

D. Diver 311

Chapter 311

I hear my system notifications ringing in my head.

[Soul Bond: Complete]

[New Buff: Red Hydra's Rage]

[Body Double Attribute Transfer: Success]

Everyone is frozen in place.

Everyone but Abby. She concentrates on me with total focus and continues to pulse with green light.

My gaze follows her eyes, and I look down at my own body to see the dark red plumes of energy still swirling all around me. My veins glow bright red, and the thick clouds of residue continue to seep in through my chest. However, the pain is gone.

It's not burning my insides.

In fact, I don't feel different at all...

I was expecting to feel a huge uptick in my natural mana control, but the reminder that this energy was only absorbed and not expelled or refined is most likely why the effects haven't taken place.

I immediately open my status with the All-Seeing Eye activated and peer to the bottom of the screen.

Its text is glowing red, standing out on my light blue status screen.

Red Hydra's Rage

Info: This buff is a unique attribute gifted by a Divine Beast. It is limited to 7 individuals maximum per resurrection of the Red Hydra. It grants the user a 141% increase in all stats. Capabilities to absorb mana and the efficiency of one's mana control will increase 79% upon use.

This buff grows with the user possessing the soul bond. The percentage increases will rise as the user's level rises. Jumps in buff percentages may also rise with excessive use of this ability.

If the user has abilities that separate their mind from their body, the buff, and corresponding soul energy will be available wherever the bonded user's conscious state of being is the strongest.

Surplus battle instincts and abilities of the Red Hydra will be granted to the user in times of need.

The crimson glow of the text I read is both exciting and eerie. Its contrast on the light blue text screen stands out significantly from all my other skills, but with a quick use of conceal, I confirm even this can be hidden from sight if necessary.

A few lines of text pique my interest.

The rule about the buff following wherever the conscious mind goes is a very intriguing condition. It explains why the transfer to my real body was successful, yet the buff is still active on my copy

here. I'm not quite sure how this will work, but I'm interested in doing some tests once I get the chance.

In the meantime, I'll need to test out how well the buff itself actually boosts my stats and mana control like it says. The 141% increase in base stats is great and all, but my Demon's Cores, as well as an assortment of gear and magic items, do the same thing. A 79% increase in mana control is the boost that really catches my eye.

A 79% boost is well over the expected 50 million MP. It's nearly double that actually... And there doesn't seem to be a time limit or cooldown visible in the description either. It means every point of new mana I refine is basically much more efficiently used while this buff is active.

As I grow more, the percentage will only go up. This is an extremely rare and powerful trait to have. My rate of growth will increase even faster.

If there are any downsides, now would be the time to find out.

I look up from my status to see the eyes of my teammates still on me. Abby is now looking much more relaxed, most likely because the red glow has almost completely vanished from the dark swirling clouds that surrounded me just moments ago.

"I did it. I successfully bonded."

As the remnants of the twisting red energy enter my chest, Abby is the first to speak. She's breathing heavily, and her eyes are still open with concern.

"T-That was... that was it? No more than 5 seconds went by. Your whole body just glowed red, and your skin and bones started bubbling and breaking under the pressure. I had to use my ranked-up restoration skill's full power on you and myself to keep up. It... I—The last shard you absorbed took hours. This one... is a bit more violent in nature, it seems."

Another awkward moment of silence passes as I open and close my fists and stretch my arms and legs.

"Everything feels fine to me. Looks like you did a good job putting me back together. However, I don't recall the physical pain at all. Plus, that definitely took much longer than 5 seconds in my mind..."

As they all listen closely, I recount the events that just took place. Then, I also share the wording beneath the buff on my status.

The group comes to the consensus as me; that the original Hydra had 7 heads, and each fragment grants a fraction of its power in the form of a buff. The bonding process is a test of the mind rather than a test of one's mana control or strength. Other than the basics of having to withstand 50 million MP of A-Rank or higher mana. This is what would instantly kill most, but we have a way to get past the physical limits, negating its overwhelming strength with Abby's skill.

Even after my vivid description of the past, Chester is left clueless about the true nature of these Soulstones.

"I've never heard of a hunter actually meeting the creature the stones belonged to before bonding with them. Until now, I assumed Divine Beasts were only myths. Absorbing a soulstone is usually a

simple process to raise a user's mana control and give a basic perk or special move. A progressively growing buff that rises in power as the user gets stronger is incredibly rare..."

Fisher chimes in.

"Okay, but how does it work? Try the buff out."

I grin.

"Sure, I was thinking the same thing. Everyone step back."

They all do as I say while I, too, back up to the lowest point in the valley once again to activate my new buff.

It's as simple as turning on a skill. Just thinking of the name triggers its abilities.

The moment I do, my veins begin to glow red just like they did before, and the crimson energy from the Hydra is seemingly summoned from thin air, wrapping its thick mana-dense clouds around my arms and legs.

It seeps out from my chest, but I don't feel the sensation of mana being used up at all.

My vision becomes tinted red, but my senses are significantly heightened. It feels as if my All-Seeing Eye is activated but finely focused on only small movements and abnormalities in the desert around me.

The darkness of night looks as bright and clear as day. I can notice the sand grinding and shifting beneath my teammates' feet over 20 meters away.

My body feels lighter too, and my muscles feel stronger.

I take a lunge forward, and my speed surprises me. It's increased dramatically. The only feeling I can relate it to is the one time I used my skill [Final Breath] against my first-floor boss opponent. The world around me feels like it's slowing down as my feet leave small craters in the sand behind me while running forward.

A cloud of dark red magic residue is left behind in my wake.

My old berserker skill and bloodlust abilities share similar traits but have nothing on the pure power and release of animalistic instincts this skill allows me to wield.

It doesn't affect my mood... Despite "Rage" being in the buff's name, I'm as calm as can be.

I come to a halt after zipping forward tens of meters in the desert in the blink of an eye, then activate my mana manipulation skill to attempt to create my normal shielding effect.

Bright pink mana is summoned from my skill bar, draining my MP like usual, but it's tinted dark red as the buff boosts its overall control. The loud buzz of my shielding can be heard from a distance, and I'm confident it's much denser and more resilient than anything I've ever faced or created myself.

"Nothing is getting through this..."

I air-step upward, leaving trails of red mana-imbued air in long trailing wisps behind me. With every step I take, I fly faster than I ever have before.

It feels so natural. It's clear that I'm much stronger, but the way my body moves and the amount of mana I exert for each action feels exactly the same. It's just being boosted upon expulsion.

Next, I summon fire, and the black flames that erupt from my hands are intertwined with the crimson energy.

Earth magic too, as well as ice; they create blood-red stone and beautiful pink-tinted ice shards.

All of my abilities are boosted by this buff. Not by pure stats, but they gain unique properties being intertwined with red mana.

I feel invigorated, and much more capable. My awareness of the environment is heightened to new heights too. Considering all of this, I won't know for sure how impressive these buffs really are until I fight something to push them to the limits.

Deep in thought with a growing smile across my face, I turn back and air-step into the small valley to meet my teammates and report the good news.

My feet hit the ground, and I deactivate the buff.

The second I do, my body feels fatigued and heavy. My eyelids droop and begin to close.

Chapter 312

The red aura around me dissipates, and in turn, my entire body feels like it just went through hours of intense training.

My mana bar is far from depleted, but my mouth feels dry, and my head starts to ache.

I stumble in my steps for a moment, and my eyes threaten to shut, but I catch myself before falling and keep walking straight ahead.

I wince at the sharp pain that flows through my legs, but activate my self-regeneration skill to try and heal my sore muscles as best I can; as expected, it hardly helps. Abby reacts instantly too, using her restoration skill. Its green healing magic expands beneath my feet before I get another word in.

The soreness and body fatigue start to fade as I face my teammates.

Behind me, high in the sky, red trails of magic residue stay stagnant and slowly swirl in the light nighttime breeze. It gives off a weak and spread-out energy signature but doesn't dissolve into the atmosphere like normal mana or even Demonic Energy.

It's just left behind in trails, following where I previously was.

The healer speaks.

"So how do you feel? And how does the buff feel? I assume it lives up to its description?"

Even with a full restore from Abby, my joints feel stiff, and my muscles are sore. I'm much less fatigued, but my body is still completely exhausted... So that's a good sign. If I needed to jump into battle right now, the minor side effects wouldn't be much of an issue. However, it feels like this kind of fatigue is something only a real meal and sleep can heal over time.

It's a good thing I didn't go all out and only tested this power to a minor extent. It seems the drawbacks of using aggressive amounts of the Red Hydra's energy will have unforeseen fatigue and stress on the body.

"We'll only be able to use this buff in emergencies, or near the end of a battle as a final last-ditch effort. Even after the full restore, I'm not back to 100%. However, the power increase was incredible... and you won't feel the negative side effects until you deactivate the ability. I don't have anything to test it on or compare it to, but it was like I was moving over twice as fast and wielding denser magic while only using my normal energy output. The Hydra's mana intertwined with my own and boosted every movement and attack."

I go into more detail about the whole experience one more time, preparing them to face the Hydra, assuming they'll experience the same mind-bending reality shift that I did.

Arie steps up.

"This makes sense. I'll go next. I know the risks and trust I can handle it with your help."

He turns to Abby as she begins glowing green to power up her restoration circle.

In the meantime, I use telekinesis to float a gem out of the briefcase and up above Arie, waiting for his signal to let it down. We all step far away from the interaction taking place, just like they did for me.

A flash of green light washes over Arie, and he nods, letting me drop the crimson stone into his palms.

Waves of red energy soak his body, and pulsing green energy comes from the desert floor, constantly rebuilding and regenerating the archer's bones and flesh.

This is pretty gruesome to watch.

I could only imagine what everyone was thinking the first time around when they were unsure of what the end result would be.

Arie doesn't scream, move, or do anything but stand still with the red gem in his hands, allowing the energy to seep into his body and bond with his soul.

The swirling red aura seems very familiar. Of course, it seems this way because it's exactly the same as the aura that surrounds me when I activate the buff; but just feeling its presence makes me subconsciously connected to it, even without my buff activated.

Less than 5 seconds pass, and the bright red violent wisps of energy subside, allowing Abby to engulf the archer in the full extent of her healing light. Moments later, she takes down her emerald veil to reveal Arie grinning and moving his limbs around to make sure everything is working normally.

Upon his successful bond, the others go through one by one. Maria next, then Fisher, and lastly Abby bonds with it herself.

Impressively, her [Area of Total Restoration] stays active even while she's unconscious. It's a perk of her ranked-up buff. If the main body or mind of the user is in mortal danger, the buff activates itself as a passive skill.

It has similar traits to my poison resistance, just a lot more extreme.

We all let out long sighs of relief as the green-haired mage walks out from her own display of red and green light as the last remnants of red wisps leave her body.

Each of them gives me a nod, then turns around to test out their buffs together. They know not to push it too hard after my initial warning, but the allure of trying this new power is too strong. I can't blame them for trying. Plus, knowing how it works so as not to be surprised in battle is important too.

I'm left standing next to Chester as the four of them run up the closest dune with trails of red energy following them, all surrounded by the very essence of the Red Hydra's soul.

The old man speaks up.

"You surprise me again and again. This is one of the most interesting items I've ever seen, and each of you have skills and abilities beyond what I ever thought was possible."

He gulps, letting out a thin smile.

"No wonder you have so many people after you."

Chester lets out a nervous chuckle as four flashing red lights illuminate the desert sky above us. Below, four hunters zip across the sand, testing out their newfound power. I reply.

"Yeah, I'm sure us successfully absorbing these stones will only bring more problems in the future. Though, I'm grateful that it will give us the edge in the short term."

My teammates all come back, showing the exact same signs of weariness that I did, all to be healed by Abby's restoration moments later. They're all brought back to their normal healed states, but the same hint of fatigue remains. Maria has a cheerful grin on her face.

"We're more than ready now. It's like we all just ranked up again! This strength and power is on another level!"

I smile back as the others agree with her and close the case with two gems remaining before tossing it into my item storage.

Each of them shares their experiences while testing out their new buff for just under a minute. It's been a long day no matter how you frame it. We need sleep before confronting the Sector leaders tomorrow.

My four teammates and Chester all leave to go back to the house. I stay behind, letting them know I'll catch up soon. The streaks of red energy left behind in the desert are very interesting. No amount of flames, MP absorption, or wind magic can get them fully out of sight. They only fade and spread out. Like toxic waste, unable to be destroyed or dissipated entirely, clogging up the air.

After a few minutes of attempting to clear the residue, I shrug and move on to greater matters. No one ventures out into the desert this far, and we'll be leaving the city tomorrow anyway. It should dissolve or be blown away by the winds given enough time. There is one last preparation that needs to be taken care of. I silently air-step back to the Abyss.

While running from the massive worm monster previously, I drained my Demonic Energy stores to 0. Although I could probably absorb 1 or 2 units from the dungeons back in Solara, filling up from the source will be much more efficient.

I won't venture into the Abyss; I'm not looking for a fight. I'm just looking to fill my core to the brim, making sure I'm fully prepared for what's to come.

About an hour and a half of scouring the edge of the Abyss goes by before I take out 4 Demonic Wolves and fill my core up past 40 Units.

I'm missing out on precious hours of sleep, but I'm pretty glad I didn't go through that whole soul-bonding process with any Demonic Energy in my core. Even with my skills deactivated, I'm unsure what all the magic pressure would have done to my body while my mind was elsewhere.

I return to the house to find everyone else already sleeping. Worn out from the day's work, my eyes close and I soon fall asleep as well.

—

Hours later, I'm woken up by Maria's voice and her lightly shaking me.

"It's time to go, the sun is about to rise."

Chapter 313

The five of us set off in the morning, leaving Chester behind.

It's still dark out, but hints of day creep up on the horizon as we venture off into the desert toward the abandoned town and observatory I've been keeping an eye on for days.

Our movements are a bit slower than my usual pace because we're not all air-stepping through the sky.

This may slow us down some, but it's also a bit more of a stealthy approach.

My perception skills are on full blast our entire way to the destination. I don't expect to find anyone out here at this hour, but keeping an eye out on our surroundings is a no-brainer.

The path over is quick and silent. Anticipation grows with every step.

Once within less than a kilometer of the destination, we all slow down. Eventually, the five of us make it to the last high-rising dune of sand leading down to the abandoned village on the other side. Simultaneously, the sun begins to rise. Its golden rays come down to light up the white dome atop the cliff that overlooks the Abyss.

Its sonar is still active even this early in the morning. A grey pulse of energy beams from the rooftop and soars into the darkness. The act lets out a light buzz that vibrates through all of our ears.

We come to a halt as I do a full scan of the building up on the cliff, then whisper under my breath.

"Just as I expected."

Three figures show up on my radar.

One of which is still in the mana-blocking cuffs. They show up in my enemy detection skill, just like the others did back in the underground lair when they were in cuffs. My appraisal and inspect skills cannot sense a single thing about their status. All signs point toward this being Lydia.

Next, the level 651 with his full wardrobe full of +100% or greater defense items and multiple legendary combat skills appears. My eyes wander down to his [Solid Steel Defense] buff again, wondering exactly how it works.

However, these thoughts soon get pushed to the back of my mind as the final figure's information flashes into my mind's eye.

The sight of it makes me feel uneasy.

[Lv. ??? Access Denied]

Active Items: [??? Access Denied]

Active Skills: [??? Access Denied]

Bufs: [??? Access Denied]

The eerily familiar [??? Access Denied] symbols pop up all over the third figure's status screen within the observatory. Even their level is blocked from my vision.

It looks just like those error messages that showed up on the man's status from the auction. Lith, the man who runs the mercenary guild in Valor City. This has to be some kind of special concealment item. If not, it has to be some kind of special buff or skill...

I'm unsure why else their status would be blocked from my vision.

I grit my teeth and duck my head down; my teammates follow my lead without knowing exactly why.

"They're definitely here. Two Inner Circle members, and one hostage. Lydia is still breathing."

Sighs are let out all around me, but my mind is elsewhere.

As these words leave my lips, our possible options for infiltration begin to race through my mind. I knew coming into this, there was going to be a mystery man; the craftsman. However, I assumed said mystery would be much easier to solve the moment I got a proper scan of him.

This is not the case.

Fisher replies to me, eagerly waiting to jump over the edge of the dune down the valley and toward the observatory.

"So it's confirmed, they're here. Let's go take 'em out."

I stare at the desert floor, thinking to myself, but reply after a short pause.

"We will, we just have to take it very slow. I can't get a good read on one of the members. I'll have to separate him from the others and handle him myself. You all will take on the man who took Lydia. The Sector 4 leader. Got it?"

Arie replies.

"Sure, if it's just brute strength and high mana control he's wielding, we can handle him no problem."

Abby and Maria nod as Fisher's eyes flare blue.

I let out more waves of mana-imbued perception waves to use my All-Seeing Eye and make a mental picture of the room our enemies are in. Usually, this would be impossible if not inside a dungeon, but with the high-density mana radiation coming off of the device upstairs, it's easy to see

how the mana flows in and out of all the nooks and crannies. It's a long distance away, but I have a good enough image to draw the structure in the sand for everyone to see.

"There are two main floors to the observatory, not including the basement."

I point to a 2D ring-shaped drawing on the sandy floor. There are three Xs marked in its center.

"This is the bottom floor. It's a large circular hallway that wraps around the entire building. There's a main living area in its center, a small circular room at the core of the base. This is where the two enemies are keeping the captive, and also happens to be the only entrance that leads down to the basement. I'm unable to fully see what its contents are."

Abby's eyebrows scrunch up like she wants to ask why but does not want to interrupt, so I continue, giving her a quick explanation.

"It seems the basement is lined with that same black shielding that we were trapped in previously at the dungeon hub in Solara; I'm unable to sense how deep it is or what's inside."

Next, I point to a circle right next to my first drawing.

"This is the top floor. It's a circular room, with high ceilings."

I peek my head over the dune's edge to point at the white structure being lit up by the morning sun.

"This is the top of the dome. There are many high-density mana items and unstable high-powered equipment being used to power a device on this floor. Keeping the fighting far away from these items would be wise."

A moment of silence passes before I carry on.

"Right now, all three people are in the holding room at the core of the base."

Abby replies.

"So you'll lead the oddball out while we confront the Sector 4 leader together."

I nod slowly.

"Yes, but first we'll need to gather a little more information. It's never a good idea to go in blind when we don't have to. We know they're here, but they don't know we are. They're expecting number 2 to show up with the prisoners in hand..."

Arie smirks, catching on.

"So we don't want to keep them waiting."

"Exactly. The longer we wait, the more restless they'll become."

I use my [Hush] skill in a large radius, and the five of us begin sneaking toward the observatory mountain's base. The two leaders I'm keeping an eye on aren't moving at all; they just stand in the center room of the fortress waiting for us to arrive. Possibly, conducting an interrogation.

Once we dip down through the village and carefully make our way up the side of the cliff, the entrance to the observatory comes into view. I speak out loud with the [Hush] barrier still active. Only my teammates can hear me.

"The main room is just through the front door and halfway down either side of the curled circular hallway; there are entrance points on both sides. You can't miss it."

I bring my [Hush] barrier down and switch to speaking through my telepathy skill.

"Once the coast is clear, I'll give you the word. Be ready for anything."

I activate stealth and jump high into the air, lightly air-stepping up to the roof area where the sonar device sticks out of the open dome.

Muffled voices can be heard from below me. With the mana-powered device buzzing in my ears, grasping the faint sounds of a hidden conversation one floor below and through multiple walls proves challenging, even for my enhanced senses.

I hold my breath and jump down onto the top floor of the observatory, using a combination of stealth, hush, and wind magic to hit the floor without making a sound.

Chapter 314

I walk across the room, passing the buzzing machine with crates of mana crystals by its side.

The wooden boxes filled with pink gems glisten in the morning light.

As I get closer to the stairway that leads down to the first floor, the muffled tones of two men having a conversation hit my ears. The first voice I recognize is the Sector 4 leader that I ran away from previously. He has a happy tone to his words today.

"So what do you think about them? They're the real deal, aren't they? Just like that dagger I have back in the trading office. Genuine Demonic Matter."

He lets out a chuckle and starts to walk around the room, leaving a long pause between his statements.

Using my All-Seeing Eye, I can sense the high-density mana items all over his body.

I slowly step forward, trying to get a better ear on what the response will be. Any clues about the man with an unreadable status will be of great help before I have to confront him. Or better yet, slip in unseen and take him out without any risk to myself or my teammates. By the looks of things, the latter won't be a viable option.

The items the second man wears aren't even showing up in my perception skills; there's an odd barrier between my mind's eye and whatever item or skill protects their identity. All I can do is try to listen.

Still, there's no response, so I creep closer and closer to the stairs.

An electronic voice, full of static, monotone, and extremely low-pitched finally replies.

The scratchy nature of the static makes me wince.

"Yes... these seem to have Demonic properties..."

Even so, his voice is clear, slow, and concise.

It makes my heart start to race.

This is the furthest thing from what I expected to hear from the room down below. There's a long pause before the slow and calculated robotic words escape this person's lips again.

"But they're impure... Replications... Intertwined with Demonic Energy from a mana-born Demon, not from the Abyss..."

The voice stops as the sonar beam behind me sends out another pulse deep into the darkness below the cliff. Then, the Sector 4 Director starts to speak again.

"Well, yes. These were the stones found on this team member from the Vice Region's Elite team. The attack on the City of Solara commissioned to take out the Labyrinth, along with many of the higher-ranking dungeons nearby. They're a fairly good team; once my number 2 comes back, I'd like to see if I can whip any of them into shape to work for me. Ha, I even-"

The monotone voice cuts him off.

"Enough... Chit-chat... I don't care about your plans... Do what you want with them when I leave... You're telling me this woman cleared the Final Floor...?"

There's a pause.

I swallow saliva and listen intently. My heart is racing, and I stay completely still, not wanting to miss a word that comes out of their mouths. There's still no information on this mystery man. The Sector 4 leader replies, with a bit of nerves to his voice now.

"No, apparently a younger man cleared the final floor. He didn't have any items of value on him, so we threw him in the mana-negating cuffs and let number 5 take care of him. You'll get to meet him soon too, but this one here has the stones you're always looking for to aid in your creations, so I assumed you'd like to see her first."

The air falls silent again.

"Yes... Good, good... I wouldn't have made the trip from Sector 2 if there wasn't something worth my while...."

Silence fills the entire Observatory once again before the sonar breaks the awkward lull.

Meanwhile, a few thoughts start racing through my mind. This man just said he was from Sector 2. Based on the superior tone used while talking to the Sector 4 leader, it's safe to say he's a leader too. This means he's probably stronger than level 651... but by how much?

He continues speaking.

"I'll use my artifact... We'll see what's really going on in the mind of the mage who brought us Demonic stones..."

I sense a large amount of mana starting to build up into a small space on the floor below me. All of my appraisal skills are constantly blocked by the man's odd armor, so I can't get a real read on what's happening. However, it's clear a large amount of energy is being exerted.

This isn't good. It's most definitely a crucial moment, and I need to act fast.

Whatever the Sector 2 leader is charging up, it's about to be used on Lydia. I have to make a decision, but there are too many unknown variables.

The mana buildup gets more and more dense, tens of thousands of MP are being channeled into a tiny space. An equally loud buzzing noise starts to pulse from below me as it does behind me from the sonar.

This artifact is extremely powerful.

Pulses of white energy start to come up through the floor.

Then, I hear a scream...

A very familiar scream. One that belongs to my teammate.

The Sector 4 leader laughs through the noise.

"Look who finally woke up. You sure do have bad luck with timing. Hold tight, this will only hurt a lot."

Sarcasm fills his twisted words as the buzzing of the mana gets louder and louder, and the readings show it covers the entire body of the other man but concentrates most densely on his palms. Still, his armor suit distorts the waves about a meter from all sides of his body.

The man moves toward Lydia.

So, I make a decision to stop it. I make my move.

I let out a deadly wave of intimidation from above, rippling through the metal walls of the Observatory, focusing right at the Sector 2 leader with all my might.

It's not so much an attack; it's more of a distraction. This is my attempt to bring their attention elsewhere before it's too late. I don't know what that device does, and it's better I don't find out; but I have my suspicions. Lydia knows a few of my secrets. Having someone digging around in her memories would be directly against my best interest.

The buzzing halts, and the static-filled voice continues in an irritated tone. It's much louder than before and not focused on anyone in particular, more so to everyone who can hear it.

"Do we have... unwarranted visitors...?"

I feel a wave of intimidation exactly the same as the one I just launched downward come flying back up through the floor to ripple through me.

The Sector 4 leader's voice follows in a shaking manner.

"N-No, there's no way anyone would come out here. It's been abandoned by the city for weeks; there's-"

The angered static tone cuts him off again in slow, calculated words, pausing every few.

"That doesn't.... explain... the clear act of aggression... coming from the floor above..."

Down below, in the center room, a door swings open, and heavy footsteps walk out. Each one makes the very structure of the observatory shake and quiver.

A trailing voice of the Sector 4 boss replies but is overpowered by the static tones once again.

"This will only take a moment... I'll handle the intruder..."

The concentration of mana from the device the man was using fizzles out, but a new glow starts to cover his entire body. It looks almost like an impossibly thick suit of mana-imbued armor in my mind's eye. Over a meter away on all sides of what normal human size would be, just like before. It makes him look very round in my mind's eye, like a pure ball of energy stomping my way.

Even so, the mana density he's wielding is impressive. Still, it's impossible to get a proper read on with all the blockers in place.

I hop backward, making my way to the other side of the room closer to the sonar. With crates of mana crystals around my feet and the open sky above my head, I'm ready to leave and lure the man away so my teammates can infiltrate the base with better odds.

Still, my stealth skill is fully activated, while using air magic and small hush barriers around each footstep. I don't want to give away my exact position until it's necessary.

Other than the one wave of intimidation, it's close to impossible to notice me unless I wanted to be seen.

Or so I thought.

Heavy steps come up the stairs and are soon followed by the ear-piercing static squeaking and scratching sounds.

A suit of black armor comes walking up the steps onto the top floor. He stands over two meters tall with a mixture of grey and white light twisting around his entire body.

The armored Sector 2 leader looks straight at me as if my stealth skills are meaningless. Then, lets out another wave of intimidation, multiple times stronger than before.

Chapter 315

In a brief moment of shock, my stealth skill is lifted, and I'm completely visible on the open top floor of the observatory, facing off against a black-armored knight with unique magic swirling around his body.

If I had more time to analyze and compare, I'd like to see if the energy coming out of the sonar has similar properties to the knight's armor. At a quick glance, they feel and look awfully similar.

However, I don't have the time to run tests.

The static rumbling voice that I heard only mumbles of before pierces through the open air to hit my ears at full blast.

"Who... are you?... Intruder..."

The heavy footsteps of the Sector 2 leader make deep indents and cracks in the floor as he walks closer. The swirling energy stays close to his armor at all times, not even a tiny wisp of it drifts away.

I don't take this moment to respond but reach down and throw a crate of mana crystals into my item storage. This opens a spatial magic portal right in front of my enemy, but revealing this one trait is the least of my worries. I turn around and air-step upward out of the observatory roof, grinning that my plan has worked out well.

I'm very excited to see what unique skills and items a stronger Sector leader has available to him. At the same time, I'm a bit nervous to face this oddball one-on-one. The power gap may be much bigger than I imagine.

A moment later a human-sized hole in the top of the observatory cracks open, blowing metal and stone in all directions as the energy-covered man follows me into the sky.

I open up my telepathy link as the morning sun hits both of us with its golden rays; giving all of my teammates a message.

"The coast is clear. Lydia and the Sector 4 leader are alone on the bottom floor in the center room. I'll keep the bigger threat busy."

The sensation of my teammates moving toward the opposite side of the building lets me know they received my message. I turn off my telepathy and activate all my buffs while taking out my fire sword and wind dagger to fight.

I want to take him out quickly, but I also need to stall him long enough for him not to get involved in the rescue mission going on behind us.

"Let's see what you're made of!"

With the golden red streaks of my buffs coming off my body and the black flames starting to dance on my blade, I air-step down toward the abandoned town at full speed. The armored giant behind me is gaining distance much faster than I thought, somehow accelerating faster and faster the closer to the ground we get.

Both of us make it all the way down the cliffside in a matter of seconds, and I duck behind a few of the village huts for cover, charging up my blades with enough mana for a proper strike.

The atmosphere is not mana-dense at all... I can get a few strikes off, but my plunderer skill can only take in as much energy as my surroundings have to offer. There are small traces of mana in the air, but not nearly enough to charge my blades up to full multiple times in the heat of battle.

This is the reason I grabbed a crate of crystals on my way out, it should be enough to keep me going as long as I use them conservatively.

While going over my possibilities, a loud crack sounds, making the flat sandy ground of the town shake, making me grip both my blades tighter. The static-filled voice of the man ripples through the air, making himself known.

"Who are you...? Association? Black Ops? Or a Private Mercenary?"

I grit my teeth and dart behind a different abandoned hut as the armored man comes closer. His grey and white twisting energy making the air crackle and let off high-frequency squeaks and static sounds.

I can feel the man's footsteps approach, so I jump out from hiding and release a wind and fire blade directly at his torso. These attacks are strong enough to make any Ranked-Up Floor Boss evaporate before they even know what hit them.

To my surprise, the man doesn't even attempt to move. The black and white mana blades hit him straight on.

The sounds and eerie feeling of static grow as both blades of energy sink into the ball of energy surrounding the man. They completely disappear before my eyes...

It doesn't make any sense.

Even the mana readings from the two blades disappear behind a veil of distorted energy, just like my intimidation wave; and just like the status of the man behind the black metal suit.

He turns my way, then a blade of fire and a blade of wind exactly like my own come flying out of the man's aura.

I jump high into the sky using air-steps to dodge, but the lines of houses left behind in my wake are all sliced clean in two, erupting into black flames after the fact.

He copied my skills, or so it seems.

The ear-piercing voice rings out through the now flaming town.

"A dual element wielder... Rare one, aren't you... My guess is Black Ops..."

He releases more waves of fire and wind up in the air straight toward me. They seem brighter, denser, and more amplified than before, almost like he is mirroring my attack but imbuing more energy into it, making it his own.

In response, I throw up a pink barrier of mana, using my manipulation skill burning through hundreds of MP to block the incoming strikes. The overwhelming buzz of mana on mana fills the air and explodes on impact, throwing me back down to the desert floor. Uninjured, but a bit frazzled at the events that just took place before my eyes.

He keeps taunting me while slowly making his way over to the untouched section of the village where I fell.

"Whoever you are... whoever sent you... it does not matter... I'll be killing you and leaving shortly anyway..."

I let out a barrage of attacks, bringing my MP down to 0, but letting a few of the mana crystals fall out of my spatial magic dimension to touch my skin and be absorbed to force out more. I zip around the town quickly and quietly at my top speed as the Sector 2 Boss runs through buildings without a care in the world. I'm much more agile than my adversary, but in pure speed and resilience he's got me beat no matter how it's looked at.

Every attack I throw at him is absorbed into the suit of armor that's surrounded by the grey glow.

He doesn't even carry a weapon, the person just absorbs every one of my attacks and throws that back at me with ease.

After over a full minute of playing cat and mouse, the entire village goes up in flames. My breathing starts to get very heavy from narrowly avoiding my own attacks being thrown back at me.

I whisper under my breath.

"It has to have a weakness."

Right now, the Sector 2 leader seems to just be playing around with me as its prey.

He's making small talk, and only using my own attacks against me.

It seems his defenses can absorb any mana-imbued strike I throw at him. Elemental aspect or not, it doesn't matter the skill, he can absorb it and throw it back at the same or even higher intensity. Nothing I've managed to attack with has even scratched the surface of these mysterious defenses, my battle plan needs to change.

I should use his overconfidence to my advantage and strike while he's still mocking me with a lowered guard.

The powers I've made known to him are only a fraction of what I'm capable of. However, more tests need to be conducted before I can go all out or put myself in real harm's way.

Sitting back against a building split in two, covered in my own black flames I put away both my mana-imbued weapons and pull out the glossy black blade. I whisper under my breath in an inaudible tone.

"We'll see how well that armor of yours defends against Demonic Energy."

Chapter 316

I hold the glossy black blade tight in my grip.

My demonic blade, or better known as the midnight dagger doesn't have the same properties as my elemental attacks. So, in switching energy sources the safety of my long-range strikes will have to be sacrificed in order to test out my next move.

This is one of my two trump cards, the other being the Red Hydra's buff, but I want to save that for when I'm sure I can take this man out.

Using something that saps my strength and power afterward at the beginning of a fight is not the right choice to make right now. Using my agility and adaptability to the landscape, however, may be the edge I need to make sense of this barrier skill the Sector 2 leader has.

If mana-based attacks are useless against it, he's basically invincible to anyone that stands in his way. The confidence in his voice and fearless movements make sense.

What he doesn't know is my Demonic Energy may be his only weakness.

The blade in my hand clinks against my rings, momentarily making me worry about all of my mana-imbued items I wear on me now. My cloak, boots, chestplate, rings, and amulets all give off minor mana readings. I took off everything near my dagger hand when I went into the Abyss previously, although I didn't take off my boots or cloak.

They were completely fine even when my body was leaking tens of units of demonic energy.

The only mana-imbued things I've seen react negatively are active skills, and active mana-wielding weapons.

I don't have the time to change my whole outfit, so I'll have to assume my theory is sound.

While deep in thought about my next attack, this has given him enough time to locate me and continue his charge.

Loud crashing noises followed by violent static waves come closer. Multiple burning huts get holes blasted through them as the Sector 2 leader approaches again. I jump to the sky, putting up a mana barrier on my exposed side and air-stepping a safe distance away.

My own fire and wind blades erupt from his grey energy and fly up in the air to collide with me while the Boss charges forward in a straight line, crashing through the house I was just sitting behind. A straight line of destruction follows his path. The voice speaks up again.

"A Demonic Blade... Now you've really got me interested... A worthy prize for when I finish you off..."

The static tones are combined with a deep laugh this time, sending shockwaves through the air.

"Maybe I'll actually have some fun..."

He turns and runs my way again, as I drift down to the fiery mess below.

Deactivating my mana-imbued buffs will negatively affect my speed and awareness of my surroundings, but to pull off this test I'm going to have to take the risk.

My feet hit the ground, and my stat-boosting gold and red aura vanishes as I clear my pathways of mana. The heavy footsteps draw closer and closer at an incredibly fast rate. However, my heart beats faster and the corners of my lips curl upward.

I stand behind a burning building, letting him approach ever closer.

"Demonic Energy Manipulation."

My vision shifts to the familiar black and white tones as I channel energy into the dagger gripped tight in my right hand.

A wave of relief washes over me as the wisps glide over my silver and gold rings, but don't erupt into an array of sparks.

Over 5 units pour out instantly, allowing for the excess matter to leak from my footsteps through the soles of my black boots.

Just because my mana-imbued buffs are gone, doesn't mean I'm completely helpless in battle. The speed and agility boost this Demonic Energy Overflow is more than enough for what is needed. I still have the element of surprise, as well as being hidden behind walls as the man runs at me in solely straight lines.

His movements are easy to predict.

I can't sense his mana anymore, but the loud static can still be heard and the vibrations of his footsteps are very loud, practically sending ripples through the sand beneath my feet.

I jump out of the way as the Sector 2 Leader plows through the small hut I'm taking cover behind. His voice also sounds happy now, but still covered up by a low monotone rumbles.

"Come on, don't give up so easy... Show me what other skills you've got..."

The small hut erupts into flames and its two halves fly to the sides. I'm within 5 meters of the walking menace. Even with my demonic vision, the swirling grey cloud remains, covering a black suit of armor.

I lunge in and swipe at the energy, swerving out of the way fractions of a second later, leaving traces of the black blade's refined demonic energy to poison the impenetrable defenses I've been throwing mana at for this whole battle so far.

To be safe, I only scratch the surface, allowing the black blade to glide through just like it's cutting through air.

I shift my body to boost off the ground with a hard step in the opposite direction once the deed is done, only looking back when I'm sure I'm out of range.

The sight before me puts a smile on my face.

As the Sector 2 boss turns to face me, a large portion of the grey mass around his body is torn away. The invincible swirling energy ball now spews off in many directions as the familiar golden-yellow sparks fill the erratic wisps.

The portions of matter that leave the man's body armor crackle and disappear into thin air as the sparks engulf them completely. His voice yells out from the bright yellow growing display.

"You can wield it too...? I've never met a human capable of such a feat..."

The sparks grow more and more, but this doesn't stop me from running further away.

This battle may basically already be won, but there's no point in dragging myself down with him if I don't have to. The irreversible reaction will destroy him, but if he gets a hold of me beforehand, I could very well be a goner too.

"Boy... I still have to kill you, but I would like to at least know your name..."

The cool and calculated tone of the man facing certain doom echoes behind me without an ounce of fear.

Demonic Energy still leaks from the bottoms of my feet as I dash away, but as I glance back the sight behind me wipes the smile right off my face.

Although the grey wisps are in fact disappearing as they're eaten up by the sparks, that's all that is affected...

The aura of energy around the Sector leader crackles away into nothingness, but the black suit of armor remains. It's eerily similar to the Demonic Guardians I faced on the 25th floor of the Solaran Labyrinth right before the boss room.

Before I can even gulp, his robotic tone rings out again while the final spark sizzles out.

"It's time to get serious..."

White and grey wisps erupt from his armor once again, and he pulls a long black sword out from seemingly nowhere.

In the blink of an eye, he runs toward me, now with nearly twice the speed and much lighter, carefully placed steps.

The static crackles get louder and louder before the armored Sector leader is less than 10 meters away.

I grit my teeth and attempt to lunge to the side, but he glides into my path with ease. With this movement speed and precision, he was clearly in control the whole time. He was merely playing around.

The black blade slices right through my stomach before I even get a chance to defend.

Chapter 317

As fast as the blade enters my stomach, it leaves in the same manner, making me cough up blood and my vision go blurry while the outline of an armored man slowly steps away from me, pulling out his sword.

In the same moment, a tingling sensation starts to make waves over my body, all coming from the stab wound's source. My arms and legs grow slower while my senses also start to dull. Static fills my ears and white and grey wisps of energy completely cover my vision momentarily before I land on the solid ground, letting the dagger fall from my hand.

It's still covered in black and purple wisps, but grabbing my weapon is the least of my worries.

Blood pours from my midsection, and even worse, the man turns to face me from about 10 meters back. He towers over me and speaks again.

"This battle was one-sided from the start, but you still interest me... I'll give you one last chance to give me your name, I'll remember it every time I use that blade..."

His armored gaze turns to the dagger on the ground as I continue to cough up blood. My body is starting to freeze up. As much as I want to stand to my feet, it feels as if my arms and legs have become paralyzed and I can't move a muscle.

If this was any normal blade, I would have been right back in battle even with a mortal wound like the one I received. There must have been some kind of poison on that long sword he uses.

I begin to push out the remaining Demonic Energy overflow from my pathways and deactivate my manipulation skill. I don't bother to answer his final offer to give my name, because I don't plan on losing this battle.

Although he's overpowered me in this small clash so far, the test I managed to pull off has given me an idea of the nature of his defensive power. The aura that surrounds him is a feature of this suit. It's not limitless, but the only time I'll be able to break through it is when my speed and agility are severely lowered. So far, all mana based attacks have been useless, and that's the only time I'm able to access all my buffs.

Using Demonic Energy while my buffs are active or there is competing mana in my pathways can only end poorly. Doing so is how I got into this whole body double situation in the first place. Which has turned into quite the blessing, allowing me to fight without the fear of death, but also the curse of not being able to use my true power.

However, letting this Sector 2 leader defeat me or even get away to take on my teammates is an even worse option. I'll take him out here and now, whatever the cost.

He raises his sword up in the air, walking closer to me and speaking up again.

"The silent type, aren't you? Well-"

Before his long sword swings down, the passive poison resistance skill begins to clear the toxins from my bloodstream. I wait for the last moment to activate my stat-boosting buffs once more and dart out of the way, then zip into the air using wind magic.

He follows in an instant, cracking the ground and releasing a burst of static and white energy beneath his feet.

A shock wave of energy ripples through the town, and the remnants of demonic energy on my dagger that still rests on the sand below goes up in an eruption of sparks but leaves the solid black core of the blade perfectly intact.

Retrieving my weapon is the least of my worries right now.

The more important thing is getting high enough into the air and changing my direction erratically to lose the armored man on my tail.

Every fraction of a second that passes, I lose a few meters of ground. Every turn I make, he follows with incredible precision. The speed and accuracy of the Sector 2 leader's movements are on a whole different level than when he faced me in the town earlier.

I have nowhere to go.

Especially up here in the sky. I assumed my air magic would give me the advantage, but my opponent uses a similar technique, stepping off of clouds from the grey mist that dissipate the moment his feet leave them.

There's no point in taking out my mana-imbued blades, they'll just give him more energy to hurl back at me. Still, I pull my flame-imbued sword from my item storage to prepare for the worst.

Using Demonic Energy seems to be out of the picture too, in the air would just leave me stranded like a sitting duck. Even with the capabilities it has of breaking through the first layer of defenses, he'll surely release a much more powerful strike than before, now that he's seen me get up so easily from what should have been a fatal injury.

There's only one logical option I have left to try.

"Red Hydra's Rage."

The sun fully rises above the horizon, casting its light upon the observatory, the burning town below, and the two of us soaring high into the sky above it all.

Red wisps of energy materialize around my arms and legs, then more dark crimson light surges from my chest.

In a moment, the battle scene around me feels very different.

The charging suit of armor air-stepping up my way seems much slower, and the flickering black flames on the town below crackle as each individual particle of sand tens of meters away shifts and churns from falling planks of charred wood and burnt brick hit the desert floor.

Closer to me, I get an actual close up look at the man trying to kill me.

The fluid flowing motion of the energy around him has intricate layers of mana shielding wrapped around each other so finely packed I still miss some even with my All-Seeing Eye now being boosted by the Red Hydra's aura.

I take a deep breath in and the air that fills my lungs invigorates me to charge my sword with mana. Pure pink and white energy courses through my veins, but the red aura around my arms combines with it as the two seep into my blade. It glows red hot, imbued with magic ready to strike.

I stop my upward trajectory and release an attack down on my enemy before zipping across the sky. My speed and awareness have more than doubled, and in the blink of an eye, the upper hand in this battle has shifted too.

A muffled static yell of surprise rings out as my black flaming mana blade, shrouded in a crimson aura, collides with the grey protective energy barrier.

The wisps of energy and light react differently to the red aura on impact, slicing through the shielding rather than just being engulfed.

A loud metallic clang rings out even as I air step away. Red Arua erupts from both sides, flowing out of the protective barrier, unable to be absorbed.

I curve around the man's opposite side to let out another charged attack of mana and Hydra's aura. This is more of a distraction for me to gather enough time to make a plan to use Demonic Energy against him, but the results of this distraction seem to be of much greater power than expected.

Metallic clangs that sound like mana on mana echo in my ears as the black and red blades of energy I've thrown make contact with the lower layer of the Black Armor the Sector 2 leader wears.

Seconds later, a black blade of flames comes erupting out.

I easily dodge and send in a few more from various angles.

It happens again. The clangs of my blade hitting his armor sound, the red arua flowing out unaffected by the odd grey energy, and then finally that static filled voice yells at me again.

"A soul bond too... And a powerful one at that... this must have been from at least a level 1000 beast to actually hit me..."

His tone is still unwavering, rippling through the air with confidence as he knows the attacks I'm throwing are severely weakened even if they make their way through his defenses. Still, I zip around the air, leaving crimson trails of energy behind me while swinging my sword almost a dozen more times and dodging the attacks that come flying back.

The clangs of my upgraded and imbued blade ring out over and over again as they hit the armor and some attacks are even countered with his sword.

However, even though the red streaks make their way through, the damage is negligible.

"The more you use that power of yours, the worse the after effects will be... No one has come up with attacks capable of breaking through my creation's defenses in years, and you've managed it twice. I commend you for that... Truly a fine fighter."

At these words, I realize he's right.

Every attack I throw barely damages his armor at all, and without Demonic Energy, the swirling mist around his body absorbs most of the power behind every one of my strikes. I grit my teeth and mutter under my breath while releasing two more blows from over 15 meters away.

"I need to get a clear strike on him without that defense up. There has to be a way to attack him while that shielding is inactive. A full powered strike without anything holding me back could do some serious damage."

While dodging the returning mana blades, a glimmer of my glossy black blade reflects the sun's light up at me. My Demonic Dagger.

"I need to use Demonic Energy and Mana at the same time..."

Chapter 318

The only clear path to victory in my mind is taking advantage of the destructive properties of Demonic Energy and the raw power of my mana-imbued strikes, buffed by the Red Hydra's aura, to obliterate the grey energy-filled defenses and land a clean attack right on the main body of the Sector 2 leader.

From what I've heard him yell, he's proud of his creations. So much so, that it seems like he's fully reliant on them.

If I'm only the second person to ever even hit him through his armor, I'm sure he won't see what I have in store for him next. This blind confidence of his will be brought down by a sprinkle of chaos.

He won't expect me to do what I'm about to do next. There's no planning for an attack like this.

I start air-stepping downward, keeping my eye on the glimmering black dagger below me. For maximum speed, I switch my long sword out for my wind dagger and only block with a pink and red mana shield while dodging attacks and sending back small wind blades to deter him from following too closely.

The man yells out as I zip down past him.

"Giving up the high ground so easily? You've made your final mistake..."

He laughs as more of my mimicked wind strikes rain down on me from above.

Even the amplified attacks are easily blocked by my Red Hydra's Aura. The Sector 2 leader may be adding his own energy into the attacks before sending them back, but the mana he's absorbing is still only that of my base form. So, the buffed strength of my full power easily defends this.

The man now towers above me high in the sky.

"Now let's finish this..."

Waves of static fill the air as he propels himself down toward me.

At the same time, I'm falling down to the ground with immense speed, with eyes only targeted on one prize.

Hitting the sandy floor with a thud, and picking up the glossy blade, I reply under my breath.

"Let's."

Now with a wind-imbued dagger in one hand and a Demonic weapon in the other, I jump up off the ground toward the man swinging his sword down at me.

Through the rippling swirling waves of white and grey magic, each one of my previous strikes with the Hydra's Soul energy fully imbued in it has managed to leave small scratches and dents behind.

This isn't nearly enough.

Checking my item storage, I find that the crate of mana crystals I've been draining MP from to power up my stat-boosting buffs and mana-imbued attacks is running low. There's less than a few thousand MP worth of crystals remaining.

A few high-powered mana attacks are all I have left to throw; I need a clear shot without this shielding to make them count.

"It's now or never..."

The Sector leader comes down at me as I accelerate, air-stepping faster and faster into the sky.

I recall Ember telling me that truly wielding Demonic energy takes a lot of time and practice. If Demons and high-powered, ranked-up monsters can wield it while also using their normal mana-imbued skills, then it must be possible for me too.

The conversation between the two Sector leaders flashes in my mind as the perfect imagery of the 25th-floor Black Knight's armor comes soaring down toward me.

He mentioned that those guardians were creations of a mana-born Demon. This further confirms my theory that it's possible but also makes me frustrated at the fact that there is so much I don't know.

"Demonic Energy Manipulation," I mutter under my breath with gritted teeth.

Mid-airstep, still covered in the blood-red aura of the hydra, and charging up a blade of wind in my opposite hand, I activate my Demonic Energy ability.

It instinctually feels right, but the sensation that follows is far from pleasant.

My vision shifts to black and white but flickers back to color in an instant. A sharp pain moves through my body, and the skill is deactivated before I can even summon any refined energy from my core.

"Demonic Energy Manipulation," I repeat the words, still air-stepping up to my attacker, closing in, and relying on my final trump card to work.

My vision flickers to black and white again, this time for a moment longer. I know what I'm about to do will most likely lead to my own demise, but this being a copy of my true form and considering the risks that allowing this man to fight my teammates poses, it will be worth it.

The cool sensation of refined Demonic Energy gushes out from my core and starts to move down my left arm, solely headed toward the black blade in its grip. I push out a full 5 units, saturating the blade before the sharp pain cuts my vision back to full color.

The Sector 2 leader is nearly within striking range, and things are moving far too fast for me to second-guess any of my actions. I swipe the black dagger across my body, following the movement with my wind blade wrapped in mana and the Red Hydra's soul energy.

The moment I release the two, I watch sparks fly and immediately dive away to avoid the reaction that takes place.

The increased speed and agility my buff grants allow me to dodge the incoming long sword, but not with ease. Even with all my items, abilities, and buffs, this man's base stats are close to my own right now. His level could be over double mine, but all of his status data is still unable to be seen.

The grey barrier around his whole body goes up in a sea of sparks, and the wind blade I threw out after soars through without a hint of resistance.

To my surprise, the white wind-imbued mana within my attacks goes up in sparks too, but the Red Aura around it flies through unharmed.

A loud metallic crunch is heard and through the violent golden display of sparks, fragments of black armor fly into the sky too. The frustrated static yell of the man calls out, this time sounding less robotic and a bit more human than it did before.

The armored Sector leader falls to the floor as I take the higher position but turn to make another attack. There's no time to waste.

A pair of frightened eyes peer at me from a cloud of sparks, red aura, and disappearing white and grey energy. The full right side of his black armor has been cracked and sliced through, and part of the man's helmet is broken too.

As the sparks start to vanish, the man's eyes turn more stern, and the fragments of black armor start to grow back piece by piece. The red aura is being left behind as we both fall toward the floor.

I mutter to myself.

"That wasn't good enough... I need to-"

What I was about to say was I need to send out a stronger attack, but this brings a much more urgent matter to my attention.

As the sparks disappear on the man's armor and are replaced by a new white and grey mist, the exact same golden crackles of energy on my own left wrist carrying my demonic dagger become much more apparent.

I knew this was a risk, and quite honestly thought it'd be worse... but I thought the damage to my opponent would be worse too.

"I need to finish this."

I air-step down at the falling suit of armor faster and faster, using every last drop of MP from the crystals in my item storage to charge up my wind dagger. More importantly, the Red Hydra's Aura grows deeper and darker red around my blade, amplifying the base energy waiting for the attack to be pushed out.

At the same time, the sparks grow on my opposite hand, and I wait patiently for the ground to get closer.

"Closer..."

"Just a little closer..."

Finally, I air-step within range and activate my Demonic Energy.

My black-and-white vision appears, and it's much more stable this time around.

At least, for a moment.

I take less than a second to channel another 5 units into my dagger, but in doing so, I momentarily lose speed in my fall. To continue air-stepping in rhythm, the skill needs to erratically switch my

vision back from black and white to normal color. This is the only way I'm capable of using both at once...

There must be a better way, but this is how I'll have to do it for now.

Every time my vision goes black and white, it's nearly impossible to feel the mana flowing through my body, much less see the mana attacks at all. When I use my normal mana abilities, sensing Demonic Energy is an impossible feat.

The only thing in common with both is that the Red Hydra's Aura can be sensed and manipulated by me in both states of mind.

Still, this conclusion hardly helps as I'm less than 10 meters from my target, and we're both less than 20 meters from the flaming town and the hard desert floor below.

I grit my teeth and power through; slashing both blades across my body as I get closer to my enemy and the ground.

The closer the ground gets, the faster the swapping of black and white vision to full color gets. The more I concentrate on one, the less effective the other becomes, but I need to use both right now for maximum damage.

Violent golden sparks grow larger and larger on my left arm, moving toward my shoulder, but I pay them no mind. What's done is done, I need to focus.

There's a loud crack as we both hit the desert floor.

A rippling shock wave blasts all of the remaining houses out of the way, creating a crater in the sand.

On impact, I stab the armored man through his center with both my Demonic Dagger and Crimson Colored Wind Blade.

The shielding around him is instantly evaporated by the overflow of tens of units of Demonic Energy from my core, and the armor is shattered by the amplified power of the Red Hydra's Wind Blade imitation.

The man within the suit is sliced in two, and the eruption of mana energy and sparks flies high into the sky.

With no regard for my own safety, I hit the ground with equal force. At the last moment, I instinctually brace myself, but the speed at which I hit the ground makes me lose over half my HP.

Even through the immense pain, and the sparks beginning to take over my body, all I can do is grin as a few ringing sounds fill my head.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[...]

[Level Up] x46

[48 Levels Transferring to Main Body...]

[Level Transfer Complete: Success]

[Body Double Level Adjusted: Success]

[Body Double] Rank Up

[YES] [NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Stat: Mental Strength

Points: 377

[YES][NO]

My vision is distorted by the violent explosions of energy and fragments of burning village all around me. On top of that, the sparks on my shoulder have now traveled down to my chest and are starting to spread even further.

With all the adrenaline coursing through me, plus the sparks growing toward my neck, the only logical decision to choose is yes on everything and hope for the best.

[Begin: Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade] Transfer to Main Body]

[Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade] Transfer: Success]

The sparks engulf my full body, and my HP begins to fall very quickly.

[Begin: Mental Strength Stat Point Transfer to Main Body]

[Mental Strength Stat Point Transfer: Success]

My Red Hydra's Rage Buff Deactivates. The extreme fatigue makes my limbs feel too heavy to move and my eyes shut.

[Begin: Rank Up]

My body starts to glow white, but my mind is in a daze.

[Rank Up: Success]

My HP bar hits 0 before I can see the final result.

[You Have Died]

Chapter 319

Red wisps of energy float up in the air as a briefcase, black dagger, silver card, and some gold coins along with small numbered pins, demonic stones, and miscellaneous items fall to the desert floor.

Beside this pile of loot, the shattered armor of the Sector 2 leader sits in a pile. It's inactive, and there's no sign of the body.

Actually, there's no sign of any bodies.

The small abandoned village continues to burn down to the desert floor, and the black flames flicker out.

The golden sun continues to heat the sand in the surrounding area just like every other day. A light breeze passes through, recalling the battle that just took place and moving the crimson residue around, but not fully ridding the landscape of its streaks.

Meanwhile, up the cliff atop the observatory, another battle is about to take place.

Maria leads the group of four as they enter through the front door of the white-walled dome on top of the cliffside. She whispers under her breath.

"Jay can handle himself, he's trusted us to do our part. So we'll trust him to protect us and do his."

The metal door swings open with a click, and Arie, Abby, and Fisher follow Maria down the curved hall.

Everyone glows lightly using their personal magic while gripping their weapons tight.

A loud man's voice can be heard through the halls of the building echoing louder as they approach one of the doors that leads to the center room.

"You sure got lucky, but we'll find out everything soon."

The sound of keys being twirled around his finger jingles as he continues.

"Did you hear all those loud bangs out in the desert? I'm sure he'll be coming back any moment now. They don't call the Sector 2 leader the Untouchable One for nothing. He's a master craftsman, supplying most of the higher-ups in the dark continent with unique gear and items that can't be found anywhere else. That suit of armor has fended off A-Rank beasts. Whoever came by just made their last mistake."

A manly arrogant laugh can be heard as the four team members line up at the door. No one says a word, there's a unanimous nod of agreement that leads to the door being kicked down and the sight in the center room is revealed.

A tall, well-built, middle-aged blond man wearing impressive enchanted gear, including a silver pin labeled "001" and a Golden one labeled "004", stands over a table, looking down on a bloodied and battered young woman with white hair and determined ice-cold eyes.

"Lydia!" Maria yells after the metal door is blasted down, and a barrage of ice, water, earth, and spirit-imbued crescents fly toward the surprised sector leader. An equally caught-off-guard look appears on the ice mage's face at the appearance of her teammates after many long days of being told they're also being held and tortured.

The large armored man glows in a silver light on instinct as the attacks all hit him.

Arie lunges forward, eyeing the keys that were jingling in the man's hand fly through the air. Meanwhile, Abby, Maria, and Fisher charge extra attacks.

This man is over 100 levels above everyone else in the room, and his gear is a step above theirs too. It'd be naive to think one sneak attack is all it would take for someone like him to be taken out.

The second barrage of energy crescents hits the same area of the room as the walls shudder and debris from the attacks fill the air.

The Sector leader lets out a pulse of his own mana while yelling.

"It's you? How? What is the meaning of this?"

The angry man's face is revealed as more of the debris falls and it shimmers silver like metal.

All of his body is coated in the same metallic coloring, and even after taking on a ton of high-powered attacks there isn't even a single scratch on him. He yells out again, raising gauntlet-covered fists in the air as they begin to glow white.

"I'll kill every last one of you. This is what I get for handing out favors to the Association, isn't it?!"

His expression gets angrier and angrier as more crescents of energy continue to barrage his silver-colored body. More pulses of white light come off the gauntlets as Fisher yells to the group.

"It's his buff... The Solid Steel Defense!! Plus that shielding artifact. We'll need to attack with more than just this if we want to do any real damage."

At these words, the Sector 4 Leader turns to the swordsman who outed valuable information about him that no one should know and makes a punching motion in the air.

A wave of bright white energy is released from the right fist and hits Fisher head-on. In response, the water user activates his ultimate defensive buff in return, but is pushed back by the immense power of the blast.

He's propelled through the side of the observatory making two huge holes in the metal and stone. The desert sand and morning sun can be seen from inside.

Without hesitation, the Sector Leader punches with his other fist at Maria, who is running up on his opposite side trying to get an attack in. The same result happens. Although Maria doesn't activate her ranked-up buff, for fear that it may get everyone else in the observatory hurt, she is still pushed through multiple walls of metal and stone while blocking with mana shielding and an ice-imbued sword.

The angered shimmering man turns his gaze to Arie next, the man that stole his keys and is running to Lydia to unlock her from the mana-negating cuffs.

"Not so fast!"

In an instant, the Sector leader charges up his gauntlets and throws another attack at the archer.

Arie saw what happened to the other two teammates when they tried to block, so he jumps off a summoned white orb of spirit magic to narrowly dodge the incoming attack. Even so, it's very close and smashes another massive hole in the observatory's side.

"Impossible!"

He punches with his opposite arm while lunging forward to let out an attack at closer range.

Arie summons another orb of magic and speeds out of the way, letting the unique energy attack narrowly miss him again.

In the cover of the falling debris and exploding walls behind him, the archer throws the keys downward for Abby to catch. Then, peeks out, waving his arms at the angry metal man.

"Pathetic, you couldn't catch me if you tried."

He smirks and turns away, hopping on summoned orbs of spirit energy through one of the holes the Sector Leader's Attacks just created.

The ground rumbles beneath the building as the silver-coated man jumps out following the archer that baited him to do so.

"You're all dead. Every last one of you!"

Before flying through the hole in the wall, he turns back with a surprisingly cool and calculated expression.

"I'll be back for you two when I'm done with them. Don't worry. I won't forget."

His sarcastic, sly tone shifts back to an angry yell while flying up into the air after the archer. His yells turn into an uncontrollable battle-crazed laugh. Abby mutters to herself, running over to the portion of the room where Lydia got blasted back in the rubble, still connected to the table with cuffs.

"I guess anyone that joins an organization like this has to be a little crazy..."

She gulps, chuckling to herself while gripping the keys tight and using earth magic to sift through the debris to uncover Lydia.

At the same moment, the silver-coated man flies through the air on a crash course for the archer, gracefully soaring through the sky. He's making his way down the cliffside toward the open desert, right between the destroyed town and the observatory up on the hill.

Fisher and Maria both see the silver man glistening in the sun, following their teammate down the cliff. They use water and ice steps to follow and support Arie in the battle that's about to commence.

Chapter 320

"If all of you were easily pushed back by my gauntlet attacks, do you seriously think you have any chance of defeating me? You should have run while you still had the chance!"

Another laugh comes from the silver-coated man as his fists continue to charge up, glowing brighter and brighter white.

"I'm the strongest one in this Sector! I can feel the mana coming off you three, you're all newly ranked up. You may be skilled, but you don't stand a chance against me!"

The white glow from his gauntlets begins to spread down his arms and soon covers his body until the Sector 4 leader is covered in a glistening silver and white aura. He hits the desert floor feet first with a ground-rattling thud.

Arie, Maria, and Fisher all land around him in a triangular formation, glowing with their respective personal magic.

In the blink of an eye, blue mana crescents and white arrows are released in a barrage against the man all at once.

But before they even make contact with his defenses, the white aura of mana around the enemy expands in the shape of his body to deflect every single attack. He swings his fists two times, letting out dual pulses of energy at Maria and Fisher.

This time, instead of trying to block, the two of them have time to dodge.

"Like I said before, it's pointless to run!"

The white energy that's usually propelled from his fists comes out from his shoes seconds later, shooting the silver man forward with blinding speed. He aims right for Fisher as the swordsman jumps out of the way from his previous attack.

The air ripples as the two metal fists clash with the ultimate water defense, mana shielding, and dark blue sword of the water mage.

He grits his teeth and looks the man in the eyes who captured and tortured his longtime teammate.

Still, even with all of his strength, the newly ranked-up Elite hunter gets pushed back with ease. Mana residue flies in the air as Arie and Maria fling attacks from the side to support, but none make it through.

The silver-coated man charges up his fists again all while continuing to punch the blue barrier over and over, pushing Fisher back.

He continues to laugh manically while pushing at the barrier.

"You kids really thought you could take on 2 Sector leaders and make it out of here alive. You must have been given false information, or-"

But his words stop as the blue eyes of the swordsman start to show a glimmer of red.

An odd feeling comes over the Sector 4 leader as his heightened mana control senses pick up the odd shift in power that fills the air.

Crimson tendrils of dense red mist start to wrap around Fisher's arms and flow down his sword. Next, the bright blue shield of water starts to become stained blood red.

As the Leader hesitates to make his next punch, the swordsman takes this opportunity to send out an attack of his own. A dark red crescent of water comes out from his sword, but the man manages to snap himself out of it and block before it's too late.

An incredibly loud clang shakes the desert sand as the Aura of the Red Hydra fully covers Fisher, and his attack makes a dent in the Sector Leader's armor.

The man is shocked... He jumps back in surprise, placing both gauntlets up in a fighting stance with a baffled expression across his face.

"How- What is this skill...?"

As he says this, the eerie feeling of the red energy that activated around the water wielder starts to creep into his mana senses from behind him as well from two directions.

A blood-red arrow and an icy crescent surrounded in the crimson energy come flying at him to pierce through the solid steel defense of his back and right leg. Blood trickles out onto the desert sand.

The Sector leader yells out in pain, glowing brighter white and recovering his body in a layer of silver to protect the slash mark and arrow hole from the previous two attacks that broke through.

"There's no way! You all have this skill? So are you not from the Association? Is this a private dealing, is this?"

Another three crimson attacks manage to hit the man mid-rant. Fisher collides with the man's charged gauntlets again, expelling energy and leaving another dent while Arie and Maria land blows to his exposed back and legs.

The three team members now zip around, leaving trails of red energy behind.

Just moments ago they were entirely outmatched, but now it doesn't even seem fair. Although it's impressive the leader has enough strength, defense, and mana control to block one Red Hydra aided attack at a time, that's not enough. His speed and agility are severely lacking to stack up against these 3.

While occupied with Fisher in one-on-one combat, Maria and Arie zip around sending one attack after another to weaken him slowly.

Over a dozen attacks are sent out, and the desert sand is stained with the silver man's blood.

He continues recharging his gauntlets and activating his steel defenses in hope that one of the three attackers misses a beat.

In the pattern that's occurring now, he only has enough time to cover his vitals and slowly use up his own MP stores.

At the same time, Arie, Maria, and Fisher are meticulously sending off attacks to wear down the man like he's an overpowered boss in a dungeon. Their main concern is the low amount of mana stores left too. Plus, the possible dangers of exerting this much MP with the buff in such a short time.

Arie sends off another arrow and steps off a red orb of light to get a better position for his next attack, while Maria sends off an ice-imbued attack, thinking carefully about when to activate her buff.

Fisher clashes again with the man as all their mana collides with another loud clang.

In all the noise, Arie yells out as he feels the presence of another hunter coming from up above on the cliffside.

"It's time, let's finish this!"

The desert floor begins to rumble, and glowing red spears of rock come from below to fill the battlefield.

Abby flies down to enter the fight, yelling for Fisher to move out of the way.

The swordsman allows himself to be blown back by the remnants of the final bursts of the Sector leader's gauntlets as the green-haired healer lands on the desert floor, pulsing red. She uses her earth magic to wrap Hydra-imbued liquid rock around the silver man's ankles.

He takes a step back, channeling white energy into his boots just like his fists to crack the stone away, but Abby has already sent up more to cover his legs and wrap around his chest and arms.

More pulses of energy crack the stone, but in his weakened state, the leader is trying to conserve as much mana as he can. Abby has just shown up with a full MP bar.

He lets out a muffled yell while trying to run from the assault, but Abby's earth magic is slowing him down to an alarming degree.

She turns to Maria and nods. Maria places her sword in her item box and takes a step forward while raising both hands toward the Sector 4 Leader.

A whisper can be heard escaping from her lips after a deep breath in and out.

"Ice Age."

The blue glow that erupts from Maria's hands outshines the crimson aura of the Red Hydra momentarily but is engulfed in a blood-red veil a fraction of a second later.

Arie and Fisher both run in opposite directions away from the blast as Abby slowly backs up while hovering higher and higher up on a platform of stone, keeping the struggling Sector leader in place.

Beneath Maria's feet, the desert freezes solid, and out from her hands, 7 pillars of crystal-clear ice shoot forward. The first impaling the leader straight through, and the 6 that follow trap his frozen body in a hexagonal-shaped pillar of ice.

It's all over in an instant...

Everyone watches in awe at the sheer amount of Ice summoned from the blond hunters palms. It wouldn't seem believable if they didn't see it with their own eyes. Even with the red wisps of Hydra's soul creeping around the impressive mass of ice, the power exerted from a single strike is far greater than any attack they've ever witnessed.

The desert falls silent, and the sand starts to settle.

Golden rays of the morning sunlight glimmer through the structure of ice down on the frozen sand below.

Level-up notifications ring in Maria's head before her buff automatically deactivates and she falls to the ground, passing out. Soon after, Arie and Fisher instinctually power down their buffs too, collapsing to the desert floor.

Abby falls to her knees last with a grin across her face while activating a restoration circle, spotting Lydia make her way down the cliffside with a million questions racing through her mind.