

D. Diver 301

Chapter 301

Chester looks at me with a confused expression, not exactly catching on to why I'm asking about the auction. He replies anyway.

"Well, anything really. There are a few of them every month, but I've heard this one is supposed to be one of the most interesting ones in a while."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Why's that?"

"Well, with the recent surges, not only was Solara hit hard. One of the prospectors at the old den told me that the Sector 2 Labyrinth had a collapse as well. Luckily it was defeated by an A-Rank from the Association, but loot always manages to slip out. People have to make their money somehow."

He smirks.

I reply.

"Interesting... So could we find any mana supplements there? Like bundles of potions or possibly even high-density mana crystals, like monster essence?"

My mind immediately thinks back to the Blue Ogre break my team and I subjugated on our way over here. Those mana supplement crystals and Abby's restoration magic are the only reason we were able to make it this far. Without them, I'm unsure if the Labyrinth run could have gone so smoothly.

While deep in thought, remembering back to this time, Chester lets out a laugh.

"You never cease to amaze me, kid. Ha! I know you all are strong hunters and all, but monster essence? You think you can handle one of those? I'm surprised you even know what they are."

He laughs again.

"You know what? This might actually be the one time of the season when they would show up at the auction."

He scratches his beard.

"After a Labyrinth break would make sense. Essence crystals are rarely farmed from anything under a B-Class Dungeon. Even so, unless the dungeon is breaking, there isn't enough mana for them to consolidate in the fallen monsters. They're fairly hard to find on the market because the hunter that farmed them would most likely be the only one capable of absorbing the energy within. They're useless to almost everyone except those with exceptional mana control."

I nod. Curious about the true depths of Chester's knowledge on dungeons and magical items, but I brush it off for now to focus on the main concern at hand.

"Okay, but just assume I can handle it. Or better yet, say I wanted to buy a few of them. What could the 263 gold here possibly get me?"

Chester pauses, thinking to himself again for a moment, then lets out a reply.

"It's hard to say. If any show up at the auction and there are no high rollers, any essence you find is as good as yours. Most common people don't know its capabilities nor know anyone able to even absorb them. If you're not an experienced trader or an elite diver, the items just look like fancy gemstones. It's a niche material. Extremely valuable, but only to the right buyers. This is a special auction, so anything can show up. I'm sure there will be many other crystals and enhancement items aside from just essence stones, so the only way to find out is to attend the auction and see for yourself."

I gulp, thinking over the logistics in my head.

"Fine. Let's head to the auction—"

The front door swings open as I make my decision. Both Fisher and Arie come walking in with grins on their faces.

I mutter under my breath to the old man as they do.

"We'll continue this conversation once everyone arrives."

The archer is the first to make eye contact and speak up.

"Hey, look who's back so soon! How'd everything go out in the desert today? Any new discoveries?"

I nod, still thinking about Chester's words about the event tonight but now switching my train of thought back to my adventures in the desert today.

"Yeah, a lot, actually... I think it's best we wait for Maria and Abby to get back before sharing."

He nods, letting the door shut behind him before the two get comfortable on the couches and eye the bags of money just like I did on the way in.

Arie speaks up again after crossing one leg over the other and taking a moment to get situated.

"So, what's the plan with all that money? You getting a fancy new sword before we take out this Boss or something?"

I nod slowly.

"Something like that. I was thinking of buying us all an upgrade, but the right offer hasn't come to the table yet. How has refining your new ranked-up abilities come along so far?"

Arie replies in a satisfied tone.

"We had a solid training session today, the buffs feel much more natural and adaptable to our fighting styles now. I'm looking forward to trying out these special abilities on the real thing."

He turns to the blue-haired water wielder, who speaks up with his arms crossed.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to going all out too."

He cracks his knuckles.

"This bossman will be no match for me in my current form."

The swordsman glows dark blue but settles down after a moment just to make his point clear, then he continues in a lighter tone.

"Anyways, I was almost positive the girls would come back from the Black Market before you. Looks like you're changing your ways, huh?"

I give him an eye roll, noting his usual comment on my punctuality but not in the mood to push it any further.

Then, my gaze widens.

His wording reminds me of something the Sector 4 Boss mentioned to the guards as I left. He told them to update number 2 once they finished their cleaning task. That's the elusive black-haired woman with the hush skill I defeated not so long ago. Considering my flight speed away from the observatory and the fact that they're finishing up work, I can assume we have some time to spare. Still, it's not much.

I reply.

"Actually... that reminds me, there is something pretty urgent to report. A lot of things, actually."

Like clockwork, the door gets a few loud knocks then swings open as both Abby and Maria walk in, practically glowing with the setting sun's golden rays on their backs.

The green-haired healer speaks first.

"Looks like it's a full house! What did we miss?"

They come over, and I catch everyone up to speed on the events that occurred today.

After a few greetings and Chester making a quick meal, I decide not to leave out a single detail about today's events. From the monstrosity I narrowly avoided in the Abyss, down to the percentage of stat buffs in the Sector leader's gear; they hear it all.

The only thing I leave out is the inner workings of how exactly I'm able to channel Demonic Energy; there's too much going on to explain this carefully now. I chalk it up to a unique skill acquired recently. I'll leave the important details for another day if the occasion makes itself necessary.

"If we are going to have any chance of taking on two leading members of the Inner Circle, every one of us needs to be on the same page here. We need to get stronger, and with the info provided; we need a plan."

After my explanation and a few surprised looks, the six of us start to brainstorm. It may sound crazy, but considering the underground lair of a secret organization we just left, along with the high-tech shielding artifacts and never-before-seen magical items, my words of a new power source and mountain-sized monsters aren't difficult to believe.

We devise a plan.

I'm going to the auction tonight with Chester, bringing all the gold to attempt to buy any and all essence shards, fragments, or upgrade crystals of any kind if they show up.

Arie and Fisher are going to guard the Black Market. With my explanation of the two grunts' level, voices, skills, and general age range in mind, they are confident they can subjugate the guards before they get to the office in the dead zone.

Maria and Abby have an interesting night ahead. One that was only made possible by a suggestion from me. I'll be dropping them off at the Vice Region's Labyrinth. To be more exact; the 21st floor where I left off last.

It's a risky play, but one that will be worth the reward. The two of them are so close to ranking up. It will be a much-needed power boost to give us the edge.

The sun sets as we walk out the front door of Chester's home, preparing for battle.

Chapter 302

After Arie and Fisher head off to the Black Market to keep an eye out for the guards, I walk with Chester, Maria, and Abby to the above-ground dungeon hub while carrying the gold coin stash in my item storage. We all wear red robes to stay anonymous.

Chester heads off to a local market to buy a few items for the auction that he says we'll need, while the three of us remaining walk through the thick crowds of low-level hunters who are finishing up their daily dungeon dives.

Most are coming out of the gates, rather than going in. It's getting late.

After paying 10 bronze each to enter one of the rectangular metal shielding crates labeled with [Lv. 1-100] on top of it, we easily walk down the stairs of the buzzing contraption and step through the blue glowing portal.

Its layout is eerily similar to the one we were trapped in, but the shielding levels are hardly that of a mid-grade D-Class Mob.

The three of us find ourselves in a rocky dungeon with brown dirt and black rocks; the landscape is mountainous with a few sturdy trees, and the air is cold. Doing a quick scan, I find a few level 50 to 60 monsters but don't bother finding out what they are. One could only assume many lower-level Solaran citizens make their living by diving here daily.

Both Abby and Maria grab my shoulder, and I Dungeon Walk them to the 21st floor of the Vice Region's labyrinth.

The three of us stand atop the same white pillar I rested on after my battle with the Behemoth. Looking out into the eerie green gargoyle dungeon that feels almost exactly the same as the one we all left in the Solaran Labyrinth days ago, we agree to meet back here on the 21st floor in no more than 4 hours. That should be enough time for them to rank up and come back down. However, it won't be nearly enough time to practice their buffs.

Still, Chester and I will have finished our dealings at the auction. The goal is to spend every last coin on optimal upgrade crystals for the upcoming fight.

I teleport away as the two of them use their elemental magic to hurry toward the boss room and onward to higher floors where they can level up much more easily.

I'm a little jealous. I'd like to see what's high up in this labyrinth too. As Chester said, according to the population of the surrounding city, it should have at least twice as many floors as the one I just defeated.

After this is all over, I'll have plenty of time to explore.

I teleport back to the Solaran dungeon hub and exit to find Chester waiting exactly where we decided on the outer edge of the square.

He hands me a black mask.

"You'll need this for the event. Other than the security detail, all faces and identities are kept secret during the bidding. It's only fair, letting outsiders be more comfortable in their business dealings."

I take the smooth face-covering, about the same size as a transmission tablet, only able to cover the top half of my facial features. There are holes for eyes, and at the bottom half, there's a curved section that stops halfway down the nose.

I use my appraisal skill, but nothing shows up. It's just a dark ceramic mask.

Even though there are no enchantments, it reminds me of my time back in my hometown when I wore a mask to fight in that underground fighting ring. It's how I earned my fire-imbued sword titled "The Flame Emperor."

The thought of this also brings back a few memories of the time I was ambushed after leaving my first auction just a few days before then... However, it's more nostalgic than frightening. If I can grow as much as I have from then to now, it just means I can do it again.

I reply, placing the mask on my face and covering up with my red hood. For an extra layer of security, I shift my face and hair to look more similar to the citizens of the Dark Continent. Even if my eyes are covered, it's still a safe bet to make the rest of me unrecognizable as well.

"Got it, lead the way."

Chester holds his own identical mask by his side and turns to walk through the busy nighttime city streets.

The crowds of hunters, businessmen, and normal city folk, along with the cool night air, are calming. I follow the old man past a few of the silver towers near the middle and northern edge of town until we come across a well-lit sand-colored building with tall steps that lead up to an impressive entrance. There are many tall pillars across the building's front side, over 20 meters high, sporting arches between each of them covered in intricate hand-sculpted art.

Many guards stand at the bottom of the stairway but don't seem to move or bat an eye as people walk by up the steps. They must be looking out for certain individuals. There are a few well-dressed parties in masks similar to the ones Chester purchased moments ago.

Ours look dull compared to the red, orange, white, and bedazzled designs that catch my eyes. Men arrive in suits while women walk in bright-colored dresses.

Aside from the couples, there are a lot of lone hunters in higher D and C-grade gear with simple masks like ours, making us seem much less underdressed.

Lastly, there are a few groups of businessmen that crowd the entrance at the top of the stairs.

If I had to guess, these are agents and speculators hired by companies whose CEOs are too busy to show up themselves. They most likely give these men a budget and offer a small percentage of the profits back on any earnings after the fact.

With my careful gaze satisfied at the information gathered so far, we walk past the guards and climb the sturdy sandstone steps.

A tall and thin man in a suit with an even thinner mustache greets us at the top of the steps and offers to check us in.

"A party of 2? Will you be watching, selling, or buying tonight?"

Chester replies, "We'll be buying. A premium booth would be appreciated."

The greeter's eyes glisten as he nods and turns around. "A premium buyers' party? Excellent, right this way. We'll do a screening before I send you to your seats. The event is about to begin; both of you are right on time."

There's a red-carpeted entrance hall, and the walls are lined with artwork and displays of interesting-looking items, to say the least, but nothing that I haven't seen before in my travels. Still, investors are surrounding them, placing bids in increments of silver coins.

I'd pay more attention to the beautiful architecture, but the man that we follow has a status that piques my interest.

He's level 264 and has simple rings and amulets of protection on, but he also has a unique skill [Privacy Cage]. It's one I've never seen before, but I have a few interesting theories about what it does.

He turns to a hallway near the back of the entrance hall, and we're brought to a small corridor that seems to lead upward. Before we can walk any further, the greeter activates his skill.

A cube of grey light encapsulates the three of us, and the bustling crowds outside stop chattering in my inner ear. It's also impossible to see outside the skill's walls. I'm sure I could break through with my pinky, but it's very intriguing. Similar to my newest Hush ability, but with an added layer of protection: sight.

He takes out a silver tablet. "I'll need your full name, occupation, a look at your status, and visual confirmation you've come with over 25 gold to be appointed a premium buyers' booth."

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The minimum amount needed on hand to be eligible for a premium buyers' booth is 25 gold coins. In comparison to my stash, it isn't much, but to the average citizen, it's quite a lot.

Even well-off level D Class hunters would be lucky to make even 5 gold a year. Most of the population could only dream of surpassing this rank, and that's back in the Vice Region. The salaries of upper-middle-class families hardly breach 10 gold coins. With average meals costing just a few bronze, and a rented room less than a few silver a month, 25 gold is an absurd amount to be spending on art or gear at an auction.

Considering this, I'll need to come up with an alias. No normal citizen would come walking in here with hundreds of gold.

The guide casting a sound and sight barrier around us waits patiently.

Chester is the first to take off his mask, pulling up his status and telling the man all the necessary details.

Meanwhile, I change my numbers on my status to look strong, but reasonable at the same time. I end up leaving my advanced fire magic as well as special grade body hardening active for the man to see. They're strong skills, but not incredibly rare to the point where I'd look like a unique talent.

Along with this, I change my level to 439 and my name to Thorne Darkwood. It's the first idea that comes to mind and feels fitting to my altered appearance.

I flip the blue text screen toward me and take the mask off my face to reveal a face similar to that of a battle-seasoned Dark Continent native underneath.

"My occupation is a mercenary, and my budget tonight is well over 25 gold."

I reach under my red cloak and into a secret spatial magic portal to pull out one of the money bags. There's nearly 100 gold in one of these.

"I'm looking to buy a few items to aid me in my work. Weapons or crystals that catch my eye."

His eyes gaze upon the bag of gold but hardly react. The man is a professional. He writes down a few things on his tablet, nods, then motions for us to put our masks back on before taking the barrier down around us.

"Very well. Chester, it's good to see you back here again. I hope we didn't catch you too off guard. The new identification requirements are for premium buyers only because of a few unique items brought in tonight. If you'd like to stay completely anonymous, just keep in mind that the top two listings may be monitored post-purchase."

Chester nods, and then the man turns to me.

"Thorne, I hope you find your time at the auction tonight successful. It's wonderful to see new rising talents in Sector 4. With your budget, I'm sure you'll find exactly what you're looking for."

He shows a kind smile, then turns.

"Please, right this way."

We're led up the narrow corridor about three-quarters of the way until our guide unlocks a sturdy wooden door. It clicks open, and we walk through.

My eyes widen through the black ceramic mask as I take in the view.

The door leads to a small balcony that looks over a sea of people. With red velvet couch-like seating and a thin golden privacy curtain with the option to close off the entire curved edge of the booth, we walk into the premium seating to look down at the stage below.

Our guide hands us a silver lightweight paddle with the number 12 in bold black lettering on the front of it.

He bows.

"Again, I do hope you enjoy the event tonight. I'll be your representative and the only one who knows the identity paired with your number paddle. Please do meet me in the entrance hall after the auction to pay for the items you've won."

The subtle green mist from my lie detector skill activates as I try to decipher his words about our identities. It seems they really are confidential, as far as this man is concerned. He speaks the truth.

The door closes behind him with a click, and I let out a sigh of relief that I wasn't even aware I was holding in.

As we sit down on opposite sides of the booth while taking in the view around us, the lights in the wide-open auction house begin to dim.

There's an echoing click as the stage below has a bright white light shine upon it, then a well-built Solaran man in a royal blue suit walks out from behind the right side of the platform to make his way up toward a podium at the front. There's an empty display table in front of him.

His voice rings out clearly as if he's speaking right in my ear.

"Welcome, all. I hope you enjoyed the pre-auction events and made your purchases on the overflow of items outside."

The room is silent with all eyes on him.

"But tonight, this is the event you've all been waiting for. One of the largest Solaran-hosted auctions to date; with 189 individual parties here and 12 premium buyers, I'm sure we're in for quite the show."

Another bright white light flicks on, and a beautiful woman in a shimmering red dress walks out with a collection of silver daggers all floating around her body in a circle. The stage light reflects off the blades in a dazzling display.

"We're not here to waste your time, and I'm sure you're all eager to start the bidding, so I'll keep my introduction short. The top 30 items have been appraised by our board and will be presented to you all today in ascending order of value. Some of which are rare high-grade battle weapons only available to the elite, while others are unique artifacts that have never seen the light of day."

Some ooohs and ahhs come from the crowd as the woman places the swords in the display case in front of the speaker using an ability similar to my telekinesis, not touching any of the items with her hands.

"No matter who you are or where you come from, there is only one rule tonight. Whoever pays the highest price may take the item home. Now, let's begin."

My gaze starts to wander around the event hall after appraising the daggers to see they're a set of 5, all with 20-50% Strength and Agility Buffs. A great item set for a C-Class squad, but far under what I care to pay attention to right now.

People begin bidding in increments of 10 silver on the floors below as I appraise my real competition: the other Premium Buyers.

There is one booth below the one Chester and I are sitting in, and two more columns of dual booths to the right of us on the same side of the auction hall, moving further away from the stage. Out on the other side of the room, I see 6 more premium buyer parties filling the other booths in an identical fashion.

Some have their curtains closed, while others peer out to observe the crowd and event just like me. None care to bid on the item set being offered now.

The announcer's voice rings out as I concentrate back on the main event.

"Sold! To the man up front, buyer 103. A bid for 91 silver has won the set. What a wonderful start! Let us continue the auction!"

The red-dressed woman continues to bring weapons and artifacts out, and the bidding numbers get higher and higher. Even bundles of extremely rare potions like the gold and blue ones Chester pushed us to save pass by. As the items get pricier, fewer and fewer people make offers.

However, there are still a lot of back and forths happening down below. Well over a dozen listings go by.

I hardly bat an eye until the 16th item of the night finally piques my interest.

The announcer speaks up as my eyebrows raise.

"Now, we've hit the halfway point. This is where the real fun begins. To start the second half of our night off right, I'll be bringing out one of the stars of the show. A truly unique collection of magic stones. This will surely turn the heads of our highest esteemed collectors in the house tonight."

The woman comes walking out from backstage with a dozen large emerald-green stones floating above her head. They give off a powerful mana-imbued glow. Activating my appraisal skill, I find each of them labeled [Serpent King's Essence] with between 600k and 700k MP available for absorption in each of them.

This bundle alone is almost 8 million MP.

My heart starts to speed up, and I lean over the edge of the booth just slightly to get a closer look.

This is exactly what I've been waiting for. This being the middle point of the event, one can only assume the strength of the stones will only go up from here. If I can land a reasonable price for a few sets of these during the auction, it will be a great success. We'll get another serious upgrade, and I won't have to worry as much about my teammates in the heat of our future battle.

I whisper under my breath, "Finally, we're getting to the good part."

As soon as I subconsciously let out a wide grin and get ready to raise my paddle, a young man across the room in the Premium Buyer booth labeled number 1 raises his own.

"I'd like to start the bidding at 25 gold."

His shimmering silver mask and sharp blue eyes are visible even in the dim light of the auction house. With a tall stature and bright blond hair, sporting a light grey suit, I suspect he's no more than 30 years old.

Cursing under my breath at his overly inflated starting bid, I do a full scan using inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 824]

Active Items:

[??? Access Denied]

Active Skills:

[??? Access Denied]

Bufs:

[??? Access Denied]

The results are not what I was expecting to see...

Whoever this is, it looks like he's my real competition tonight.

Chapter 304

He bid 25 gold... for an item only halfway into the auction. This mystery buyer is already making himself known.

As I calculated before, the bundle of stones is nearly 8 million MP, so it's over 90% off the market price. If I were to buy this much in potion form, even with the Dark Continent price discount, it'd take all of my 263 gold. Still, I'm trying to get as many of these essence stones as possible for the lowest price.

A bid of 25 gold for 8 million MP is pushing my limit. If this is the going price, I'd only be able to buy 10 of the same value, averaging about 80 million total MP for the night. Divided by all 5 of us that are looking to absorb it, that brings our total down to 16 million MP each.

It's an exorbitant amount, but it's not the overwhelming advantage that I'm looking to come out of here with. Plus, the bidding hasn't even started yet. This would be the best-case scenario... hoping that this man in the silver mask doesn't bid too much higher.

The announcer speaks, replying to the offer received.

"And we've got our starting bid of 25 gold from Premium Buyer number 1! These items are truly a unique collection of gems, farmed from a collapsing B-Grade dungeon out in Sector 3 following the most recent surge."

The eyes of the crowd down below reflect the green gems' vibrancy as the woman places them on the red velvet display table.

I can't help but notice the fact that the announcer did not go into detail on what exactly these gemstones do. Unlike his in-depth descriptions and stat readings of some of the past items. It seems at the higher-priced portion of the auction, it's more of a 'if you know, you know' type of deal.

He continues.

"Now, let us start the bidding in increments of 1 gold coin."

I raise my paddle, but to my surprise, almost half of the other premium buyers do as well.

The crowd below erupts in whispers as the announcer's voice rings out clear as day in all of our ears.

"That's 26 gold from number 12, no, 27 gold from number 5, 28 from..."

He goes on and on, and the buy price keeps rising higher.

I back out once the price passes 35 coins, observing the event unfold before me.

The buyer in booth number 1 stands out over his balcony while raising his paddle as the announcer accepts a 36 gold bid from the buyer right below me.

The silver-masked man speaks in the same voice he did previously to make his first bid.

"I bid 75 gold."

The room falls silent, but the announcer fills the vacuum in a professional tone.

"Our new highest bidder! Booth 1 bids 75 gold. Going once... Going twice... Three times... and sold!"

After a few sighs from other booths and the excited whispers of crowd members, the green gems are taken offstage, and I'm left in a state of shock.

Whispering under my breath, "This is not going to be as simple as I initially thought..."

I turn to Chester; he's thoroughly enthralled by the gems as well as the woman in the red dress as she walks backstage to retrieve the next item.

As soon as he feels my gaze, the old man realizes what I'm implying and responds.

"Tough competition tonight. It seems there are some other strong parties involved."

I nod while thinking to myself.

Sure, 75 gold for 8 million MP is still well under market price, but it's much worse than my initial estimate. Three times as worse, actually...

I clench my jaw as the next set of shimmering silver swords with 70% strength buffs are all brought out to be displayed.

My eyes gloss over without a care in the world for these common items as the auction continues.

Armor sets, platinum rings, and enchanted artifacts all found in high C-Grade and low B-Grade dungeons from Sectors 3 and 4 are brought out. They all sell for between 10 and 15 gold to premium buyers and a few members of the general audience.

Nothing compares to the excitement in the air from those green gems until the 24th item set of the night comes forth.

My eyes perk up as a bundle of grey stones with white energy swirling through them catches the corner of my eye and activates my appraisal skill.

[Black Stone Golem Fragments] x11

As my careful eyes closely inspect each of them, I conclude that these may be worth my while. Each of them holds over 4.5 million MP, some of them nearing 5 million. The total here is about 50 million.

Whatever monstrous golems these fragments dropped from are no joke. Back when I farmed Blue Ogres, the mobs only dropped 100-250k per stone. Even the anomaly that took in nearly the entire dungeon's mana expenditure and hundreds of essence shards is only twice as much as just these 11 stones.

One can only imagine how strong they are, but my daydreaming about them will have to wait.

The announcer's voice begins the next round of bidding.

"A collection of magic stones from the Sector 2 Labyrinth break. A very rare item set indeed. Considering our last batch of similar items sold for an extraordinary price, one can assume the price on these will climb much higher."

He pauses.

"Just a word from the auctioneer to buyers out there, our appraisal team has gauged the recommended use for these gems to be around level 700 and above. High-grade gems like these don't come around often; this is truly a one-of-a-kind treasure."

Silence fills the room once again, but the first to break the noise is the silver-masked man.

"100 gold coins."

With a wide smile, the event host replies.

"Very well. 100 gold to number 1! We shall raise the bids by 5 gold per offering."

I raise my paddle.

"That's 105 gold from number 12!"

No one but the silver-masked man raises their paddle back.

"110 gold to number 1!"

"115 for number 12... 120 for number 1...."

We go back and forth, raising the price on each other with every bid.

Not a single paddle raises from any of the other buyers. From a quick appraisal scan to appease my curiosity, I see none of them are anywhere near number 1's level. Whoever this is, he must be investing for his own personal use.

As Chester explained before the auction, items like these hardly sell on the open market. This is because, to most people who can't handle absorbing millions of MP, they're just pretty gems that depreciate over time as the mana flows out of them. To the man across the room and also to myself, this is a 50 million MP pool of mana waiting to be absorbed.

I grit my teeth as he yells out, raising his paddle high into the air.

"200 gold! I bid 200 gold!"

The entire room falls silent, and so do I as a pearly white grin can be seen under the bottom portion of his mask.

I could bid higher, but who's to say he won't just let me take this and burn my pockets for the still 6 remaining items to come?

His inflated prices now could all be a tactic to bleed the medium-sized fish like myself early on to get the best prices on the rarest items near the end.

I let out a sigh and take a step back as the announcer looks around and counts up to 3.

"Sold! To number 1 for 200 gold! What a show! We have a real magic gem connoisseur on our hands tonight, crowd!"

The audience is going wild with whispers, laughter, and cheers.

Even Chester's eyes are open wide. He whispers to me.

"I've never seen such a lively event in years. If this isn't even the main star of the show, I'm sure we're in for quite the treat. Don't worry, the best is yet to come."

I tighten my lips as they prepare the next item for public sale.

I'm not quite sure what to think. It's almost impossible to compete with a masked man and his endless pockets.

Then again, I'm happy I didn't bid higher and spend all my gold on 50 million MP when there's a possibility of a better deal to come.

However, my happiness wanes as the next few items roll out. Sets of enchanted gear passing 100% buffs and bundles of element stones in containment cases ready for fusion into weapons are the next few items that show.

Most go for 20-30 gold, sold to the other regular premium buyers. These are all incredibly rare pieces, and they can be used by anyone, so keeping them in their possession and waiting for resale in a shortage or using the items themselves to fight off stronger monsters is well worth the investment.

Most practical investors and collectors come to the auction for items like these. I, for one, am looking for something else... As more and more items pass, the growing feeling of dread fills my stomach.

If I can't manage to buy any items tonight that will boost my entire team's strength to new heights, our extraction mission to save Lydia and my curiosity to confront the craftsman from another sector may all be very compromised.

I'd have to rely on the newly ranked-up abilities of my team members, plus my ability to wield demonic energy as a trump card.

There's too much uncertainty in this loosely strung-together excuse of a plan; I need something that will help change the odds.

The announcer's voice and the sight of over half a dozen blood-red crystals larger than my open palm completely change my growing anxiety into a source of hope.

This relief comes in the form of hundreds of millions of MP swirling within just 7 stones.

"Our second to last item set of the night. A collection of ruby red gems. Collected as the final drop from the Sector 2 Labyrinth Collapse, we've managed to bring them all the way here for all of you to see! Now, without further ado, let us start the bidding at once!"

Chapter 305

I scan the crimson gems with every one of my perception skills as they float around the gorgeous woman until each of them rests gently on the display table at center stage.

[Red Hydra's Soulstone Fragment] x7

They don't bear the usual 'Essence Fragment' or 'Essence Shard' labeling, but 'Soulstone Fragment' instead. These are definitely much different than the magic stones I've seen before.

Clearly, in my appraisal skill's text boxes, two more readings catch my attention. The first is the 45 to 50 million MP stored in each one of these stones available to be absorbed, and the second is the line of text beneath it.

[Permanent Buff: Red Hydra's Rage]

There's no in-depth description or conditions to go along with it, I'm just left wondering what exactly these gems can do...

However, before I'm kept deep in thought for too long, the announcer's voice breaks my concentration.

"This bundle of items is truly unique. A batch of stones with its exact capabilities has never met the open market before and will most likely never meet the market again."

They sparkle under the spotlight, captivating the audience with their endless dazzling radiance.

I rethink the announcer's previous words.

He did say they were the final drop from the Sector 2 Labyrinth. If he really speaks the truth, this could be one of the special floor boss drops that is unique to every 20 floors. It could quite possibly be a one-of-a-kind item, never to be seen again.

This only makes me more curious about what the added buff can do.

My only problem will be if premium buyer number 1 is just as eager to find out as me.

The announcer continues.

"Now, the seller who brought this item in tonight declared they would not take less than 100 gold, so we'll start the bidding there. Based on our magic stone track record so far, I have a feeling this won't be an issue to match."

The gentleman on stage smiles brightly as the woman in the red dress walks over to stand by his side.

Meanwhile, the room goes silent.

I gulp while expecting the silver-masked man to make an outrageous bid.

However, for some reason, the bid never comes.

Whispers start to fill the room, and the joy-filled smile of the announcer starts to droop.

He gulps nervously but keeps a professional face while staring out at the crowd.

His eyes dart to the side as I decide to start the bidding myself, raising my paddle and stepping forward into the dim light.

He calls out immediately as I do, bringing the energy back to the room.

"That's what I like to see! 100 gold for premium buyer number 12! We'll be raising the bids by 10 gold for every offer from here on out."

The man in the silver mask steps forward and slowly raises his paddle in reply, and the announcer gets back into his groove.

"110 gold from buyer number 1!"

I retaliate with a grin to cover up my nerves while raising my paddle.

"120 gold for buyer number 12! 130... 140... 150 for buyer number 1!"

My stomach drops lower as the bids get higher.

So far, the good news is he didn't immediately bid over my budget and make it impossible for me to win.

Also, the man across from me takes longer to raise his paddle every time, leaving the crowd in silence before he does. I raise back immediately each time.

The bad news is, even though it takes him a moment, he keeps raising it and bidding anyway.

This mystery buyer has already spent hundreds of gold tonight and seems to have pockets with no bottoms in sight. I need to change something up, or else I'm going home completely empty-handed.

I could wait for the last item of the night after this one, but that would be foolish. I already tested my luck to its limit waiting this long. I have exactly what I need right in front of my eyes.

If I bid all in at 263 gold right now, it would seem too odd a number to be random. To any logical buyer, this would seem like I'm going all in because I am. Number 1 would just have to bid one more time, and I'd be out of luck.

Bidding 260 is a cleaner number in the designated increments of 10, but it gives the same effect. It's too random to mean I'm not at my limit.

A much safer bid is 250 gold. It's clearly an inflated price to scare away the competition. It is higher than the last absurd price number 1 threw out, and it's a significant leap up higher than anything I've bid on other items tonight. It would show that I want this item and will pay whatever I need to to get it. However... If anyone calls my bluff and bids 10 gold higher, I'm out of luck yet again.

My final option other than incrementally pushing the price up is a large 240 gold bid. This may be the worst option. It tells my opponent exactly how much gold I have to pay. It shows I'm scared to bid 250 to provoke my opponent to challenge me, and it also implies that I want to have a safety net of 1 bid just in case they do... It's basically yelling out to the crowd exactly how much gold I have on hand.

I grit my teeth, raise my paddle, and make the most reasonable choice there is.

"I bid 250 gold."

The announcer points upward and opens a palm in the air at me, and the crowd fills with even more energy.

"A new highest bid of the night! Buyer number 12 bids 250 gold!"

He walks around the stage as the crowd dies down.

All eyes are on the man in the silver mask now as he stares forward and begins to scratch his chin.

The announcer continues to speak.

"Are there any other bids? That's 250 gold to buyer 12! Going once..."

My heart starts to beat loudly in my chest.

"Going twice..."

I can't help but dart my eyes back and forth from the glistening stones to the man who could bid just 10 more gold and take them away from me.

"Going..."

He grips his paddle as the announcer begins to finish his words.

"Three times..."

My breathing becomes heavy.

"And..."

The silver-masked man releases his tight grip and takes a step back, disappearing into the shadowy privacy of his booth.

"Sold! Our second to last item of the night is sold to buyer number 12! Please don't forget to see your guide in the entrance hall after the show. I hope you're satisfied with this one-of-a-kind purchase!"

The crowd erupts again, and the pressure in my chest subsides.

I laugh and fall back onto the red cushioned couch next to Chester, letting out a long sigh.

"I pulled it off. I managed to get exactly what I came for."

As the crowd settles and the gems are brought backstage into storage, they get ready for the final item of the night.

I'm overjoyed, but Chester looks concerned. He whispers to me, and I reflexively put up a small Hush barrier to listen.

"You're aware of the strength of those stones, aren't you?"

I nod.

"Yes, of course. Almost 50 million MP each. A steal for 250 gold, right?"

He looks at me with a puzzled expression.

"They're one-time-use gems. Once absorption starts, whatever you can manage to take in during one sitting is all the mana you will receive. Plus, that buff is only available to those who absorb enough of the Soulstone for it to bond with you. Well—those are the conditions for similar items I've dealt with in the past. Nothing of this magnitude, but I've seen lesser variants of Soulstones, so I'm positive that is how they work. This is easily an A+ rank item; I doubt there are more than five people on this whole continent that can handle absorbing it fully..."

The old man continues his nervous rambling, but I can tell he's secretly excited to get the chance to examine the crystals once I let him get his hands on one of them.

I, on the other hand, piece together why buyer number 1 most likely dropped out of the bidding.

If these are truly one-time-use A+ Rank gems, they are graded for over level 1000 or higher for minimum consumption. If this man is just shopping for his own power-boosting needs, bidding a small fortune on a gamble item is senseless.

My satisfaction only increases as I conclude that I snagged an even better price than I initially thought. If there was an A-Rank in the audience or someone who could actually absorb these stones, I would have surely been outbid.

Before I can celebrate too much, I lower my Hush barrier and sit straight up as the final item of the night comes out from behind the curtains of the stage's back side.

It's a single jet-black sword without a hint of mana present in it.

My perception skills also don't pick up any readings at all.

Only one thing comes to mind as the white stage light reflects over the glossy weapon's surface.

It's a Demonic Sword.

Chapter 306

A long black sword with an identical dark glossy shine to my newest dagger floats around the woman as she brings it to center stage before resting it on the red velvet display table.

I immediately recognize it as having a Demonic Origin.

The announcer speaks over the whispers of the crowd.

"This is an item confirmed to have come from within the Abyss."

At these words, all chatter ceases.

"Found near the border of Sector 3 and Sector 4 by a group of mercenaries, it was covered in a pile of gear from a party that set out to explore the day before. The seller, who is a leader of the mercenary group in Sector 3, is unaware of how exactly this item came to be. Only one thing is clear, the monster that used to wield it came from the darkness that constantly approaches our cities. Everyone knows the Abyss is only a recent phenomenon. It could disappear tomorrow, or it could consume us all. Hardly any information is known about its nature. This treasure could be the key to unlocking countless more lost to its dark depths, and on top of that, it's a once-in-a-lifetime piece to add to your collection."

He pauses, inwardly smiling about the pitch he's so intricately announced.

"The seller of this item will take no less than 500 gold for the item presented. It is, after all, the first artifact to hit the open market in Sector 4 confirmed by our appraisal team to be a genuine piece from the Abyss."

Silence follows again.

"Now, do we have any takers?"

No one says a word. Everyone in the premium booths takes steps back away from the balcony, and the floor seats below seem to be in shock.

The looming Abyss that many fled from over the past few months is a taboo to bring up out of the blue. The tension in the air is eerie; mention of the unknown threat is a topic that everyone delicately tiptoes around in their usual day-to-day lives as if navigating a minefield.

However, one man relieves the crowd of its silence.

"I'll gladly take it. I bid 500 gold."

The man who withdrew from my 250 gold bid for a priceless set of gems moments ago now bids double on the ominous black sword. He did so knowing not a single other buyer would dare to bid against him.

This brings up the question of: why? Why did he actually withdraw from purchasing those stones if he has this much spare cash on hand? Is the dagger in my inventory made of the same material worth just as much? Did he know what the final item was going to be and wanted to save his gold to purchase it? Does he have other motives for letting me win those gems?

Or am I just overthinking things...

All these questions twist through my mind as countless others at the event ponder questions of their own.

Meanwhile, the announcer counts to three and the sword is sold. Not a single other bidder tries to step in. On this odd ending note, the woman in the sparkling red dress brings the black sword backstage, and the announcer closes out the show.

Everyone is left speechless.

It's a very awkward ending for tonight's auction, but once the sight of that sword leaves the room, many begin to lighten up again and the normal chatter starts to come back. As the doors in every booth open, and many exits in the auditorium below click to follow, the announcer speaks.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight. It's been one of our most competitive auctions in years. I hope you all got what you came for and enjoyed the show. Please exit in a timely manner and meet your identification guide to purchase your won items. Again, I thank you all. Have a wonderful night."

The curtains on the stage close as the lights all turn back up to their full luminosity. People begin to leave the large room at once.

I sit back and wait for the rushing crowds to calm down. I'm in no rush to leave and would rather not have over 100 people's prying eyes looking at me as I go to claim my winnings. As anonymous as I may be in a mask and with my conceal skill activated, it never hurts to be too careful.

More than 5 minutes pass, and hardly a peep can be heard from the main room. At this, Chester and I make our way down the narrow corridor back to the entrance hall.

Waiting just outside is the tall guide with his distinctive thin mustache that brought us in. He's having a hard time containing his smile. My guess is he'll be getting quite the perks from handling this transaction. Still, the man speaks up in a smooth and professional tone.

"I'm happy to see you found an item you liked at the auction tonight. Please, right this way and we'll make the transaction final."

We're led through the entrance hall where a handful of identically dressed guides are leading other buyers to small tables that line the walls, as well as a few side trading rooms where the purchased items were saved and sorted during the show.

It seems a lot of the common items sold during the first half of the auctions are here outside, while the more valuable gear and materials are traded in private.

Chester and I are brought into a small room consisting of only a table, a notepad, and a large black briefcase with a silver handle.

We're enveloped in a barrier of sound and sight-blocking magic as the man activates his skill and the door closes behind us. He opens the case with two clicks.

The low hum of a containment field sounds out, and the 7 beautiful crimson gems come into view.

At the same moment, I reach under my cloak and pull out the three bags of money. I take 13 coins back from the pile to make it an even 250.

"That should be everything."

He nods, diligently counting as I closely examine the gems.

Even through the white glow of the containment artifact lining the inside of this case, I can feel their power emanating out, and a red aura seeps from the magical seal. They're yearning to be absorbed and used, and I'm eager to see the power they're capable of granting.

The guide looks up from the piles of gold and smiles.

"Looks like you're spot on; this is everything we need from you. The gems are now yours to keep, and please take the containment case as a token of our appreciation. We look forward to seeing you again in future auctions, Mr. Darkwood."

I smile, taking 3 of the 13 remaining coins from the leftovers and placing them on the table away from the stash.

"Thank you, I appreciate the help tonight. I've got exactly what I came for."

He gladly accepts, bringing down the privacy shield while placing the piles of gold into an item box with a Solaran logo printed on the side of it and placing the 3 gold I tipped him in a separate pocket of his suit.

I stare down at the gems for a few more moments, then close the case and place it in my item storage beneath my robe.

As the door to our private trading room opens, the person who greets me on the way out takes me by surprise.

The friendly gesture of an outstretched hand raises toward me.

It belongs to the man in the silver mask.

"Nice to meet you, buyer number 12. I don't often find such interesting bidding competition out here in Sector 4."

Chapter 307

As my gaze lifts from the outstretched hand before me, up to the shimmering silver mask of the man I was bidding against all night, I immediately go on high alert.

Activating my perception skills, I come to see his status is still blocked to me for some reason. It is only showing those odd "???Access Denied" messages next to every spot where items, skills, and buffs are meant to be. His tone while greeting me isn't hostile, and it would not be logical to pull anything too nefarious while under the roof of an event hall like this.

If we were outside or completely alone, it would be a different story.

I shake his hand and put on a professional smile to reply.

"Nice to meet you too, Number 1..."

My stomach still drops while looking at the man's intensely sharp blue eyes, but my battle experience has taught me it's best to put on a cool front at all times.

He smiles, showing perfectly straight pearly white teeth.

"The name is Lith Galeheart. I prefer not to go by number 1. So please, call me Lith."

He continues after a short pause.

"We were the top two buyers of the night. Our names will be in the public sales records anyway; there's no point in keeping secrets that will be shared eventually."

His words remind me of the warning my guide said before the auction: the top two items of the auction may be tracked because of their perceived value. I have an alias, so it doesn't matter much. Chester, on the other hand, will be linked to this sale.

I respond while releasing the grip of our firm handshake.

"Thorne. Thorne Darkwood."

I wasn't expecting to get so much mileage out of this name, but it seems my choices tonight will have much longer-lasting effects than expected.

He responds.

"Association, Inner Circle, Black Ops, or A Solo Mercenary? Who do you work for?"

My eyebrows raise higher and higher at every word that comes out of his mouth, but I instantly reply once he finishes speaking.

"Solo. I work by myself."

The tightening of his gaze makes me wonder if he really believes me or if he's able to see right through my disguise.

Now that I have a moment to think about my situation, I can't tell a thing about him, actually. With such a level of difference and lack of information, this silver-masked man is in total control of the conversation.

He reaches into a chest pocket and pulls out a thin silver piece of metal in the shape of a rectangular card. It's a few millimeters thick at most but carries some weight to it. Lith motions for me to take it.

"No matter what your actual origin is, you're a very intriguing individual, Thorne. If you're ever in the area around Valor City, know you can always get work from my guild. No strings attached."

I hesitate to grab the metal card, so he continues, sensing the tension.

"Really, no strings attached. We offer jobs asked by anonymous buyers. If it's within your capabilities, the guild will offer it. You may accept and get paid upon completion or decline without consequence."

I nod, understanding the line of business he's describing very well, but not understanding why he's explaining it to me here of all places.

I let out a sigh and accept the silver card. However, the moment I do, he turns to leave, disappearing into the crowd of people behind before I can think to get another word in. With my mouth left open, I look down at the shimmering piece of metal and let out the breath that was just about to ask him why he chose to invite me. Instead, I stay silent while reading the line-lined text over the glossy silver surface of the item.

It just has the logo of swirling lines that mimic a breeze with his last name printed above it: "Galeheart Mercenary Guild". Below the logo and guild name, there's an address in Valor City.

My eyebrows scrunch as I try to make out what just happened. Did he just try to recruit me for his mercenary group? Where is Valor City? And are there really no strings attached? There's always strings attached...

I continue to stare down at the card in confusion as the hall starts to clear out, coming to the consensus that all of this recent backstabbing, betrayal, and running away from monsters that want to kill me has made me more paranoid than ever.

Still, it's for a good reason. I'm still working on slipping away from the Association that sold me out and tried to have me killed. Plus, I'm working on dismantling the Inner Circle and rescuing my teammates from the inside before they catch on. Things are a bit complicated right now. It's not in my best interest to get a third party involved for no reason.

I put the card away and begin walking toward the door. Chester follows close behind with a puzzled expression on his face. I can't tell if it's excitement or terror; his skin is a few shades paler than usual, so the safe bet is the latter.

We step out of the auction house's front steps and make our way down the street we came from, back to the dungeon hub square, before I finally put up a small hush barrier.

"What's going on? You've been pale and silent like you've seen a ghost. Did you know that guy? Is it something else? He's gone now, and he doesn't even know my real name. I doubt he'll come after you."

Chester doesn't reply.

"Come on... I'm sure he would have made things a lot more hostile if he was really mad at me for outbidding him on these Soulstones. He could have bought them himself if he really wanted to!"

Chester gulps and finally responds.

"Oh, he most definitely could have bought those stones if he wished. That was the leader of the Galeheart Guild. They call him The Man Hidden in the Wind. The fact that he came from Sector 1 all the way to Sector 4 just for this auction... No... the fact that we even saw him in person... He talked to you directly..."

There's a smile growing across Chester's face now that makes it seem like he's more of a fanboy than afraid of this so-called "Man Hidden in the Wind".

I reply.

"Who is he? I know he's strong... Stronger than me... But what are you talking about? He's from Sector 1? A well-known Mercenary or something?"

The old man nods, letting out a breath and bringing himself together.

"Well known? Sure... A mercenary? No... I'm not sure you could call him that. He's mostly talked about in the high-end collector's circles. For the right price, he'll get teams to farm any dungeon you need or retrieve any order of materials no matter the drop rate. He's the main supplier for legitimate businesses in the craftsmen and collectors fields here in the Dark Continent."

I nod, but Chester keeps speaking before I think to get a word in.

"It's rumored he came from the mainland outside the walls of the continent to make a name for himself in a newer growing market with less competition. His only true competitors out here are the Inner Circle, related gangs, and other smaller private mercenary groups. However, his group is known to be the best and most legitimate. That's why long-term public contracts with the Galeheart Guild are a big deal. I haven't done business with his guild in well over a decade, but I still keep close tabs on the collector's world."

Chester laughs.

"Oh, how the times have changed."

The fact that this man is a well-known collector and businessman in the strongest Sector of the Dark continent isn't what stands out to me the most. It's the fact that Chester said he hasn't done business with him in over a decade. The man I met tonight was no more than 30 years old by the look of his visible facial features.

Either he managed to build a business empire in his teens, found the cure for aging, or his whole getup was a carefully concealed disguise. Given the nature of his blocked status, the last doesn't seem too far-fetched. Although, scarily enough, the first two don't seem unreasonable either.

Deep in thought, the two of us make it back to the above-ground dungeon hub one step at a time.

With the presence of a strong 3rd party making himself known in the city, it only reminds me of how much I don't know about this continent as a whole compared to the mainland. Everything that goes on here is kept a secret from the outside world.

However, as the rectangular shielding contraptions that guard the dungeons come into my line of sight, a new thought creeps into my mind. I wonder what buffs Abby and Maria got from their rank-ups.

Chapter 308

The late-night city streets are dark, calm, and quiet.

After going back to the same Shielded Dungeon entrance and paying the 10 bronze fee to get inside, I step into the E-Class portal to teleport back to the Vice City Labyrinth's 21st floor. Chester waits near the outer rim of the Dungeon Square as I do.

It's been a few hours since we left for the auction house, so I should be right on time.

The moment I teleport back onto the marble white pillar standing high above the green clouds, my sense proves my assumption right. The presence of two familiar readings shows up in my mind's

eye, but with significantly higher-powered stats and mana levels. Just like when I ranked up, and just as Fisher and Arie, their natural mana control both received between a 100 and 200% boost.

However, their position is almost a kilometer away. Although I did say that we would meet back in this dungeon, I never really specified where. It may be easy for me to find the exact teleport point from before, but to anyone else, all these white pillars look the same.

I smile, air-stepping in their direction and using my Appraisal skill to examine their new status to check for any buffs. Both Maria and Abby's skills are already maxed out at advanced and legendary grades so the rank-up wouldn't target advancement there; they would most likely give unique abilities based on their battle style.

The sight of the healer and ice mage both come into my field of vision and two buffs pop up in the form of blue text boxes.

[Area of Total Restoration]

[Ice Age]

At first glance, the names just seem to be more extreme versions of their normal skills... A restoration buff for Abby and possibly an Ice defense or offensive boost for Maria. However, the names could be misleading and my Appraisal skill doesn't allow me to check the details with more depth. All of the ranked-up buffs I've seen so far have been incredibly overpowered, so I'm sure there are hidden metrics to these too. I won't know for sure until the two of them go to battle.

I wave from a distance, and they wave back as I approach. Both of them made it to level 505. They succeeded in the rank-up and got some extra training in too, it seems.

I get much closer and speak up.

"How'd everything go? A smooth rank-up process? What floor did you have to climb to?"

Maria smiles wide and replies as I drift down to meet them on the stone pillar.

"It went really well! We made it up to the 23rd floor! That's where both of us started getting really consistent level-ups with every kill."

She pulses dark blue with excitement as Abby gives off a slow and consistent green flow of energy. Her eyes dimly shine, matching the bright emerald hue as she jumps into the conversation.

"Yep, success on our end. How about you? Did you find any Essence stones at the auction?"

I smirk, letting them both grab onto my shoulders as we teleport back to the Solaran Dungeon Square.

"Yeah, I got us the most powerful gems I could afford. They're similar to the shards we all absorbed before the Labyrinth. To use these new ones, you'll need to push that new restoration buff of yours to the limit."

As we leave the square and meet back up with Chester, the four of us walk back to his home. I can clearly feel the mana control difference in these two. It's near the point where I was post-absorbing the largest Blue Ogre King's Essence. So, in other words, just under half the control of my newly ranked-up real body's control level, nearly even with Lydia when we first met. So now they're forces to be reckoned with.

Even with such increased power, the question that still runs through my mind is how are they going to handle absorbing these Soulstones? The temporary MP absorption buff potions come to mind, but even with a few hundred percent increase for just a handful of minutes, I'm not positive that'll be enough to pull it off...

It's not so much the MP itself I'm concerned about; it's the possibilities of unknowns that rub me the wrong way.

Pondering these thoughts, we make our way home to find Arie and Fisher waiting for us.

They're both standing with arms crossed and confident looks on their faces as we approach. The blue-haired swordsman is the first to speak up.

"You were right. Two guards came wandering into the Black Market's dead zone trying to tell their boss something."

He chuckles.

"We took care of them."

I pause, wondering if they killed those two...

It wouldn't be the worst option, but they never really did anything to harm us, so they don't deserve it as much as our direct captors. I shrug, but Arie interjects, rolling his eyes before we step onto the porch and walk inside.

"By 'took care of them', he means we stripped them of any identifying items, knocked them out, tied them up, and locked them in a cell down below the market. The same as they did to us. When we manage to take out their boss, maybe we'll think about questioning them further. Neither of them saw our faces, so no harm done. Mission accomplished."

I nod, a little relieved that my teammates aren't as ruthless as I had imagined, but more interested in the really important topic at hand.

We all sit around the living room as I pull out the briefcase from the auction.

"This is what I managed to buy."

With two clicks, the containment field begins to buzz in our ears and the crimson gems light up the room with a red tint. Everyone stares in awe for a moment before Chester speaks.

"Now, I believe I heard your earlier conversation correctly. You said all of you managed to absorb essence stones?"

There's a round of nods from each of us. I step back from the open case and motion for him to continue on, he knows much more than me about the stones, so it's better for him to explain.

"Well, these are Soulstones. They're quite different, but share similar properties to the items you've successfully consumed before."

Everyone gets closer to the gems, eyeballing them from close range, and Fisher even goes in to touch one. Chester urges him to stop.

"On physical contact, the process will start so be careful. Unlike consumable gems, Soulstones are a bit more volatile. Just like the Essence you all absorbed, once the process has started, it can't be stopped. You either successfully absorb the Soul Energy along with its absurd amount of mana

keeping it contained, or you will give up early and only take in a fraction of the mana while losing the benefits of a soul bond taking place."

My eyebrows raise at his last statement. I've only heard of a soul bond one other time in my life; it was when I was making a pact with Ember.

However, I don't interrupt and let Chester continue.

"I'll take it most of you don't have the Appraisal skill, so I'll explain its strength and properties in full... This is a 7-piece Red Hydra Soulstone collection. Each Fragment has roughly 50 million MP, that's hundreds of times greater than the average Essence stone. If successfully bonded, each of you will receive the Red Hydra's Rage buff."

There's a long pause.

"I for one have never seen an item of this class on the market. Anything over B+ is hardly sold; it's usually kept by the hunters that farm it. However, I have seen similar lower-grade Soulstones with buffs attached. This will be of a similar nature to your ranked-up abilities. A permanent buff on your status, available to use like a skill at any time you wish. The stronger the monster's soul, the stronger the buff it gives. The stronger the buff, the harder it is to bond."

The pause continues as everyone stares down at the stones and rethinks Chester's explanation along with his implied warning. These are unknown powers with unknown buffs. Even with Abby's Restoration skill in mind, the overflowing Red Aura from the containment field still makes this seem like a gamble.

My words cut through the silence after almost half a minute goes by.

"I'll go first. I'll absorb the first stone."

Chapter 309

After my statement, there's some hesitation from my teammates. They look at me wide-eyed from every corner of the room.

I reply.

"You heard me, I'll test it out first to see if it's safe. I'm the one who brought them here, it'd be rude not to absorb my gem first. If everything goes well, we'll know it's safe for you to try too."

The expressions on their faces are a mixture of concern and curiosity, but mostly concern as I shut the case on the table and motion toward the door. I'd like to not let anyone think too long about it and come up with any good points to talk me out of trying.

Remembering back to the immense amount of energy expelled by absorbing the Ogre King's Essence in that shielding room, I point toward the door.

"We'll need a lot more wide-open space than this. I'm sure it will give off quite the charge."

Maria stops me and is the first to voice her concern.

"I know you have higher absorption capabilities than all of us, I'm sure out of anyone you'd be able to handle that; but are you sure you want to risk acquiring an unknown buff from an A-rank monster soul bond?"

She's genuinely concerned.

Arie tilts his head to the side and adds to her claim.

"Maria has a point here. We may need an edge, but killing yourself a day before the battle won't help us much. We need to be certain these stones are safe before any of us try them out. That includes you."

Abby joins in too.

"I know my restoration skill has worked without any problems so far, but don't you think this is an unnecessary risk? How strong will those Sector Leaders really even be? We may be able to beat them as we are now."

Her eyes flare green for a split second, reminding me of her newly ranked-up abilities.

Fisher nods.

"Yeah, as long as I'm not in those cuffs... these leaders don't stand a chance."

"..."

I reply to them all after a long pause.

"Unfortunately, the Sector leaders are much stronger than you think. Much stronger than all of us combined. As I said before, one of them is level 651 and their visitor is from an even stronger sector. For all I know, they could be an A-class-level threat. We need all the advantages we can get."

My teammates don't know I'm not in my real body, so their worry makes sense. I can tell the reason they're audibly doubting the strength of our opponents is to urge me away from making the rash decision.

However, absorbing these gems may be our only shot at saving Lydia while also getting to see who this craftsman really is.

A massive mana control boost plus an offensive buff from an A-ranked monster is just the trump card we need. It's likely more powerful than that worm I just barely managed to escape from. With the power of a monster like this on the outside, even in the form of a buff, we'll all be much better off. With my self-regeneration abilities on hand plus the added benefit of my body being a copy, it isn't much of a risk for me to try. Going first is the best way to confirm it's safe for my teammates to absorb too.

The only problem is they believe this is my real body.

I bite my bottom lip and pace for a moment.

While thinking to myself, the room is left in silence.

Once a few long seconds pass, I let out a sigh.

"I'll be trusting all of you with another secret."

The best way to convince them this is a good idea without thinking I'm insane is to keep those who will be fighting with me in the loop. Or in other words; tell my teammates the truth.

They all listen as I describe the body double and hibernation skills I used after a severe poisoning I received from the Boss of the Labyrinth. While divulging some information, I still keep my bond with Ember and the fact I carry 2 demon cores allowing me to wield demonic energy a secret.

Even Chester is interested in what the Boss monster looked like, but I keep my descriptions vague to focus on the main points of why it's best to let me test this out. It seems that Demonic Guardians and Dragons are seriously well-hidden knowledge even to high-end collectors and researchers.

Telling my party even these small details feels like a huge weight is lifted off my shoulders. Still, due to my cautious nature; it doesn't feel necessary or optimal to burden them with the whole truth all at once. Too much information can lead to unforeseen problems in the future.

Once I've finished my explanation, tiptoeing around the parts I'd like to keep hidden, Maria responds with a much more relaxed expression and calm body language.

"I knew you had a plan." Then she rolls her eyes. "You just sometimes make me worry, Jay."

The others nod and let out sighs of their own. Unexpectedly, they take my account of the bizarre last few days pretty lightly. I expected them to be mad.

Arie points toward the door.

"This makes a lot more sense. Let's get to it, you had me convinced at body double. I trust you as a squad leader. However, it's nice when you keep us in the loop."

Abby smirks.

"Agreed. Now I have all the reason to push my new buff to its limits without holding back, I'm in."

Fisher shakes his head but smiles.

"It's always something with you, isn't it?"

I nod, accepting their responses, and releasing all the remaining tension in my clenched jaw.

With more confidence in my claim to test out the stones first, the 6 of us leave through the front door and head off into the desert. We walk out toward the east for 20 minutes before the lights of Solara begin to slightly fade.

The desert is dark, and the night air is cool. Every few minutes a light breeze passes through calming the nerves of the group.

Although they all agreed with cheerful attitudes, I can tell everyone is still on edge.

A small valley in the landscape dips far below the natural desert's rising and falling altitude.

"This is the perfect place."

The dunes that surround us create the perfect light-blocking barrier to conduct this test.

I take out the briefcase and open it up on the desert floor. The stones light up the surrounding area with a red glowing light instantly.

Everyone takes a step back.

Using telekinesis, one of the crimson gems floats into the air and I hand the case containing the other 6 to Arie; he stands by my right side. With two clicks, it closes and the archer leads Chester, Maria, and Fisher a safe distance away.

The red stone floats above my head. Only Abby stands near me, less than 2 meters in front, staring straight ahead.

Everyone watches with anticipation, readying their magic skills for whatever happens next.

I take a deep breath in, then out; letting the glowing red gem drift down toward my fingertips.

Abby's eyes track it, glowing brighter green as the stone gets closer. She whispers under her breath.

"Area of Total Restoration."

Beneath the healer, the same green energy that glints in her eyes erupts outward in a wave of light flowing in all directions, creating a wide circle. It covers a diameter of almost 10 meters and glows brightest beneath my own two feet, gliding upward and encapsulating me in a green humming glow. It feels warm and soothing, just like her normal healing magic but with an aura of strength deep within it far beyond her capabilities before.

At the same moment, the red gem falls into my open palms and thick red wisps of energy start to leak from its core. On contact with my skin, it burns. The sensation feels as if boiling water is being slowly poured down my wrists.

The Soulstone's contents twist slowly around my arms and energy makes its way to my shoulder and eventually over my chest.

The searing pain is intense but bearable as it hasn't even entered my body yet...

I've felt the agony of many mortal wounds far more painful in my previous battles to make these burns feel like a walk in the park, but I'm well aware the worst is yet to come.

I grit my teeth as the dark blood-red matter seeps into my chest and the absorption process begins.

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The sensation of boiling water trickling down my skin is almost soothing compared to the searing hot waves of energy that begin to enter my chest next.

I can sense the nerves and anticipation from the people watching around me, but out of anyone, I'm the most calm one here. Even without the fact that we all desperately need a power-up, I would have attempted this bond myself if there was only one stone.

My intuition on energy signatures is pretty refined from past battles. Despite throwing myself into dangerous situations, I know when something is actively trying to kill me or not.

These stones, in particular, feel as if they're reaching out with immense and overwhelming power. They may be dangerous, but they don't have the intent to harm anyone without good reason.

As the energy seeps into my chest, it feels like molten rock is soaking in through my skin deep into my heart, then pumping out and spreading through my veins. My blood feels as if it's boiling, and my bones and joints heat up like hot stones in the sun, cooking me from the inside out.

To say there is an instantaneous overwhelming feeling of agony that reaches every corner of my body is putting things lightly.

A shockwave of truly overpowering energy ripples through me, but at the same time, it carries an aura that feels invigorating while it injects itself into my mana pools.

Hundreds of thousands of MP instantly enter my bloodstream, filling the pathways in my arms and legs with the hot red light that slowly oozes out from the crystal's core.

I think about activating my Plunderer skill as well as Self-Regeneration to ease the violent nature of the absorption process, but I decide against it to simulate how it would be for my teammates. This isn't just for me; I'm trying to make sure the process is safe for those who follow my lead as well.

The blazing hot energy completely fills my body. Boiling mana flows through my veins, and my pathways are filled to the brim. Easily over a million MP has made its way into my body, but there's still so much more to go.

Barely a second has passed, but one thing concerns me...

Although the pain is harsh, overall it's bearable. The damage being done to my insides and skin will be repaired with ease, either through Abby's restoration on the spot or my Self Regeneration after the fact. These sensations don't bother me. The crux of my concerns is that the red energy entering my mana pool is not leaving at all.

In the Essence shards and fragments I absorbed previously, the moment the absorption process began, mana was expelled from my body as it was used up. This is how the mana control refinement process works.

The more mana processed through one's system, the more open and able it becomes at processing and wielding it in the future.

This energy I'm taking in is not leaving my body; it's just continuously pouring into my mana pathways.

The rate at which it flows from the ruby-red gemstone increases, and the searing pain envelops every surface of my body, inside and out.

The Soulstone's energy covers my line of sight as my absorption rate fails to keep up with the rate at which the energy is being expelled from the stone.

I'm completely covered in a red aura from head to toe.

I attempt to look around through the thick, smoke-like, energy-dense fog that encapsulates me, but everything shifts from red to white in an instant.

Completely white...

Blank...

The desert is gone.

Abby is gone.

All of my other teammates are gone.

The only thing left is the blood-red gem in my hands and the powerful aura that flows out of it like an ocean's raging current.

This makes no sense...

My surroundings are invisible, even though my eyes are open. Every direction I point my gaze turns out to just be white. The pain from the heat becomes so intense that there's nothing else I can think about but the non-existent flames that surround me.

My body feels as if it were burned to ash in an instant as the fiery red aura engulfs me.

I can't hear anything. I can't feel anything. Worst of all, I can't see anything but white.

This is worse than the darkness of the Abyss. At least when everything is dark, one can hope for light; but in the presence of blinding light that blocks everything out, what more could I hope to see?

I'm left in a state of shock.

I can't tell if this is reality or my eyes playing tricks on me.

My mind is still intact, and my perception of the space around me flows normally, but there's nothing to take in. All I can do is think.

This isn't the experience I expected to go through at all...

Before I become used to the illusion of the white void, a pair of black eyes appears, soaked in the same crimson aura that engulfed me.

They're enormous and exude pure power. As they appear, wisps of dark red and black energy fill the empty bright void and creep forward. A Hydra's head materializes around its eyes, and the most intense wave of intimidation I've ever felt hits my very soul.

It's not filled with killing intent. It's more of a show of dominance.

The sudden profound sensation vibrates through me, allowing my mind to comprehend the presence of my body once again. Its mana ripples through me, amplifying the output of the millions of MP coursing through my energy pathways. With such a deep and intrusive wave, even the depths of my soul link with Ember are touched.

The sensation allows me to feel two paper-thin connections to both my real body in its hibernation state and Ember hundreds of kilometers away, even deep within a dungeon. It's like a silver shimmering spider's silk thread of a substance not quite made of mana, but powered by it. The thread is only visible to me in this exact mental state.

I've never physically seen our bond, but now that I have... I may be able to tap into this feeling again in the future.

However, despite my momentary dose of clarity, I'm still paralyzed with what I can only describe as fear. The head of a Blood-Red Hydra towers over me and continues to pulse with dark red light.

Every wave that hits me invigorates the mana inside me back to its original state, making the searing hot boiling sensation return greater and greater with every pulse. This makes my skin and energy pathways hotter by the second.

What felt like slow-moving molten rock before now feels like fiery eruptions coursing through my veins, threatening to rip my body apart from the inside.

I can't move.

It's like I'm chained to an invisible wall, just watching the events unfold before me.

The constant waves of the Hydra's magic push my mind into a numbed state, but I don't give in. As I bear the pain and stare straight at the unwavering beast before me, I slip further and further from reality.

I can't tell if it's been seconds, minutes, or hours.

Everything starts to blur as the eyes of the Hydra creep closer. I see six more heads behind it with twelve more glowing red eyes staring deep into my soul as my vision starts to fade. It looks like they all want to say something. Their mouths hint at opening, but they never do.

All I do know is I have to hold on. My jaw is clenched, and all my muscles are tight, but the pressure of the energy waves that hit me over and over holds me down in this illusion of a spiritual prison.

It's taking every ounce of my willpower to stay conscious.

I can't even attempt to use my mana control or other powers to fight back. The thought of exerting any force other than keeping my eyes open feels like a death wish.

Closing my eyes seems like an even worse option.

The seven heads just watch as I'm filled with the remaining wisps of red aura from the main monster above me.

Its head begins to turn lighter and lighter as more energy spills out. As the red aura that leaks, it takes the Hydra's pigment with it, making it fade closer and closer to match the white color of the void.

As it fades, the Hydra bows its head. The waves of its energy cease.

At the same moment, my feet feel as if they've been splashed with cool water.

The sensation travels up my calves and to my knees, then around my thighs and all the way up my back to trickle down my arms into my fingertips.

The layers of molten hot mana that flow through my veins are covered by this new energy, cooling the Hydra's power to lukewarm.

Once the cold energy reaches my neck and seeps into my mind, I receive a refreshing boost of power, allowing me to move and think freely once again.

I look down to see the waves of green light that cover my body, intertwining with the red aura and rejuvenating my charred skin and fractured bones. Abby's skill is bringing me back to the real world.

The eyes of the monster in my mental prison fade completely into the whiteness, and only six heads remain, watching from far behind.

I take a deep gasp of fresh air, and my awareness of the calm nighttime desert comes back into full view. The white void is gone...

The gem in my palms has completely dissolved into grey dust. The eyes of everyone around me are wide open in awe.