, I thank you for fighting. The average citizen may not ever know the magnitudes of evil you're about to face."

The guard pauses as my foot touches the cool hard white surface of the shielding room. Then, continues.

"I may not ever know myself, but we thank you. Best of luck in there."

After that there's silence. We all enter the metal box and see a white staircase heading down underground.

Everything is white.

The walls, the floor, the stairs, everything.

It's just like the training room we left in the city, but shaped like a stairway downward with twists and turns having no apparent end in sight. The 6 of us head down about 10 meters, then make a sharp right turn leaving us with flat white slightly vibrating ground for another 5 meters or so.

The footsteps of the 5 other team members around me are slowly drowned out by the increased humming noises in the tight white walls.

Another staircase brings us 10 meters further underground.

The small flat hall leading to the next staircase glows a tint of red. Wisps of fog creep around the corner and I can sense there's a portal very close by.

As we turn the corner to head down the next staircase, it reveals itself before us.

A violently spinning dungeon break comes into full view at the bottom of the next flight of stairs.

The Labyrinth breaks spins and vibrates, shaking the shielding all around us just slightly.

I've seen worse breaks, but the edges of the spinning mass on its edges is dissolving into the air and beginning to slowly fill this white-walled hallway with dark red mana-imbued mist.

In a matter of hours, it'll definitely be a completely different scenario here.

I reach under my armor and cloak to pull out my sword.

Everyone around me either begins to glow, draws their weapons, or both.

The 6 of us all step down the last staircase and jump through without a word. This is our mission.

We enter the labyrinth.

Red swirling mist clouds my vision as I step through. The dark crimson fog slowly fades to white as transfer magic activates.

Everyone is brought to a rugged mountain range, covered in rocks without many trees in sight. The ground is hard and brown. For as far as the eye can see it's littered with stones and occasional dark green shrubs.

Looking ahead, the sky is grey and the mountains stretch out indefinitely.

I whisper under my breath as we walk forward.

"The 18th Floor... this should be a breeze. We'll be fighting the Labyrinth Boss in no time."

Chapter 252

The 6 of us walk out into the rocky dungeon under the grey sky. Rolling brown hills and valleys fill our vision as far as the eye can see.

About 3km away, I can sense a few groups of monsters clumped together. Some even occasionally disappear from my radar.

The Solaran Hunters must be here fending off monsters waiting for our Labyrinth Ascent.

Lydia takes the lead and Fisher follows right behind her. I don't mind. This climb will be fast.

The fighting won't get serious enough for me to want to join in until far past the 20th Floor.

I follow, continuing to scan the environment around me and testing the limits of my newly enhanced mana control.

With plunderer, I'm able to instantly take MP from the ground beneath my feet, and even the air around me.

Mana is so abundant here, that I almost feel invincible.

My perception range has increased dramatically too. The entire dungeon is clear to me without overpowering my All-Seeing Eye one bit.

It may be a smaller dungeon, but I still would have had to re-up my MP bar with this much skill strain if I tried using this much perception ability even yesterday.

Each individual object is much clearer to me too. I can sense and track the swirling magic in every rock, monster, and mountain within the confines of these dungeon walls.

The closer it is to me, obviously the more detail I can perceive.

I see small traces of MP entering Lydia's body just like when I attempted to absorb mana from the mist upon leaving the treating capsule in the city. It seems she's constantly working on her skills and pushing the limits as well.

As for my combat skills, I won't have a chance to test them out anytime soon. Though, my teammates might.

Just 500 meters in, we come across a team of hunters fending off a group of mutant High Orcs.

They wear red robes, all have decent gear and solid combat skills. A team of 5 level 350-360s is taking on these level 370-380 Orcs without much problem. One of them has a major team strength buff skill so they're using it very strategically.

He's the one that calls out to us as we pass by in range.

"The Elites! Good to see you've made it. We have two other squads on this floor, and one more up on the 19th. Everything 20 and above is up to you power holders."

I raise an eyebrow at the "Power Holders" line. I haven't heard that one used before... Maybe he's referring to mana control users?

Fisher replies.

"Keep up the good work. We'll have this Labyrinth cleared before you know it!"

The hunter smiles, pushing out another golden wave of energy for his teammates as the Final Mutant High Orc is taken out.

They wave us off and search for more.

The further into the dungeon we travel, the more Orcs show up.

Without much effort at all, each of us is able to one-shot the creatures without batting an eye.

We pick up the pace and begin to run. After 40 minutes, and passing the two other groups keeping Orcs at bay, we mark it to the Boss Room.

It's a few shades darker grey than usual, but nothing too out of the ordinary. We enter immediately.

Maria and Abby slice the Boss into pieces without a moment's hesitation. The High Orc King falls to the Boss Room's rocky ground and we're all transported to the 19th Floor.

As we all materialize back onto a flat glossy hard black surface Fisher turns to us and speaks.

"Now- I'll be the first to say that was pretty impressive, but let's see how all of you fare against a floor like this!"

He smirks and points out at the jagged crystal-like maze of a dungeon, then turns back to me.

"Looks familiar doesn't it?"

I nod.

"It does..."

The crisp air of a Berserker Giant Dungeon fills my lungs as we step forward into the mazes of glossy black crystal before us.

I could easily fly over all of this and avoid every Berserker with ease. Those green-eyed, muscle-covered, red-skinned fiends are rather annoying to deal with.

It seems everyone else is thinking in a similar school of thought.

Abby is quick to activate her earth magic and make stone steps above the floor, while both Maria and Lydia have the same idea to create waves of ice angles upwards to the sky at an angle easy to walk on.

I follow on their leftover residue, using trace amounts of mana manipulation in my feet to mold the ice to my liking. It ensures I don't slip.

Moving above the twisting black mazes and caverns will save us a lot of time.

As we walk further into the sky, balancing on the archways of rock and stone, I watch monster run around maniacally in the mazes below. We would have spent way too much time fighting if we stayed down there.

The 6 of us almost make it halfway through the whole Dunegon before seeing anything too interesting.

I spy a team of two hunters, a man with bright yellow hair using lighting magic and a dark-skinned woman wielding daggers moving with incredible speed.

They're facing off against a 4-meter-tall Berserker Giant alone... and winning.

The Lightning Summoner continuously shocks the monster while the dagger wielder with an [Extreme Speed] Skill runs circles around the beast.

In under a minute, the creature falls to the floor. Busted armor, sword, and all.

We're in quite a hurry, so Abby Maria, and Lydia don't slow their pace as we continue to use elemental magic and travel through the sky above the dangers below.

The Lighting user notices as we pass and waves while yelling out.

"Just in time! We'll hold down the 19th floor. Don't worry one bit."

With that, the 6 of us continue forward.

My teammates are brimming with energy, I'm sure they're all very confident they can take on the monsters down below.

I'm confident in them too, but one person here isn't.

Fisher speaks up as we begin to near the end of the dungeon. The Boss room portal comes into view, this is what sets him off.

"Hey, are you 4 going to do any fighting? Don't you think we should gauge your strength? I'd like to see you fight one of these mobs."

Arie shrugs.

"Sure, I'd like to fight one too."

Abby and Maria happily reply, showing their excitement and eagerness to fight one of the odd-looking creatures that we keep passing below.

I speak up too.

"I'd rather wait to fight something more interesting."

As all of the misshapen crystalized black mountain peaks and low maze-filled valleys pass, we finally make it to a wide-open area of flat ground with the Boss Room portal just 100 meters away.

It's a hard black floor that we can nearly see our selections in while looking down. To our left and right side, there are high jagged walls of hexagonal crystals in all shapes and sizes.

Granting our wish, two Berserkers come running our way straight on. From the right side, I can sense a third slowly creeping in from behind a crystal structure.

Abby and Maria run forward charging their blades and let out attacks before any of us can even blink.

The Berserker lurking off to our right, behind a small ledge jumps out with its green eyes locked straight ahead.

Arie releases a fully charged glowing white arrow between Fisher and Lydia straight at the monster's forehead.

Seconds later, the 3 creatures that attacked are blown to pieces on the spot.

I let out a laugh, walking forward like nothing happened.

My teammates basically do the same, powering down their skills and not bothering to check for loot, fully focused on the boss room portal ahead.

The white-haired mage speaks to Maria before we enter.

"Looks like you've gotten a lot stronger since the last time we trained together. How interesting..."

She carries her gaze over all of us, stopping on me, then turning her head to the Boss Room portal.

"Well, that's good. The more availability of mana control users the better. We'll need it."

Fisher is left speechless. He just follows after that display and glows a dull blue.

Like that, we all step forward into the swirling grey portal to see the massive Berserker King waiting for us.

I remember facing this boss vividly. Its Final Breath skill is a deadly buff... One that I have now, but would rather never use or face again if I didn't have to.

I murmur under my breath as my 3 teammates approach it.

"One-hit kill that monster, it has a nasty buff on low health."

Arie smirks, charging an arrow as the blue and green mages run ahead with their weapons drawn.

"I was planning on it."

A flash of white light along with flying ice and rock erupts from the scene as the monster lets out a single roar. The boss is defeated in an instant.

I grip my sword and stare straight ahead, eagerly awaiting the transfer magic to take us to the next floor.

After a small celebration, it does. Everyone is looking forward to fighting the stronger monsters that we came here to face.

We're all brought to a narrow black passageway just like the two others I've been in before. It's no more than 20 meters long and the walls are lined with dark stone.

This small area is a floor connector that only spawns for very special events. The Lower Floor Boss and the Final Boss are the only times I've ever seen it before.

As I grin and move forward while igniting my sword, the white-haired mage's voice rings out in my ears.

"So you've been in one of these before, haven't you?"

I pause, but she continues before I can think of a reply.

"Every Labyrinth has very different Lower-Floor Bosses. So if you've faced the one in the Capital and think this one will be the same, you're mistaken."

I turn with tightened lips full of curiosity.

She speaks again, moving forward at the same pace as me.

"It should be at similar strength, but every Special Boss is unique to its Labyrinth. We've never found one that matches another. Unlike the dungeon floors. Even if you're strong enough, it's still best to be cautious. Anything can happen on a floor like this."

We all stand in silence, staring at the slowly spinning dark grey portal at the end of the black-stone hall. It vibrates and lets off a low humming waiting for us to enter.

There are wisps of jet-black energy trailing off its edges, slowly filling the small hallway with white, grey, and black mana. It's just like the mana coming off of the break portal when we entered. Not violent or unstable, but emanating power.

I pause and observe the sight before me for a solid 10 seconds, then finally speak up.

"Understood, let's do this."

Chapter 253

We slowly walk forward while activating our skills.

The white, green, blue, and red lights shine through the grey mana-imbued fog until we're completely engulfed.

White transfer magic blinds me as I push my perception skills to their limits.

What Lydia said stuck out to me. Special Bosses are much more intelligent than most, it's best to stay on guard even if I'm clearly strong enough to defeat it.

If this is going to be a brand new Floor Boss, I'd like to find out everything there is to know about it before it gets a chance to make its move.

The white light around me fades away, revealing the light purple tint of the Lower-Floor Boss' domain.

[400m]

[Lv. 440]

[Lv. 440]

[Lv. 440]

[Lv. 440]

[250m]

[Lv. 435]

[Lv. 435]

[Lv. 435]

[Lv. 435]

[Lv. 435]

[Lv. 435]

[100m]

[Lv. 430]

[Lv. 430]

[Lv. 430]

[Lv. 430]

[Lv. 430]

[Lv. 430]

Readings pop up all over my inspect and enemy detection skills.

The Floor Boss' minion's levels fill my mind's eye as my gaze tightens and focuses on the enormous tree at the back of the dungeon.

"Not what I was expecting at all..."

Its trunk is easily 100 meters in diameter and grows high into the dark purple sky spreading green leaves in all directions. It's creating cover from above for over a kilometer high.

The thick brown roots of the overgrown plant twist and turn all over the dungeon floor creating mounds of rock and dirt hundreds of meters high and opening up earth down below for presumably the same distance.

They're ferociously searching for nutrients to support the massive tree to grow more, this creates a very odd landscape.

Large red circular fruits hang from the branches that look big enough to crush a small town if they were to fall to the ground. They look like overgrown apples but have a thin mana shielding around each of them.

I whisper under my breath.

"I've never seen anything like this..."

As these words leave my lips, a pair of crimson-red eyes appear from the back side of the tree in the darkness. Dense invisible mana comes radiating from them.

I feel a wave of intimidation hit me as I appraise and inspect the lurking creature in question.

I shiver out of reflex and watch my teammate's bare mind attack, but manage to stay on their feet.

My attention turns back to the Boss.

Its dark black scales glimmer purple and green as it twists and slithers around the branches near the top of the tree's trunk. Still hidden in the dark purple fog and shadows, It lets out a loud hiss and shows off its white fangs, welcoming us to its lair.

Another intense wave of energy hits all of us as the monster's status comes into my mind's eye.

[700m]

[Lv. 483]

Active Items:

[The Ancient Serpent King's Scales] +121% Defense +99% Speed +97% Agility +55% Magic Resistance

[Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Intimidation

Buff:

Poison Breath [Hidden Ability]

"It's a serpent... and its enormous..."

The Boss slowly moves its long body around the branches of the tree, eyeing us from almost a kilometer away.

Normally, it'd be close to impossible to see a monster at this distance with the naked eye, but its sheer size is astounding. If I were to put a number on it, this creature is nearly 100 meters long.

Another thing I notice is its "Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core". I've seen one of these before, but It didn't drop last time. Or at least I didn't have the chance to pick it up.

Before I can think too deeply about this topic, I'm interrupted by 6 level 430 serpents that come slithering into all of our field of view.

[Lv. 430]

Active Items:

[The Ancient Serpent Scales] +81% Defense +79% Speed +77% Agility +50% Magic Resistance

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Intimidation

They move their bodies back and forth to traverse the landscape but also manipulate the rocky root-covered floor beneath them to accelerate their movements.

With glossy black scales, showing a hint of dark green as they slither closer, their glowing red eyes lock onto each of us.

Loud hisses fill the air as they surround our team of 6 and go in for the kill just seconds after we've entered.

Fisher is the furthest up front, he takes the first one on. With a swift slice from his blade, a bright blue jet of mana-imbued water magic comes rippling out of his sword. The 20-meter-long snake is decapitated in an instant and its head rolls to the floor.

Lydia is nearby, letting the serpent that's challenged her get up close and personal. She doesn't even bother to draw her swords. The mage just puts out a hand and begins glowing bright white and blue.

Ice forms all around her and once the monstrous snake dives into her 5-meter-wide aura, its glossy black and green scales begin to cover with crystal clear ice.

In just fractions of a second, the monster is completely frozen solid.

It falls to the floor and shatters into thousands of pieces as Lydia shows a thin smile for all of us to see.

Abby and Maria jump up in the air, propelled by ice and earth magic to take on two other snakes from behind us.

These creatures are covered in thick shields of mana, but they're nowhere near as powerful as the Blue Ogres we recently faced.

The two girls slice each snake in half the long way without a hint of resistance.

Arie and I turn our backs to each other in the middle of the other 4 other battles and fire off our respective shots at the final two monsters waiting to attack from a distance.

My blade of fire and his arrow of light hit both targets square in the forehead.

The 6 serpents that attempted a sneak attack on us are all defeated in an instant.

I can sense the excitement in the air as everyone keep's their skills fully charged. We move forward without saying a word or complementing each other's kills.

It's obvious we're all ready for the real fight to start.

The purple fog from above in the tree at the back of the Boss Room grows much denser and starts to creep down the trunk.

Running forward through and above the twisting roots of the massive tree, we come across the next 6 level 435s. They're slaughtered in an instant just like the snakes behind us in a glorious light show.

The glowing red eyes of the Ancient King lurk atop the tree, waiting for us to approach. The closer we get, the denser the purple clouds above the tree become. The green leaves are starting to fade out of sight and the fog drifts down to the Boss Room Floor.

This reminds me of the last Lower-Floor Boss I faced. It had minions slow me down on the way, but they were nowhere near as strong as the Boss itself.

It just waited for its prey to arrive. It seems this Boss has a similar plan.

Another few hundred meters pass and the final 4 level 440 Serpents are slain.

We all stand on top of a large root near the base of the tree and look up at the lurking serpent's glowing eyes as the purple fog passes over us.

The low buzz of mana fills the air and the presence of the Boss looms over us.

Maria waves her sword in the air, pointing it up at the glowing red eyes in the darkness above. She speaks up in a cheerful tone despite the growing omnibus environment.

"Come on down, we're ready to fight!"

Her voice echoes, and we're left with silence.

Seconds pass, and nothing happens. Those crimson eyes just continue to stare down at us through the purple fog and wait...

Then, I feel my MP being drained.

Not very much, but a noticeable amount. It feels similar to the effects of my self-regeneration skill's perk when I drink alcohol.

At this moment, I realize the battle has already begun.

"This fog... It's filled with poison."

Chapter 254

As the thin layer of purple fog sweeps over us, I feel the special grade perk of my self-regeneration skill activate.

Poison Resistance.

My MP is being actively drained as the poison from the fog seeps into my body and becomes instantly nullified before damaging my HP bar.

The mana all around me is more than enough to counteract the slow drain. My only concern is my teammates.

They don't all have easy ways to counteract an ability like this.

I yell out.

"Hold your breath for as long as possible! The fog is filled with poison. It's not strong, but I doubt it'll stay that way!"

Everyone around me begins covering their mouths and holding their breath. Abby starts glowing very brightly light green, putting out a restoration wave.

I watch both Maria and Arie take their hand from their faces moments later, letting out sighs of relief as the green magic negates the poison's effects almost instantly.

I murmur under my breath.

"Never mind... it seems I don't have to worry."

The archer turns to me.

"Let us handle this Boss, you'll get to have your fun later. This may be the hardest opponent we'll get to face today that we can actually handle. I want to see how tough a Lower-Floor Boss really is."

I pause for a moment, looking up at the crimson-glowing eyes of the snake above, then nod and let my gaze hover over each of them.

"Sounds good... I'll be watching. Be safe, and enjoy."

Stairs of ice and rock form, leading up to the higher regions of the massive tree in the sky.

My teammates disappear into the growing fog above.

It's true. Based on the shielding that snake possesses, I could most likely defeat it from here if I really put my all into a shot.

My teammates may not get a chance like this again to face a unique Lower-Floor Boss. It seems to be just about their mana control level too, so this will be an excellent training opportunity for them.

I power down my skills, place my sword by my side, and cross my arms.

Lydia speaks up from my right side.

"All of you are much stronger than any of the reports mentioned."

I nod slowly and turn towards her, surprised she hasn't powered down her mana shedding yet to conserve energy and start drinking HP potions to counteract the poison. The white-haired mage has actually turned hers up.

A shimmering layer of mana covers her entire body, nearly visible to the naked eye. It is so dense.

Under the gaze of my perception skill, it reveals itself to be more mana-rich than any shielding I've ever witnessed.

Looking past her, Fisher has his shielding up too. It's very powerful, and not wavering at all under the purple fog's growing presence.

Lydia speaks up again in my confusion.

"Powerful enough shielding can block any magic effects, whether it's a skill or a hidden buff. Mana control is the only thing that truly matters for Elites."

She pauses, tightening her gaze on me.

I'm standing in the fog with without a hint of shielding protecting my body, breathing in the poison without a care in the world, and using the ambient mana in the air to regenerate my MP bar.

Her words echo through the heavy air.

"Then again... I guess there are some outliers."

Fisher walks over as the mana-imbued mist repels from his body with every step.

"Now that we have a minute, I wanted to ask you alone. You got a lot stronger since we trained... All of your teammates too!"

"..."

I don't say a word. I thought he'd ask eventually.

"How'd you do it? There's no way you were holding back while we were in the labyrinth, you were definitely clueless."

I let out a light laugh, remembering back to my training session with the blue-haired swordsman.

If one could even call that a training session... He just showed me his attack once and let me figure it out on my own.

Either way, it helped.

I reply.

"Yeah. We all got stronger, but it's a story I'd rather not tell. We promised to keep it a secret."

He tightens his lips, shrugs, and lets out a bit of a grunt while turning to look up at the tree.

"Well, I assumed you'd say something like that... At least I know I'm not going too crazy. The 4 of you are nearly as strong as me! Seems like I'll have to work a lot harder to keep up now."

I nod, looking up at the tree's top as well.

"Looks like it."

It sure does...

My 3 teammates make it to the top of the tree and begin splitting up in the branches surrounding the enormous monster.

Its shielding buzzes loudly and flashes of light fill the sky making the clouds of purple fog glow brighter and the monster releases more poison into the air.

Arrows fly and blades are swung. Blue, white, and green flashes of light fill the sky. It looks and sounds like a rainbow-colored lightning storm from this distance.

Through my perception skills, I watch the shielding of this beast begin to break and wear down more and more every time it reforms.

Slithering through the trees faster than I ever imagined it would, the monster puts up a fantastic fight.

The archer and two mages have to re-up on MP potions half a dozen times each to continue the fight, and constantly regroup near Abby to re-restore their poison injuries.

Hissing and battle cries echo down from the tree above. The outlines of their figures and the presence of mana allow me to sense each teammate's vitality and MP remainders almost perfectly.

It'll be a long fight, but they've got this in the bag.

The purple-tinted fog grows thicker and thicker, but Abby's restore skill negates its effects as they all begin landing hits on the snake's actual body slashing deep holes through its armor and leaving wounds in its purple armored body.

Fragments of the snake's scales begin falling to the Boss Room floor, along with branch fragments and magic residue.

Large rocks and showers of ice erupt from the light show above littering the floor with debris.

The trunk shakes as loud hisses continue to be interrupted by energy waves from the 3 hunters having the battle of their lives up in the canopy.

Just 10 minutes pass before the battlefield above finally goes dark and silent.

Cheers ring out through the ominous thick fog as an incredibly loud thud just a few seconds later shakes the entire Boss Room.

The ground ripples and shakes as a battered Ancient Serpent King's corpse falls from the tree above.

The 3 of us on the ground level jump into the air, propelling ourselves upwards with wind, water, and ice to avoid the shock waves and flying stone from the Boss' fall. Once a safe distance in the air, Fisher yells out in a half-laughing tone.

"Looks like they really did it. They beat a Lower-Floor Boss. Congrats! Your team is really strong enough to call yourselves elites."

I nod, showing him a smile and whispering to myself.

"Yeah, yeah. I knew that before stepping foot in this boss room."

A glowing green light from above approaches. Abby is healing everyone as they make their descent.

I already knew they were strong enough now, but this really confirms it in front of my eyes.

Maria's voice calls out from the purple fog that begins to fade away from the top of the tree. I see her cheerful smile.

"Ha-ha! Did you see that? I think this was my favorite fight yet... our new power is awesome!!"

As they glide down, the corpse of the enormous snake begins to dissolve. I curiously activate my Appraisal skill to spy on their item drops. A few serpent scales or special items will most likely drop.

As it fully dissolves, the blue text comes into view revealing four items. Three of which seem to be the scales I was expecting.

Once separated into 3 parts, their stat boosts have fallen a bit, but are still very impressive. Great rewards for a battle like this.

[The Ancient Serpent King's Scale] +91% Defense +82% Speed +67% Agility +55% Magic Resistance

[The Ancient Serpent King's Scale] +91% Defense +82% Speed +67% Agility +55% Magic Resistance[

The Ancient Serpent King's Scale] +91% Defense +82% Speed +67% Agility +55% Magic Resistance

The final item on my radar is one I can't say I was expecting... but definitely hoped it'd appear in the back of my mind.

[Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core]

I wonder what this will be useful for...?

Chapter 255

The shockwave of the massive Boss' corpse hitting the ground has blown most of the purple fog away revealing my 3 teammates as they make their descent.

Maria and Aire are bloodied and bruised, but the green circle of light that encapsulates them all slowly makes every wound on their body disappear before they meet the ground.

The Serpent dropped 3 scales, but also... an item I wasn't sure could even drop.

The blue text in my mind's eye won't go away now that I've locked onto it.

[Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core]

All 6 of us begin to approach the long narrow crater made by the snake creature's body after the fall. It's fully dissolved now and has left a 10-meter deep, 100-meter-long ravine in the Boss room floor.

We hop down into it, to get the loot and mana crystal drops.

The items are giving off a white and purple glow, radiating with excess mana from the creature. Even after death, it's still exuding power.

Maria is the first to run over and pick up one of the glossy black scales. It shimmers purple and green when light hits it.

Like most item drops, it shrunk down to wearable size and it's attached to a small black string. All 3 of them put in their new battle rewards.

My eyes move back and forth around the boss room floor searching for this mysterious identification core. I've never seen one before... So I'm not sure what exactly I'm looking for. My teammates haven't found it, so it wasn't in the loot pile.

Technically it's their kill, so it's their loot. Though, I'm sure they won't object to some reasoning.

My main concern is finding it before we're sent to the next floor. The blue text box hovers above the ground just 10 meters away under a pile of small rubble.

I walk over and start moving stones out of the way with my telekinesis skill. No excess mana is coming off of this pile, so all I can do is uncover the stone slowly. Pinpointing its exact location is oddly difficult.

Arie walks over with his arms crossed.

"What are you looking for?"

My gaze tightens as I continue to move rubble.

"I'm... honestly not sure."

There isn't even a hint of a mana signature coming off of this item. None at all.

The only way I'm able to locate or sense it is with my Appraisal skill. The blue text just hovers over this pile of rubble in my mind's eye.

I Lydia and Fisher both eye me from afar, but decide to congratulate Abby and Maria instead.

The girls are very happy about their victory and need someone to share it with.

My focus is solely on finding this Identification core. I must have missed my chance to obtain one in my last Lower-Floor Boss match. I did pass out after the fight. If it's this hard to locate every time, I can't blame Ember for leaving it behind.

No one else is able to sense its presence, not even the experienced Elites. So, it must be even rarer than I initially thought.

Arie watches me sift through the rubble for a few minutes, then finally speaks up again.

"Whatever's under there, I can't sense it at all. If you find anything, it's all yours."

He turns the black scale to glimmer around his next.

"This is more than enough for me."

I give him a nod but stay focused on the rock pile ahead of me.

The small blue name tag keeps shifting and changing exact locations as I throw rocks around. I'm narrowing in on its location.

Finally, all the debris moves out of the way and I'm left standing in front of a small grey-colored stone...

It has swirls of black color over it, creating a stripe-like pattern. Looking at it through my perception skill gives me a very weird feeling, it doesn't even show up at all.

It's not made of mana.

The blue label just floats above the floor over a tiny smooth oval-shaped rock. I lean down and pick it up.

[Lower-Floor Boss Identification Core]

[Instant Low-Floor Boss Room Re-Activation]

[Yes][No]

[Automatic Timed Re-Activation]

[6 Days 23 Hours 57 Minutes 11 Seconds]

I turn around, and Arie is still staring at me with arms crossed and a satisfied look on his face from a battle well-fought.

Passing for a moment, the stone is the only thing I can think about. The countdown timer is 7 days long, the same as a Boss Room's cooldown timer.

I let out a long sigh, then turn to Arie.

"Can you see anything unique about this stone?"

He raises an eyebrow and puts out a hand.

"No... Let me see it up close."

I blink a few times while staring at the stone in a confused state of mind. Then, tightening my lips I drop the stone into Arie's hand.

"Just, tell me if you can see any-"

The moment the stone touches the archer's hand, it passes right through and hits the hand Boss Room floor at our feet.

It doesn't make a sound as it lands. Arie jumps back, cracking a smile but reacting in a surprised tone.

"W-What was that? That rock just passed right through my- my hand!? What kind of item did you just find???"

After Arie's yell, this gets all of my other teammates interested.

The 4 others walk over.

One by one, I drop the rock through each of their hands and it does exactly the same thing.

Even Fisher and Lydia.

After almost another minute passes, I choose [No] on the instant re-activation and the timer continues to count down on its own.

No one here has an Appraisal skill, so it makes perfect sense why they couldn't see or sense the item. The one question that witches at the back of my mind is why I'm able to touch the core and no one else can...?

Before I have too much time to question this more, a white flash of light begins to bring us to the next floor.

I throw the Identification Core into my item storage. This will be explored later.

While the whiteness of transfer magic surrounds me, my brain churns through ideas, but it's best to focus. I'll ask Ember about it once we have a moment of free time. He'll know more than I do about the inner workings of a Labyrinth.

In the meantime, I'll have to focus on clearing this break.

We're about to enter the 21st Floor.

As my vision comes back to me, the sight before my eyes is oddly familiar.

My feet stand steady on a very hard white marble-like surface, and in front of me, there's an eerie pale green sky.

It's not exactly the same, but quite similar to a dungeon floor I've been to before.

Fisher speaks up from behind me, reaffirming my suspicions.

"Hey Lydia, this floor is exactly the same as the 21st back in the capital. Who would have guessed?"

He lets out a laugh, and it echoes through the endless white pillars that stretch down into the green abyss below and above.

The blue-haired swordsman speaks up again, reaching down to pick up a green vine with healthy-looking leaves growing around the large pillar we stand on.

"Well, it is a little different. I don't remember there being so many plants back in the Vice Region's 21st."

I nod slowly, still taking in the view, then activate my perception skills. The moment I do, a massive green creature approaches us from above. Its beady red eyes peer through the misty sky.

The creature's white talons match its sharp teeth. With a 5-meter wide wingspan allowing it to glide around with great precision, the monster stares us down with an ugly monstrous expression.

Its status appears in my mind's eye.

[75m]

[Lv. 461]

Active Items:

[Gargoyle's Platinum Ring] +88% Mental Strength

[Gargoyle's Platinum Amulet] +82% Defense

[Gargoyle's Heavy Armor Set] +2000 Defense

Active skills:

Life Steal [Special Grade]

Body Hardening [Special Grade]

"Gargoyles..."

Chapter 256

The green dark-skinned creature flaps its wings and soars down towards me. Its red demonic eyes are shining through the mist.

With the face of a rabid dog mixed with a mutant goblin, its jagged white teeth shine in contrast against the hazy green dungeon background.

I've never seen a creature like this.

"It's a Gargoyle."

My eyes dart across its status, trying to piece together any extra information it'll give me.

At first glance, it looks quick and agile, but its stats show a different story. The monster seems to be mostly a defense type with high magic and HP-increasing skills.

Body hardening and.... Life Steal.

I smirk at the sight of this. If it does what I think it does, I'm in for a treat. I haven't gotten a useful skill in ages.

Come to think of it... If I waited on the 21st floor in the Vice region for a little longer or gone back to check things out after I fully recovered, I could have had this skill for myself a lot sooner...

Gritting my teeth, but show a wide smile through my clenched jaw. I swing my blade up in the air, releasing a dense black wave of energy before anyone else can get a shot out.

"This one's mine."

A loud screech fills the skies as my blade of mana collides with the gargoyle less than a second later.

It doesn't have much time at all to react, but the distance between us is still pretty far.

On reflex, its body hardening skill activates, and all of its mana shielding moves to the exact hardened point as well. White mana residue and grey body hardening cover its cross and lower body in a thin line.

That grey isn't the same color as my hardening, It seems this creature must have an odd variation.

The rest of its body is completely unguarded. With every bit of energy focused on blocking my attack, it puts up a great defense in the blink of an eye.

After a flash of white light and a quick buzzing sound, the outline of the winged monster flying through the air comes out from behind the fireball of mana residue and broken body hardening.

Shards of stone-like material fall into the pale green abyss below.

With it, one of the monster's legs covered in crimson blood spins downward with it.

The screech for the wounded creature echoes throughout the dungeon, and I sense more monsters approaching from both above and below.

"It brought company."

Gritting my teeth, and aiming for the gargoyle trailing blood in the sky, I let off another shot.

The same thing happens. It twists and turns away, this time avoiding my strike entirely.

I am over 40 meters away. Even if my attacks are fast, it has plenty of time to move. This isn't a low-level monster after all...

Looking back and forth at my teammates as the creature's backup approaches, I grip my sword tighter.

"I might have to get a little serious."

I activate my stat-boosting buffs and zero in on the twisting and weaving monster in the sky. It's trying to get away, hiding behind white stone pillars covered in lush green vines.

My teammates jump into action too. Just in time, as half a dozen mobs identical to the first come rushing out of the pale fog.

Water, Ice, and stone form as we all jump from the white stone pillar, forward into the endless dungeon.

I air-step high into the air, following the monster that survived two of my attacks. It won't be so lucky on my third.

The towering structures of marbled stone pass me on both sides, and my teammates follow below as monsters emerge from the green foggy cloud on all sides.

Smiling as I get closer and closer, I release an attack that would easily have split the Blue Ogre King in two.

I charge up 2000 MP of my newly upgraded fire-imbued mana.

Overkill, but letting out a full power slash is something I haven't done yet with this new power. I'd like to see how powerful I've really become... plus, this shifty Gargoyle is getting on my nerves.

As the Balck wave of magic comes out of my sword, the loud sound of buzzing mana erupts and hums through the dungeon.

I can see the air quiver around it and the stone pillars nearby vibrate and shake just from being near it.

It's faster, stronger, and more deadly than anything I've ever produced before.

The gargoyle is less than 10 meters above me. It's desperately trying to get away but never stood a chance.

It's sliced in two without a hint of resistance, letting the Balck blade glide far off into the dungeon behind it.

I watch it soar off into the distance slicing through a few tall white pillars that grow high into the sky.

More importantly, I lunge forward to be showered in the incinerated shielding and body hardening of the now-deceased gargoyle.

I see blue text appear in my mind's eye as it falls through the air.

It's a satisfying sight, one I haven't seen in quite a while.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Life Steal [Special Grade]

[YES][NO]

Honestly... a little too satisfying...

I don't remember the last time I got a skill this easily.

I quickly choose [YES] as the dark green corpse whizzes by my head and falls into the abyss below.

I'm sure if we kill enough of these monsters, some kind of unique item will drop. However, I'm not diving down to try and catch that thing.

It's skill is enough of a reward for me.

I smirk, opening up my status to see my new skill at the bottom of the list. Then, open it up to check the specifics.

Life Steal

Info: Life Steal allows the user to take HP from opponents once physical contact is made.

The effectiveness of the user's ability to steal HP decreases if the maximum HP bar of their opponent is higher than their own. It is much more efficient to steal HP from weaker enemies.

[Special Grade] Perk: HP may be consumed from direct contact with an opponent's mana shielding or skill's aura. Efficiency is reduced by 85% without physical contact. An opponent's HP can only be brought down to 10% without physical contact.

Grade: [Special Grade]

[Upgrade]

I close my status with a smirk and turn back to my teammates, watching them decapitate, shatter, and explode their enemies to bits in a light show of blue, white, and green magic.

I whisper under my breath while air-stepping back down to meet them.

"Too easy... this is way too easy-"

CRACK

My inner thoughts are interrupted by the distinct crunch of stone scraping on stone.

It sounds like massive boulders are colliding and breaking behind me. Not at all what I'd expect while high in the sky.

I turn my head immediately to see dozens of marble-white pillars all tilting my way.

It feels like the entire dungeon is falling toward me... In reality, there's a chain reaction of pillars crashing and falling into each other in reaction to my powerful attack.

The tops of these enormous structures are impossible to see. Some break off into pieces, and the sky begins to fill with falling white cylindrical stones.

It's a beautiful sight, but a terrifying one too.

Our time in this dungeon has been short, but it seems we've already overstayed our welcome.

Chapter 257

The attack I sent out a moment ago was a bit too strong for this delicate dungeon to handle.

The white marble pillars of stone come crashing down towards us, breaking into massive pieces and filling the green sky with an incoming barrage of white-colored stone.

I create a layer of pink mana shielding around my body and air-step down towards my team as they all begin to activate their powers as well.

"A dome! We'll make a dome!"

I hear Fisher yelling at us as we all form together in a tighter circle, standing on floating earth magic from Abby's skill.

Ice, rock, and water starts to form all around us as we work together to create an impenetrable mana-imbued defense in mere seconds as the pillars of rocks come crashing down.

I contribute with a layer of rock, but my main focus is using my All-Seeing eye to gaze into the sky through our dome.

For easily a kilometer in the air, more and more pillars are breaking and adding to the avalanche coming down from the sky above.

I've started a chain reaction that doesn't look like it's going to stop until they all come crashing down.

The thick layer of floating earth magic is steady beneath our feet. I grit my teeth and wait for the first layer of stone to hit our dome of shielding.

As it gets closer, I use telekinesis and mana manipulation to slow its fall and liquify it as best I can. Unfortunately, there's way too much mass coming down toward us to move it all.

A loud crushing thud hits the top of the dome, splitting the pillar into fragments and falling to the green abyss around the shield on all sides.

"One down... and... too many to go..."

Seconds after, another loud crunching and cracking sound rattles the entire shield and shakes the ground we stand on.

More and more pillars come falling down.

I make sure to soften the blows as best I can with every passing impact.

These are just large pieces of dungeon mass after all. They're not supercharged ultra-dense mana like our shielding.

The only issue is the weight, size, and sheer amount of these falling death pillars.

Over and over, for nearly 5 minutes straight we're bombarded by rock.

Everyone is breathing heavily and holding onto their shielding for dear life. I'm most likely the only one that can sense an end in sight.

Everyone else is just biding their time and hoping for the falling stone to stop soon.

Eventually, that end comes...

The last pillar falls and breaks in two, falling down to the pale void and knocking other stone columns down on the way with it.

The dungeon goes down for quite a while. Almost as far down as it goes up actually.

Many pillars and still breaking and falling into each other far below. The echos of stone colliding sound out through the entire pocket world we stand in.

The collisions against our dome fade to nothing and not a single pillar remains above us in the sky.

I speak up.

"It's over... They've all fallen."

Through the heavy breathing and bright glowing mana, everyone slowly releases their collective shielding, and we're left standing on a single floating platform of combined magic.

I peer out into the dungeon to see nothing but a pale green empty sky...

Lydia chuckles.

Fisher starts to laugh.

Then Arie, Abby, and Maria all join in too.

The white-haired mage speaks up after we share a lighthearted chuckle over the absurdity we just witnessed.

"Ya learn something new every day. I didn't know a reaction that massive was even possible to tell ya the truth."

She smiles and looks over at me.

"That's one powerful shot you've got there. You've taken on a Ranked-up monster, haven't you? Control like that doesn't come easily..."

I nod slowly.

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to seeing what this Labyrinth has in store for us."

She grins, then turns toward the direction of the Boss Room.

"Well, one floor at a time..."

There's a long pause, then she speaks up again.

"It seems like most of the monsters were taken out by the pillar's fall, but they will all be spawning back in soon enough."

I activate my enemy detection skill to confirm most of the monsters really are gone.

Lydia continues.

"We'll need one person to stay behind and guard the exit portal. This Dunegon should be breaking in just a few hours... none of the Solaran forces can handle watching it."

Fisher speaks next.

"I'm not staying."

He crosses his arms and looks over to me, then his teammate.

"Neither of you are either. It's clear we need to handle the highest floors."

He looks over to the archer, healer, and blond-haired ice mage.

"One of you needs to guard this floor."

Arie shrugs and replies.

"I don't have an element summoning skill. It's impossible for me to stay up in the sky like this."

I think to myself as Abby and Maria turn to each other discussing the matter.

We never witnessed the Gargoyles use the Life Steal skill, but the best way to counteract it would be a healing skill as well.

Abby would be the perfect fit for this dungeon.

She has an easy enough time staying up in the air on her summoned earth magic and I saw her take out a gargoyle at close range with a single swing from her daggers.

She could collect a lot of loot and mana crystals too.

"Abby, you'd be the perfect fit. Just don't let these monsters get too close. They can steal HP even without touching you."

Both of the girls turn towards me, understanding that it's the safest bet.

With her restore skill, even mutants won't be able to suck the life from her, theoretically.

The green-haired healer speaks up.

"Sounds good to me. I'll do my part, you all do yours."

We work out logistics and say our goodbyes for about 3 more minutes while hovering back over to the spinning exit portal.

Lydia explains that the circle of mana leads to the 19th floor. Once that floor collapses the dormant boss room will be skipped and the 21st will be next.

Abby needs to fend off monsters until the 21st floor fully breaks. No amount of killing the boss will speed this up.

The Labyrinth is a ticking time bomb, almost nothing can stop it now.

Once this floor breaks, all hunters inside will be transported back into the Solaran shielding stairway underground.

You may re-enter the labyrinth to help your teammate on the floor above once this happens.

Meanwhile, the remaining hunters will race to the top to clear the Final Boss before the entire Labyrinth breaks releasing Elite level monsters into the city.

On that note, we leave.

Abby guards the first portal as we make our way to the Gargoyle's Boss Room.

It takes just under an hour, but we make it to the back of the dungeon to find a floating grey portal.

Without wasting any time, the 5 of us jump through to face the Boss.

The Room we're transported into is like a miniature version of the pale green dungeon itself. It's filled with high marble stone pillars and twisting vines growing up their sides.

As soon as the level 484 boss appears, it's sliced to pieces and riddled with holes by 5 Elite's full-powered shots in a matter of milliseconds.

The poor creature never stood a chance.

There's a miniature collapse of stone columns just like in the dungeon, but it ends quickly as transfer magic brings us up to the 22nd floor.

As my eyes adjust, the dry cracked orange stone ground under my feet comes into my line of sight and an earthy herbal aroma fills my nose.

The air is dry makes me lick my lips and the artificial dungeon sun shines down on us as I look out over a magnificent canyon.

Dust clouds are visible in the distance, notifying us that monsters must be approaching already. I activate my inspect, appraisal, and enemy detection skills to lock onto the closest one.

[400m]

[Lv. 489]

Active Items:

[Lizard Tyrant's Armor Set] +2400 Defense

[Lizard Tyrant's Heavy Axe] +2200 Strength

[Lizard Tyrant's Platinum Amulet] +1800 Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Extreme Strength

Chapter 258

An enormous brown-skinned lizard wearing thick shining silver armor approaches in a cloud of dust from the back side of the dungeon.

On all fours, the mindless beast charges forward, waving a red tongue back and forth while letting out grunts and hisses.

Thick mana shielding surrounds its body on all sides.

It has a skill I've never seen before.

Of course, it's one I want, but I'm not drawn to it immediately like the last creature we faced.

It seems my teammates are more trigger-happy than me on this floor, especially the blond-haired mage.

Maria lunges forward, glowing bright blue and taking a swing with her sword smiling ear to ear.

"This one's mine!"

Before the 7-meter-long lizard can even get within range, it is hit point blank with a powerful incoming wall of ice.

I watch its black crystals of body hardening activate and the monster's aura glow gold, but in a matter of seconds it's already over.

The incoming blue and white light encapsulates the lizard's mana shielding in a layer of ice. It squeezes in tighter and tighter until a buzz of white light from the fractured shielding explodes outward in all directions and the feral beast comes to a halt.

Frozen solid, not moving a muscle, the Lizard Tyrant stands in front of us now in the form of a light blue statue.

Maria sends out another wave of energy and the work of art explodes into a million tiny little fragments of ice that glimmer and shine while falling to the floor under the heat waves of the artificial dungeon's sun.

She cheerfully jumps in the air as we follow after her.

"Alright! Another level!"

A few more monsters appear as we continue onward. They are all between levels 480 and 490.

Each of us sends out attacks, either splitting them in two or shattering them with just the touch of a finger. That's only Lydia's battle style. I still haven't seen her put in any effort at all today.

After defeating one of the rather easy-to-kill Lizard Tyrants myself, a familiar text screen pops up.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Hibernation -> Hibernation [Special Grade]

[YES][NO]

While choosing [YES], I whisper under my breath.

"This is getting too easy..."

I check my status, in a particularly good mood about the [Special Grade] perk on my Absorption skill automatically upgrading this one.

Hibernation

Info: Hibernation allows the user to fall into a deep slumber and cure any curse, disease, or illness given enough time.

Hibernation costs a set amount of MP upfront and the user will not require food, water, or excess mana until the process is complete.

If awoken before Hibernation is complete, progress will be 100% negated.

The effectiveness of Hibernation is greatly decreased if a curse or disease inflicted on the user comes from a being of significantly greater mana control or level. It may take significantly more MP to complete a difficult request.

The user's defenses will decrease by 99% during Hibernation.

The user's defenses will decrease by 50% for 12 hours following Hibernation.

[These De-buffs may not be completely removed by any skill below the Mythic Rank]

[Special Grade] Perk: Hibernation time is decreased by 50% and upfront MP cost is reduced by 35%. Post Hibernation De-buffs may be reduced by up to 50% with specified MP cost depending on the severity of the ailment cured.

Grade: [Special Grade]

[Upgrade]

I scrunch my eyebrows as I read this description....

It seems to be another healing skill, but useless if I already have Life Steal.

Self-regeneration and HP potions should be more than enough for post-battle trauma too.

With a shrug, I close my status and continue moving forward with my team. It never hurts to have another interesting skill in my arsenal for any unexpected issues.

We come to the first major cliff that leads down into the Orange Canyon below. There's a water source down below, allowing for more plant life to grow in the deeper regions of the dungeon.

Arie turns to Maria and speaks up.

"So, I assume it's either you or me. Who's guarding this dungeon from the impending break."

She smiles.

"I'll do it. I'd like to see what kind of loot these creatures drop after a few dozen more kills. There's been nothing yet, but I'm feeling lucky."

I nod and interject.

"They should drop a solid mental strength buffing amulet if you kill enough. It's definitely worth farming for."

She gives me a firm nod.

"Great. Plus, these creatures have a natural weakness to the cold. It'll be easy enough, even if 10 attack at once. I'll be nearing level 500 by the end of today."

Arie turns to me, then back to Maria.

"So, it's settled. We should keep moving."

Again, we go over logistics and Maria heads back to guard the gate.

The 4 of us remaining head off down into the canyon and keep killing Lizard Tyrants as they show up sporadically.

I sense some of them lying dormant at the backsides of the dungeon.

There's a high chance they're Hibernating, but we don't have much time to check it out.

Deeper and deeper, we travel until we make it to the swirling grey portal at the furthest portion of the canyon.

It's located underneath a massive overhang that blocks out the sun, and two mutant Lizard Tyrants levels 491 and 492 stand waiting for us.

Fisher and Arie take them out with ease as Lydia and I follow behind.

The anticipation of what's to come is building, but I still have a while to wait...

Everything in this dungeon feels so weak. In reality, I've just grown very strong.

"When am I going to get a good fight?"

I murmur to myself as we're transported into the Boss Room and the level 504 humanoid-looking Lizardman with dark brown skin, shining silver armor, and two enormous glowing red axes eyes us down.

Orange stone walls create an incredible arena for a fight with a ranked-up beast, but I can't help but feel irritated and bored by the sight of it.

I could take this monster out in a single slash.

Aire and Fisher lunge forward as I stand back and watch with Lydia.

The white-haired mage chuckles and leans in toward me.

"I feel the same way. Not even worth drawing your sword right?"

I swallow hard, then reply while blue and white light begins to flash as the two hunters take on a ranked-up Boss of the 22nd Floor.

"No... unfortunately it's not.

Just under a minute passes and the mutant creature falls to the boss room floor, dissolving and dropping a glistening silver armor set.

Arie gladly accepts it and puts the new gear on.

I Appraise the silver armor as we're transported to the next floor.

[Lizard Tyrant King's Armor Set] +3000 Defense +1500 Mental Strength

The white transfer magic fades and under my boots, I feel the earth shift and make odd scratching sounds.

Once my full vision comes back, the black-colored gravel beneath my feet glimmers with a metallic shine.

I look up, and all I see is an endless void of a very light grey sky. It's almost completely white, and the flat ground stretches out for kilometers ahead. The end is further than the naked eye can see.

Taking a step forward, the metal crunching under my boots fills my ears.

My 3 teammates step forward as well, making the same twitchy reactions as the sound of a thousand tiny forks scraping across dinner plates fills everyone's ears.

"What... is this place...?"

The ground begins to vibrate. Less than 30 meters in front of us the metal fragments on the ground start to twist and turn, then float slowly up into the air.

At first, it looks like a silver and black bubble.

The ball of metallic shards lifts from the ground, contrasting with the grey sky and glimmering as it shifts and spins to mold into a different shape.

It floats higher into the air, pulling more metal with it, sporting arms and legs, now standing over 5 meters tall.

The metal fragments look like tiny silver bugs as they shift and move around forming a humanoid body holding what looks like a long sharpened shining sword.

A shadowy face, with faded features continuously shifting and moving appears. It's trying to mimic the eye and mouth formations it sees on us as it creeps closer.

The slow creep speeds up.

Then, it lets out an ear-shattering metallic roar.

It starts to run straight toward us leaving thousands of tiny fragments behind while scooping new ones up with every passing step to reforming its lost mass.

I power up my stat-boosting skills and grip my sword, then use Inspect and Appraisal.

[Lv. 495]

Active Items: [Metal Warrior Core][Bonded]

Active Skills: [NONE]

"Interesting..."

Chapter 259

A level 495 Metal Warrior stands over 5 meters tall, made completely out of the shards that cover the dungeon's floor.

Its only active item is a bonded core, so my first assumption is that this monster is similar to the rock golems we faced not too long ago.

If that core is destroyed, it will most likely just re-form until the mana within it completely disperses.

As it runs closer, a white light starts to shine from its chest and I activate my All-Seeing Eye.

Sure enough, it's the core. My guess is spot on.

The growing light of Arie's bow begins to match the luminosity of the core covered in metal fragments that charges toward us.

I ready my blade but know my teammate is getting ready to take the shot, so I wait. Arie is powerful enough to take this monster on alone, I'm sure of it.

Once less than 10 meters away, the glimmering white arrow flies forward at the metal creature.

Surprisingly, there is no mana barrier at all around the Warrior's Frame. It only keeps a protective layer around its core. The creature uses scraps from the dungeon to re-form its body, so there's no need to conserve anything else.

The twanging sound that two magnets make when they collide rings in my ears as Arie's spirit arrow makes contact with the white glowing core of the charging beast.

It cracks open and expels an enormous amount of energy, sending scrap metal flying in all directions.

I grit my teeth and throw up a barrier of pink mana to block the debris.

The bonded core of the mutant golem we faced before was only defeated once its MP was completely expanded.

The readings I'm picking up after this first blast are impressive, it looks like that may happen soon.

The core of this Warrior is already carrying a 3rd less mana than it did moments ago.

Arie fires off a second shot without wavering for a second. The crisp arrow glides into the white ball of energy that skill comes charging our way at an alarming rate.

Metallic sounds echo through my eardrums again. Another wave of intense energy shakes the ground, shooting more shrapnel our way.

Fractions of a second later, the archer fires off a third and final shot.

This time around, the core completely explodes with it. The heat from the blast melts a large amount of the floating metal as it flies in the air.

Lydia and Fisher put up walls of ice and water. My shielding is already raised. I watch Arie start to glow light white, similar to his arrow's color, but surrounding his entire upper body.

He still turns his back to the blast. However, as the shards of metal come rocketing toward his never-heavy armor, they slow down and stop before hitting him directly.

The pieces of glimmering black ore fall to the ground and bounce off in other directions just like the mana barrier of a combat magic user.

The remains of the metal monster fall to our feet in a wave of debris, but they all sink back into the floor within seconds.

The Dunegon falls silent again, only allowing for the sound of our feet scraping on metal to be the sole sound filling our minds while powering down the shielding.

Fisher turns with his arms crossed.

"Three shots, not bad. Not bad at all!"

Lydia walks over next, nodding with a smile.

"Three shots, and you put up a solid Tier 1 mana shielding. I could sense it from here. With no elemental skill either, that's pretty impressive."

The archer stands up straight with a look of satisfaction as he eyes his open status.

"Yeah, that was my first time trying it out."

The fractured core of the Metal Warrior rolls to our feet, then starts to dissolve.

Not even a mana crystal is left behind. All of the pure energy from this monster just floats into the air and returns back to the Labyrinth.

Arie speaks up again, looking out into the dungeon.

"I'd like to test this new shielding ability out a bit more. I think I'll be able to master it, given a few hours guarding this Dunegon."

I nod, finally speaking up.

"Great, you'll guard the 23rd floor."

My eyes dart along the horizon in front of us, and I see another Metal Warrior forming about 100 meters away.

Lydia speaks, turning her gaze from the newly forming monster back to the archer.

"They never hunt in groups. Two at a time is the most I've ever seen from these Metal Warriors. You're more than capable enough to guard this gate. Master that shielding in the time being, then help us out once this floor collapses. I'm sure you can take on the 24th too."

Arie gives her a firm nod. The Ice mage turns back to me and Fisher.

"Let's head out, we don't have much time."

Fisher runs forward at the metal monster as Arie begins to walk back toward the exit gate.

I watch crescents of blue light come from the water welder's sword as he takes the Warrior out in two shots. A dazzling explosion of silver and white light follows.

We venture off into the dungeon and continue to defeat about a dozen of these odd creatures on our way to the boss room.

Fisher does most of the hunting, but I attempt to defeat a few as well.

By one-shooting them with a half-powered strike, or draining their MP dry with plunderer, they seem to just dissolve into thin air dropping no items of mana crystals no matter how many of them we kill.

Lydia makes a comment on this as we approach the far side of the dungeon.

"There's never been any drops with these Metal Warriors, unfortunately. Good levels though."

Fisher jumps into the conversation as the spinning grey Boss room comes into full view.

"They sure are! I gained 3 levels in the last 30 minutes! That's more than I've gained in months."

He smirks, still glowing blue.

"Come on, let's face this Boss!"

We all jump through the grey boss room portal that ominously spins on the flat ground of this empty black-floor dungeon.

White transfer magic brings us to a room with a layout I was not expecting to see.

The floor feels the same as the one we just left, the only difference is the fragments of material are as white as snow.

I look up to see the sky...

It's completely black.

The Boss room is very disorienting.

I blink a few times while looking around and kicking up some of the white fragments on the floor.

It feels Like the ground and sky have been completely flipped.

Metal scraping on metal still scratches at my ears as we all take a few steps forward, but the ominous dark void above us makes me want to look away and stare down at the ground out of instinct.

As I do, the white metal shards begin to rumble and vibrate, just like in the Dunegon outside when a Warrior forms.

Lydia's voice hits my ears from the right side, and I sense Fisher powering up his long blue sword on my left.

"Get ready, it's a mutant. I've never seen a Warrior's Boss room quite like this."

The shards of white metal start to float away from me as I look up to watch them all form into a massive ball.

It's like a wave of white water is sucking the floor out from under us.

We jump in the air, using elemental magic to hover and stand our ground.

The white ball contrasting against the black horizon shapes into a humanoid Warrior with a long sharp white sword.

It's the exact opposite of the monsters that form in the dungeon, and it feels at least twice as strong.

The creature's chest glows bright with 3 cores. Two of which shine with normal pure white mana, while the center core pulses jet-black. Dark swirling mana-imbued energy leaks out of it, exuding great power similar to the Blue Ogre I recently faced.

The magnificent metal creature stands over 7 meters tall. It forms a constantly shifting pair of eyes and a jagged mouth to let out a metallic roar.

[Lv. 525]

Active Items:

[Ranked-Up Metal Warrior Core][Bonded]

[Metal Warrior Core][Bonded]

[Metal Warrior Core][Bonded]

Active Skills: [NONE]

I grip my sword and activate my stat-boosting skills as I read its status.

This is a Ranked-Up Metal Warrior.

Chapter 260

Shimmering fragments that make up the white Ranked-UP Metal Warrior's body reflect off each other as the ground beneath my feet gets sucked away.

A black void surrounds the entire Boss Room, and a dreadful monster's metallic screeches ring through my ears. I try to concentrate and look for a weakness.

I'm sure I can defeat it with brute force, but figuring out how a ranked up golem like this works may help me win further fights. It's best I study every new opponent like they're deadly to me.

Its body ripples like waves and its facial features shift constantly to keep shape.

Fisher is the first to jump into action. He throws an attack at the shimmering white titan.

A thin blue wave of energy clashes with the monster's white sword, then slices right through almost instantly to head at its torso.

The mana holding its fragmented body together is much weaker than that closer to the center.

With a long crash, the attack collides with all three cores at once.

At first, I was expecting this attack to instantly end our boss room battle. I even activated my All-Seeing Eye to watch how the mana blade would leave the Metal Warrior in shambles.

This Ranked-Up Boss seems a bit tougher than I initially gave it credit for.

The blue slash of water magic cracks the two white cores on both sides of its chest but stops instantly once it reaches the middle black orb.

My eyes widen while watching the swirling black aura completely absorb every drop of MP from Fisher's strike.

The water wielder lets out another attack just after with visible frustration, but swift practiced precision.

He mutters under his breath.

"No way! That was almost my full power!!"

The second crescent of light blue mana cracks through the white warrior's sword shattering its blade and full arm to pieces as it heads straight for the cores.

There's another flash of light and I witness the same result.

More damage to the two outer cores is visible, but the middle black core seems unaffected.

It absorbs the entire shot without a hint of resistance. The Boss keeps moving forward as its jagged mouth opens wide to let out a screech.

The two cracked bonded spheres in the creature's lower chest begin to glow brighter as they heal themselves completely with the absorbed mana from Fisher's strike.

There's another frustrated grunt from the blue-haired swordsman as he drinks an MP potion and starts to move away from Lydia and me to face the beast at closer range.

"I've got this, let me figure out how this monster operates. Then, one of you can step in if my mana control really isn't up to par."

Lydia crosses her arms, looking up at the monster then back to the swordsman.

"Two minutes. Then we step in for the kill. These golem types aren't easy to without rapid mana regeneration or a teammate."

He turns while charging up his blade.

"Got it, watch close. I'll have some fun with this Warrior. It's not every day I get to face a ranked-up Boss."

I power down my sword and let him fight his battle. The monster looks interesting, but we all know he'll be guarding the next dungeon.

If he wants to have some fun with this boss, it's all his. It may be the strongest opponent he'll get to face today.

Two take each other on. Blue slashes against a glowing black core in a sea of white metal shards.

The outer cores are destroyed over and over again, but the Metal Warrior keeps absorbing every one of the water wielder's strikes with the miniature black hole in the center of its chest.

Fisher fights harder.

Drinking more MP potions, but never releasing enough shots at once to truly damage the boss before it can regenerate entirely.

It reminds me of the first half of my battle against the Blue Ogre King.

The only difference is, it has a clear weakness.

For a fraction of a second, every time the Metal Monster regenerates its outer cores the strength of the shielding around the middle black life source flickers.

The impenetrable swirling black mass of mana dilutes its power by nearly 70%, sharing MP with the other two cores momentarily mending them.

Fisher completely destroys them every time with ease, expelling 100% of their mana. The only way to heal each one is with the help of an outside source.

The Ranked-Up Core.

It happens 5 times in a row, in a timeframe of under a minute and a half.

Even with the naked eye, I can see that shimmering onyx black core. It peeks through as the mana around it thins.

Fisher lets out two more shots to obliterate the dual cores but fails to slash the 3rd in time after re-upping his MP again. He can see it too, but is too stubborn to ask for help.

Or based on the wide grin across his face, maybe he just doesn't want us to prematurely ruin his fun.

Lydia turns to me.

"That's 2 minutes. Enough wasting time. Would you like to take a crack at it? Or shall I?"

While watching the black core glimmer again, I charge my sword.

"I'll handle it. I'd like to see this monster close up too.

Air-stepping forward as white metal fragments fly around the air, I aim my blade in for a clear shot.

Fisher shows me a smirk as I approach and the white warrior shifts its gaze toward me. The blue-haired swordsman yells out.

"You see its center core right? Try aiming for it after my next attack."

This was already my plan.

I nod without saying a word, just putting up a wall of pink mana shielding to block the glistening white sword made of tiny fragments that comes falling down toward me.

It explodes into pieces as it collides with my shield.

At the same time, fisher lets out two more shots one after another at the creature's chest. Mana and metal fragments fly off in every direction.

The beast lets out a high-pitched shriek as its sword, body, and two cores are all destroyed in fractions of a second.

The final core is exposed, and its shifting face shows an expression of confusion as it struggles to re-form.

Meanwhile, I let out a jet-black flaming blade of energy straight toward the shining core that matches its dark hue.

My mana blade blends in with the sky as it effortlessly glides through the monster's midsection and slices its main core in two.

I air-step forward, absorbing the MP in the air as its expelled from the consolidated black aura.

I'm giving this beast no options for regenerating.

A ranked-up boss like this wouldn't be defeated just from a broken core. It must have more tricks up its sleeve, but there's no reason to find out what they are...

The white and black swirling candle-smoke-like energy flows into me.

The closer I get, the easier it is to fully absorb with my plunderer skill.

In a matter of seconds, the Boss' final cries cease and all of the white shards drop back down to the floor.

The Boss Room is flat and motionless again. Silence fills my ears.

[Level Up]

All 3 of us glide downward, powering down our skills to examine the debris leftover from the brawl.

In the sea of white shards, a fist-sized glossy black sphere rolls to a halt.

I appraise it.

[Ranked-Up Metal Warrior Core][Bonded]

Then a second text screen pops up next to it as well.

[Use Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Advanced Perk: [Temporary Minion]

Enter Desired Level: 0-496

[YES][NO]

I grin and bend down to pick up the item, but Lydia warns me to step.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you..."

I pause, looking back at her with my hand centimeters from the black ball.

"Why not-"

The floor beneath my feet begins to rumble, and the remnants of black mana-imbued aura flicker around the monster's core.

The white-haired mage jumps up in the air, using ice magic to hover off the ground.

"It's always a pain when ranked-up golems drop their cores."

She rolls her eyes, motioning for us to follow her up in the air.

Fisher yells out as the dark core starts sucking in fragments of matter from the floor.

The white shards start to disappear at an alarming rate.

"W-What? How? I even leveled up! I thought we killed that thing!"

Lydia responds as the black hole speeds up its absorption rate, taking more and more of this Boss Room's mass into it.

"We did. It's just being a bit difficult to kill... even after death."

My gaze tightens on the growing circle of darkness dragging dungeon mass into it as all 3 of us hover in mid-air.

The advanced mana manipulation perk screen still floats in front of my vision with blue text.

"Well, two can play at that game."

I choose [YES].