

## D. Diver 61

### Chapter 61

I made it back to the Inn and nodded to the man sitting behind the front desk before riding the elevator up to my room.

After my usual hot shower, I fell into bed and stared at the ceiling thinking about my day.

Maybe the folks at the Tara Guild are a group of good people after all. I wouldn't mind seeing Nessa and Hudson again. I really enjoyed that boss fight and gained a lot more levels, but I think I'll try to take tomorrow off from fighting. It'd be better to focus on crafting my new sword and take a day to relax.

The drinks from earlier allowed my mind to wander aimlessly as I fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning my mind and body were rejuvenated entirely as I jumped out of bed.

After taking the elevator down to the lobby I saw the Inn Keeper smile and wave at me as I walked towards the front door.

"Another day of hunting?"

"Nahh, today's my day off."

"Probably a good plan. There weren't any major breaks last night. It seems the surge hit its peak yesterday. There may be some minor activity for another day or two, but we made it through another one."

"Oh yeah? That's good to hear."

He nodded.

"Well, have a nice relaxing day sir."

I walked out the door and replied.

"You too, have a great day!"

The sun just came up over the horizon as I walked following the directions of the old man's sloppily written address.

My stomach still feels kind of full from last night, but it's probably a better idea to eat now and not worry about it later. I stopped by a small family-run diner to grab a breakfast sandwich before making my way toward the opposite side of town.

The further I walked the more off-putting the environment felt. The buildings became shorter and more run down. Everyone around wore less well-kept clothing and the general feel for the town was a bit more rugged. I expected this though, I am trying to find a black market after all.

All of the tall silver buildings were glimmering in the distance, there's a completely different way of life out here. Most of the buildings were made of red bricks, others were old school and made of wood.

About a third of the buildings are definitely abandoned because the windows are cracked and some doors are completely smashed in. There's no way anyone lives in those.

This part of town is where all the outcasts from the city reside. There's a bar on every corner and they're mostly filled with guys in dark rugged clothing, tattoos, and dirty hands. Just like the old man at the bar last night, these people have had long and tough lives.

Some of them look really intimidating and mean, but the majority of people here are laughing and having a good time. It's just a crowd I'm not used to, there's no point in thinking poorly of them. We're all living life with the hand we were dealt day by day.

After about 30 minutes of walking in total, I finally found the building that belonged to the address. It's about 3 stories high and made of old bricks. There are two big-looking men in black leather jackets standing outside. The structure has no open windows where anyone could see clearly inside.

I walked straight up to the front door and talked to the men.

"Hey. Uhh, I'm looking for Briana."

The man on the right raised an eyebrow while smirking and stepping forward.

"Oh yeah? What for? You don't seem to be from around here."

I gulped and used inspect.

[Lv. 144]

[Lv. 151]

I let out sigh of relief and stood my ground confidently. These guys may be high-level to the usual thugs around here, but they don't scare me.

"I need a smith. I was told Briana can craft what I need."

They both laughed and turned to mutter a few things to each other before nodding and opening the door.

"You seem serious enough, just no funny business kid. Mess around and you're dead."

"Understood."

I walked through the front door and was pretty surprised at what I saw.

There were almost a dozen people working at desks reading books and writing things down on papers. Every desk had piles of swords, potions, rings, bracelets, and magic gear I'd never seen before. It looked like they were filing and keeping stock of large quantities of magic items.

The man who let me in spoke up.

"Go up to the third floor, I'm sure she knows you're coming."

"Thanks."

I walked through the working men and women while eyeing the gear they were sifting through. Some of it looks like some pretty good quality stuff.

At the end of the room, there's a spiral staircase that goes both up and down. I walked up it.

The second floor wasn't anything like I expected either. There were two women on either side of the room working at desks. They seemed to be filing more items and doing paperwork as well, but these workers were in less of a rush than the ones downstairs.

At the end of the room, there's an empty desk. A tall thin man with short black hair stood next to it while reading a book. He looked up at me through his wire framed glasses and gave me a nod of approval as I continued upstairs.

Once I finally made it to the top floor of the building I immediately felt an ominous presence in the room. It feels like I just walked into the lair of a beast...

What's wrong with this place....?

The room's walls are lined from floor to ceiling with books. It's pretty dimly lit, so can't even see the back of the room completely.

"Hello? Sorry for the intrusion, it's just I--"

"Welcome, I've been expecting you."

I heard a woman's voice from the back of the room and slow footsteps followed.

"I'm Jay. Nice to meet you."

I used inspect and enemy detection to try and get a better idea of who's in the room with me.

[Lv. 488]

My eyes went wide... She's... Level 488... Who is this woman....?

"Nice to meet you Jay. Call me Bri. No need to be too formal."

She finally walked into the light, I couldn't help but stare. Bri wore tight black latex pants and a fishnet shirt that showed her tight matching latex bra underneath. The black clothing contrasted her smooth olive skin incredibly well.

She stood around 190cm tall, that's including her black leather lifted boots.

Her eyes were such a deep brown color that they looked completely black. To top it all off, her silky jet-black hair fell down and wrapped around the front of her thin waist.

I don't know exactly what I was expecting... but it wasn't this....

"N-Nice to meet you too, Bri."

She smiled and pointed one finger in the air. A white light glowed around her hand, then expanded to illuminate the entire room.

There's a wooden desk at the back of the room. A black chair stood behind it with red velvet padding and gold edges to make it look like a throne.

In front of the desk, there's a large matching red and gold couch as well. It must be for guests like myself.

At closer examination in the light, the walls aren't just covered in books. There are all kinds of potions, stones, and weapons up on racks. I've never seen most of these magic items before.

"Please, once you're done admiring my collection have a seat. I believe we have some business to discuss."

Bri smiled and looked me directly in the eyes as she turned to walk back to her desk.

I shook myself from my daydream and followed her.

She sat in her throne with both arms on her desk looking straight ahead as I made myself comfortable on the couch. It's time to get straight to the point.

"I would like to have a sword crafted, apparently you're the woman for the job."

"Yes, it seems I am. Let me see what materials you've brought in."

I paused for a moment. My items are in my storage system... She sensed my hesitation and spoke up.

"Anything you show me during our meeting will never leave this room, I promise. Our word is all we have in this line of business, trust me."

I nodded and stood up to take out the Minotaur horn from my item storage, she didn't bat an eye as I placed it on the desk.

"I have an element stone too, how can I transfer that to you safely?"

Bri took out a clear crystal tray about the size of my hand from a drawer in her desk. It began to hum and glow white.

I gulped and took out the stone from my storage system. It burned my hand horribly as I transferred it to the tray. Flames flew everywhere, I've never taken this thing out in a small room like this before. It felt horribly dangerous, but Bri just grinned a little. I used self regenerate to heal my hand behind my back.

The second I placed the stone on the tray it stopped producing flames. It just sat there... the stone looked like a red mana crystal. I stared at it curiously and Bri spoke up.

"These are some high-grade items, not bad. I can only imagine where you got them."

She felt the Minotaur's horn all over and began examining the element stone closely as well. About 30 seconds later she looked up at me.

"Okay. I'll make you a sword, It'll take me a few hours at most."

I grinned ear to ear, then Bri spoke up again.

"Now let's talk about cost."

"Sure, how much will this blade run me?"

She looked at me with a serious stare.

"To get started, I'll need 8oz of your blood and 10 gold coins."

That smile left my face immediately and I got up to my feet.

“Hey! Hey! Wait a minute! Since when is blood a payment type? What-“

She rolled her eyes and chuckled.

“Sit down. The blood isn’t part of the payment, I need to pair the element stone with the sword user. Without a blood bond, the stone will always burn you when you use it.”

I sat down and nodded slowly.

“A blood bond? Okay. That makes more sense, I didn't know you had to do that. Hmm. Uhh, about that 10 gold. I don’t have enough on me...just uhh, give me a few days I can ge-“

“No worries, you don't have to pay in gold.”

I looked at her curiously. We stared at each other in silence for a moment until she spoke up again.

“I have another way for you to pay me.”

Bri looked me up and down and a grin slowly formed across her face.

“W-What’s that? What do you mean?”

She pointed to the spiral staircase at the back of the room, then looked me in the eyes and pointed down.

“Survive one fight in the Rumble Dome.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“The what?”

Her grin grew even bigger.

“It’s an underground cage-fighting league. If you win one fight, the sword is yours free of charge.”

This isn’t exactly what I expected I'd be getting myself into on my day off... I smirked and began to tingle with excitement.

“Deal.”

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Bri pointed at the floor and that same white light started to glow all around her hand. With a swift motion, she threw the orb of light at the floor. It sank right through and disappeared out of sight. She looked up at me and spoke.

“My assistant will come up here shortly, shall we begin?”

“Begin now? I thought I had to win a match for you to make the sword.”

She grinned.

"Well, you need a sword to fight with don't you?"

I scratched my head awkwardly.

"I do, you're right."

"You'll fight when I finish the blade. I don't see element stones of this grade very often. If I'm going to make a sword of this caliber, I'd at least like to have some advertising done for my services. You better put on a good show."

I thought to myself for a moment.

That's why she offered me this option. She wants everyone watching the fight to know she made this sword. Ugh, business people or ya, always scheming up something.

"Makes sense, I ju-"

\*Knock\* \*Knock\* \*Knock\*

The tall pale man in glasses from the second floor knocked politely at the top of the spiral staircase.

"Ms. Briana, I am at your service."

He bowed and Bri spoke up.

"One moment, Bernard."

He nodded and Bri turned back to me.

"Put out your arm, I need to extract a little blood."

She pulled out a small glass jar with a cork in the top from her desk along with a shiny dagger. My eyes opened wide.

"Hey! There has to be a safer way to do this, you don't have a needle or something?"

She smirked.

"What? You scared?"

"N-No, its just-"

"Good. Don't worry about it, I'll heal you up before you leave."

I gulped and put my left arm out in front of her.

Bri ripped the cork out of the bottle with her teeth and looked me in the eyes before sizing up my arm. Without hesitation, she sliced open a vein in my forearm and placed the jar directly on the open area. Thick red liquid spurted out instantly, her expression didn't change one bit as the bottle filled up to the brim. She screwed the cork back on and threw the jar of fresh blood up and down in her hand with a slight grin. I just watched her mutilate me in disbelief.

"H-Hey I'm still bleeding here!"

My blood is flowing much slower than it started, but it was still coming out and making a mess all over the floor.

Bri's hand lit up with a green light and she placed it over my sliced-up arm. I felt a warm sensation as the skin grew back together and the gash completely disappeared.

"Fixed."

It'd probably be better to not ask any stupid questions right now.... But that's two skills she's used so far.... Just making a mental note.

I nodded. She spoke up again.

"Give me a little while. I'll have your sword ready for the fight scheduled around noon. Let me see your status, we have to make sure you're paired up in the right level class."

I froze.

"I-I'm Level 211, there's no need to show my status..."

She shook her head.

"It's either you show it to me, or the fight commissioner. I know you have something going on... You come here with a Mutant Minotaur Horn and an element stone that's nearly B Class in purity grade. You're not an ordinary hunter, I know that for sure."

I gulped and scanned the room.

"I-uhh."

"Just show me. What can I do? Run to the Association and tell them your secret? I'm the last person you should be worried about showing. As I said before, this is a confidential meeting. Nothing leaves this room, you have my word."

I took a death breath in and out. She has a good point... Who would she even tell? It could only ruin her confidentiality reputation.

I opened my status and turned it towards her.

Bri's eyes lit up. She stared for over 10 seconds straight before I got anxious and closed my window.

"Those aren't purchased skills are they? Not even country leaders have enough money to get skills like that..."

I looked at her in confusion again.

"You can buy skills?"

She grinned and eyed me up and down.

"I like you. I hope you don't die in the ring today."

"Hey, that doesn't answer my question!"

Bri turned back to her desk and motioned for me to leave.

"Follow Bernard downstairs. He'll get you ready for your fight. Ask him whatever you'd like to know. I'm busy."

She began writing a few things down on a notepad and the thin man walked over to me slowly.

"Nice to formally meet you, sir. I'll be taking care of you for the time being. Please follow me."

"I-Uhh Hey! Bri! I-"

"Please follow me, Ms. Briana is busy working at the moment."

The light in the room started to fade back to darkness as Bernard escorted me to the spiral stairs. That meeting ended so abruptly, I don't even know what to think.

I'm getting the sword made a least. I guess it went well....

"Hey! Bernard! What was she saying earlier? Do people buy skills? And are they really that expensive?"

He nodded as we made our way down the stairs.

"Of course, It's possible. Nobles have often used entire generational savings to purchase a skill for a prodigy in the family."

I looked at him curiously.

"Why are they so much? Where can you get them?"

"Well, the reason skills are valued so high is that most people are just stuck with the ones they're born with. The option to add on extra skills is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity even for the elite class. Every year or two a skill stone shows up in the capital auction. The amount of money people bid is preposterous, but when you have that kind of money and power It's the only thing worth buying. I understand why they all do it."

"Skill stones? I've never even heard of them... Where do they come from?"

"As I said, every year or two one shows up in the capital auction. My guess is they're found deep in the labyrinth. There's never been a report of skill stones being found in normal dungeons, if there were everyone would flock to it and hunt that dungeon dry."

I nodded and thought to myself quietly as we continued to walk down the stairs.

We made it to the street-level floor and began walking further down. After another 10m or so of walking, I started to hear voices and people walking around... It sounds like there are a lot of them.

We made it to level ground where I found myself with Bernard in a stone cellar consisting of a small wooden stool, a few large crates, and a heavy-looking metal door. He opened the door slowly and I couldn't believe my eyes.

It's an open area about 30m wide and 5m of ceiling height that seems to go on forever. The floors and walls are made of old stone and the wide hall is lit up with torches and various magic items. Some lights are white, others are yellow, and some are orange. It isn't quite congruent, but it works well enough.

There's a full underground marketplace beneath this town.

It feels like the city market, but much dirtier and the people are much tougher looking. It's where all the outlaws buy and sell illegal or stolen goods. Makeshift merchant stands line the open hall selling swords, daggers, and shields. Others are cooking delicious-smelling food and pouring drinks. Mana crystals are being bought and sold along with potions and all kinds of common magic items.

Bernard began to walk through the market.

"Come on, don't you want to purchase some extra equipment before your fight? I'm sure you'll find something you like here."

I shook myself out of my daydream state. I'd been staring at the crowds of people going about their day for a little too long.

"Oh, uhh yes. I'm coming, right away."

I followed Bernard deeper into the underground market.

At closer examination, most of the magic items were pretty poor quality. Mostly E-Class mana crystals and small potions that I assume skill users are making by themselves down here.

The food definitely smelled good though, it's pretty hard to mess that up.

Bernard kept walking quickly down the center of the pathway. I spoke up.

"Hey! Are we going anywhere in particular? None of this gear looks any good. To be honest, I'd rather just go to the normal market."

He replied without turning back to me.

"Just a little further. I know the perfect shop."

After another 3 minutes or so of walking, Bernard finally stopped and turned to a small merchant stand.

It looked like every other stand to me. Standard potions, a variety of E Class Swords, and a few piles of mana crystals. Once we arrived a middle-aged merchant looked up and smiled.

"Bernard! What brings you down here today?"

He smiled back.

"Morning Henry. Ms. Briana has a new toy she wants to see fight in the Rumble Dome. I'm here to make sure he doesn't break before she's had her fun. The sword is being crafted as we speak, but he has nothing else. Do you have anything new in stock that's worth looking at? Speed or Defense Items will suit him best right now I think."

I turned to him abruptly.

"HEY! Bri's Toy?? What are you talking about."

Both the men laughed and ignored my comment. Henry spoke up.

"Sure, there were a few unregistered dungeon pop-ups yesterday at the peak of the surge, this is what we managed to salvage."

He dug through an item box and pulled out a ton of shields, rings, and potions. I looked at all of it, but nothing really caught my eye. They're all just normal defense or magic-boosting items. Not too special.

"Oh right, these just came in too. A pair of beauties, when's the last time you saw a 60% boost?"

He pulled out a pair of jet-black combat boots. They looked like they were made of cloth, but looked very sturdy at the same time.

I interjected.

"A 60% stat boost? In what?"

He grinned.

"Speed. Rumor is these came from an unregistered elf dungeon about 20km south of the capital. The dungeon broke already, these may be a one-of-a-kind item around here."

I eyed the boots curiously. They look really cool... but also have a 60% speed stat boost. That would be an incredible addition to my fighting ability. Its far as I can remember I've never seen speed-boosting items before. I need this pair of boots.

"How much?"

"3 gold and they're yours."

I laughed. It's not a horrible price, but I'd rather get them for much lower. It's time to haggle.

"Yeah right! I'll give you 1 gold."

"You really wanna do this kid? 2 gold 75 silver final offer."

"Nope, way too much. Not interested."

I turned away with a smirk on my face, the merchant offered me another deal almost immediately.

"2 gold, 50 silver. That's my real final offer. What do you say?"

"Sorry, too much. Who carries around that kind of cash? 1 gold, that's all I can do."

He turned to Bernard.

"Who is this kid anyways, why'd you bring me a lowballer today of all days."

He ginned.

"Looks like you're getting a taste of your own medicine Henry."

Bernard looked at both of us.

"Meet at 2 gold. It's a good deal for both of you."

Henry and I looked at each other for a moment, then nodded and shook hands.

"Deal."

"Deal."

I placed a gold coin on the table and counted out 100 silver before trying on the boots.

The second I slipped them on they magically tightened to fit my feet. I felt a burst of energy flow through my legs and up into my body. It felt just like handling a new sword with a strength boost, but even better somehow...

Bernard looked me up and down then turned to the merchant.

"They look good. Appreciate it Henry, have a good rest of your day."

"You too."

He smiled at us both but gave me a side eye as we walked further away. I think my haggling earlier turned him off of me a bit. Bernard spoke up.

"All right, follow me. We have one more thing to do."

I turned to follow him even deeper into the underground market.

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The underground market seemed to go on forever. We walked for about 20 more minutes, every new merchant stand looked the same to me. Every 100m or so there were doors and hallways that lead off of the main path, but they all either lead up to the surface or were private property.

Bernard finally stopped in front of another small merchant shop and smiled at an old bald man that was half asleep sitting on a small wooden crate.

"Morning Tom!"

The old merchant shook his head and stood to his feet immediately in a startled fashion.

"O-hoo! It's you! Good morning to you too Bernard. How can I help ya?"

"Have any extra lives in stock? The kid needs at least a D grade for his fight today in the Rumble Dome."

The old man grinned.

I just looked at them both in confusion for a few seconds and spoke up.

"An... extra life? What do you mean by that?"

They both ignored my question.

The old merchant started to dig through a box full of junk items for a bit longer than I had the patience for.

I became antsy and started looking around his small shop examining random items that I had no intention of buying. Most of the stuff in here is just old E Class potions and used gear... Honestly, every shop looks like this down here. I guess you really have to get to know your sellers to find the good stuff.

Finally, Tom pulled a small cube-shaped piece of metal with a long black string tied around it from under his pile of scrap items.

"Here she is. It's probably got a day or two left on it, a mid-level D Grade I reckon. You know I make em' cheap, but it'll definitely save your life in a pinch. 3 silver and it's yours."

Bernard nodded and turned to me.

"You heard him, 3 silver."

I squinted my eyes and looked at the cube of metal on the end of a ragged string.

"3 silver for what? A good luck charm? What am I even buying here?"

Bernard rolled his eyes.

"Just buy it. I'll explain on the way back."

I'm really getting pushed around here... It's starting to get annoying.

"Fine."

I handed the old merchant 3 silver coins and he took them while handing me the odd magic item.

"Pleasure doing business with ya! Try it on kid."

I let the metal cube sit in my hand for a few seconds. A very light hum came off the item. The only reason I even noticed is because of the slight vibrations it gave off in my hand.

Without much thought, I tied the cube around my neck with the long black sting and let it hang next to my cyclops pendant. I didn't feel any change in my abilities.... Bernard nodded at me.

"Great, I think that'll be enough for now. You're not much of a shield user are you?"

I looked at him in disgust. Sure, it might help me out a lot in close combat battles but It would slow me down a lot. Speed is my number one stat that I take advantage of. Plus, just picturing myself with a shield makes me laugh. None of the main heroes in comics use a shield. It may be a pretty childish thought, but I think going into battle without a shield looks so much cooler.

"Nope, you're right. Definitely not a shield user."

He sighed.

"What a shame. Well, I hope luck favors you today. We're heading back."

I followed him close behind while we walked back the way we came.

"Hey! So, what did I just buy anyways? You said you were going to explain!!"

Bernard didn't turn around, but he replied.

"It's a pretty unique item actually. Tom has an interesting skill that lets him merge potions with certain magic metals. This one in particular, he coined as an "extra life". He said it's around middle D grade, so it'll add an extra 500 or so HP to your stats temporarily."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Really? He said it lasts a few days...Couldn't I just get a ton of these and wear them whenever the old one wears out?"

"Yes and no. It's called an extra life because they're mostly used for life-or-death situations. Yes, it's a 500 HP stat boost, but that just means it'll absorb the next 500 HP worth of damage you take on. Once it has taken in all the damage it can, the necklace will break and you'll be on your own. In a Rumble Dome match potions aren't allowed, so this will just give you an extra edge in HP. Does that make sense?"

"Okay. Yeah, it does."

I guess for 3 silver, you can't really go wrong. Although I was a bit annoyed at Bernard earlier, this made up for it. A one-time-use item like this could be the difference between life and death in a 1 on 1 fight. Wait a minute... that reminds me...

"Hey! Bernard! How do you win one of these cage fights? It's not a straight up death match is it?"

He turned and grinned.

"The winner is decided when their opponent is either knocked out cold, falls asleep, admits defeat, or is killed."

"Okay. That's uhm, good to know. So, anything goes in these matches?"

"Yep. Anything goes. There's no dirty trick in the book that can't be used. All magic items and gear are allowed except HP and MP potions, which would just make matches never-ending. The only other rule that's set in stone is the level class system. You'll be fighting in the U250, or better known as the Under 250 class. This ensures a more fair fight."

"Okay. Hmm. Good to know. Thanks for the help today."

"Of course. If it's Bri's wish, then it's my command."

We continued to walk back toward the building we came from. I watched the merchants and outcasts buy and sell their gear all around me. It really made me wonder what other treasures I might find down here if I search for long enough.

"All right! Here we are!"

Bernard opened the heavy metal door and we started to make our way back upstairs. We've been underground for a little over an hour. I spoke up.

"Could the sword really be done already?"

He nodded while we approached the first floor.

"Probably yes, but we will not enter the office until I'm given the signal. Please follow me, I'll entertain you on the 2nd floor while we wait."

"Oh, okay."

Once we climbed the staircase to the 2nd floor I noticed the two women working on either side of the room again. I didn't get a close look at them before. They're both plugging away at some busy work in silence. Bernard stepped forward into the room motioning for me to follow.

"These are my assistants. Please introduce yourself."

They looked up from their seats and both stared me in the eyes. I couldn't tell them apart at first glance. They both wore light blue dresses, had matching blue eyes, tied up their bright blond hair in a bun, and stood around 160cm.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Jay."

The two of them both got out of their seats and simultaneously bowed while replying.

"Nice to meet you, I'm Chloe."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Zoe."

I blinked twice and rubbed my eyes then looked at them both again. They smiled and bobbed their heads back and forth before going straight back to work in unison.

Bernard walked over to his desk and offered me a seat in a flimsy-looking wooden chair he must use for guests.

"They're great aren't they?"

I looked at him with a bit of concern.

"Uhh, yeah I bet they are."

Bernard sat down and pulled out a book from the small pile on his desk.

"It shouldn't be too long now, please pick any book you'd like in the meantime."

He crossed his legs and adjusted his glasses before opening the book to where he'd left off previously. I began to sift through the pile to see if there'd be anything worth reading. They're all old science and math books... These look like they were written before the dungeons even showed up over 80 years ago. I guess he enjoys the classic fundamentals. I for one, get bored out of my mind reading books like this.

I kept awkwardly shuffling through the books and reading the back covers for a solid 20 minutes. I couldn't find a single fantasy, or even a history book of some kind to cure my boredom for the time being.

I just decided to give up and stare at the ceiling.... After just 5 minutes of counting the specs of dirt I saw an orb of white light sink through the solid floor above me. Looks like I've been saved by the bell!

Bernard looked up from his reading.

"That's our cue. Ms. Briana is ready for us."

I grinned with excitement.

"Finally! I get to see my finished sword!"

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Bernard walked me up the stairway back to Bri's room, or better yet, her lair.

"How was your shopping trip? Find anything good?"

She walked towards us as I stepped into her office. Bernard stayed back and let me approach.

"Yeah, I got a few things!"

I lifted the new necklace off my chest while kicking up my right foot to show the new boots.

Bri nodded and walked towards her desk. A large black rectangular box rested in the middle of it. She glanced over at me, then back to the box.

"Come open it, I think you're going to be happily surprised."

A mischievous grin appeared on her face. I didn't care, I walked over to the case with a smirk of my own.

I stood over the box with both hands hovering over either side. Bri stepped back and I gulped to calm my nerves. The box hummed quietly, it must be some sort of containment item.

\*Click\*

I grabbed both sides of the box and opened it in one swift movement for a grand reveal.

The room felt different the moment my eyes met the blade. It's almost like it has a mind of its own and it just found its new owner... I can't shake the feeling it's watching me.

It's a long sword with a very similar shape that I'm used to, but it's jet-black and glimmers blood red depending on how you look at it In the light. I can already tell it's a one-of-a-kind piece.

I reach towards the handle and that feeling of being watched becomes stronger and stronger.

I tighten my face and got into a sturdy stance, it only feels natural. I grab the sword and hold it high up in the air.

It began to glow a dim crimson shade the moment I grasped it, but the color returned to black a few seconds later. The blade's handle feels warm to the touch. Initially, it felt like there was foreign energy flowing into my body, but now it feels very natural like the energy belongs to me. There's a significant strength stat boost, I feel incredible.

I looked the sword up and down as I brought it back down to my side. The feeling of being watched is totally gone now. I didn't just imagine it out of excitement, did I?

Next, I check my status.

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Name: Jay Soju

Level: 211

Hp: 1060/1060 [+500/500]

Mp: 1060/1060

Strength: 512 [+384]

Speed: 606 [+364]

Agility: 630

Defense: 451 [+180]

Mental Strength: 512 [+102][+128]

Skills:

Absorption

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Self Regeneration

Spacial Magic[Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Items Equipped:

Golden Wolf Ring [+20% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

Extra Life [Bonus 500 HP]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+75% Strength][+25% Mental Strength]

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“The... Flame Emperor's Sword...?”

I gripped the handle tighter and smirked. Bri walked towards me.

“I thought you'd like the name, I came up with it myself. I think you have great potential.”

I turned to face her and bowed politely.

“Thanks. When's the fight?”

Bri smirked.

“The next match is in a little under an hour. I put your name on the roster and registered you in the U250 league. I'm your sponsor, so don't die out there. It'll make me look bad.”

“Hey! Ya know I wasn't planning on it!”

“That's a special sword. I don't think I've made one quite like it. It'll definitely have a wild spirit in the heat battle.”

“It'll what?”

She grinned and turned towards the door.

“I think it's better if you find out on your own. Let's head off to the Rumble Dome, I'd like to watch your match. Bernard, hold down the fort while I'm gone.”

“Yes, Ms. Briana. Leave it to me.”

With a nod he walked downstairs and left Bri and me standing alone in her office.

Bri put her finger up in the air and the light in the room started to slowly disappear as she walked toward the stairs.

I took one last good look at my sword and put it into my item box so It'd be accessible without using my storage skill. I followed her all the way down to the cellar and through the heavy metal door.

“This way, it shouldn't take too long.”

Again, I feel like I'm being dragged around.. but I signed up for this. There's no backing out now. Plus, I'm itching to try out this new sword. Preferably on some monsters, but people will have to do for the time being.

With my boosted stats and new items, there's no way anyone could be even close to my league... right?

We walked through the underground market in silence for a little under half an hour until finally Bri spoke up.

"This is it."

She stopped and turned to a normal-looking metal door. It seemed like all the other ones, but a few people were standing outside it waiting in line. We did the same.

After another 5 minutes the line got to us and we waited in front of the metal door. A small area near the key hole opened up and a voice came out.

"What's the password?"

Bri rolled her eyes.

"It's Ms. Briana, I don't need a password!"

I could hear the locks on the doors clicking and turning rapidly and the door swung open.

"Y-Yes ma'am, welcome back to the Rumble Dome. Please find a seat in any high rollers booth you'd like."

Bri grinned and nodded at the short skinny man behind the door and she motioned for me to follow her in.

My eyes opened wide as we walked forward into the underground room. It had high ceilings that went up about 20m. This must be connected to a warehouse or something on the surface and they just hallowed the building leaving a frame above ground.

The room itself is about 50m by 50m wide and long. There are poorly made metal bleachers that go up about 5m and VIP-looking booths on top of each of them. Most of the crowd is on the ground. If I had to guess, there are about 150 people packed into this room screaming and shouting at the spectacle in the center of the room.

I've never seen anything like it... Now I understand why it's called the Rumble Dome.

There's a circular white flooring that is about 15m in diameter in the center of the room. The entire floor is surrounded by a fence-like material that encapsulates the fight pit in a dome-looking structure. The metal is covered in wires and powered by magical items to protect the audience from what happens within. It's a makeshift mana shield, it's continuously shaking and forcing the ground to rumble all around it.

What a sight to see... this is the Rumble Dome. Bri spoke up.

"Enough staring, let's get up close. We have enough time to watch one fight before yours."

I nodded and walked forward with her.

We weaved through the crowd of cheering fans drunk off the excitement of violence.

Once we got close to the dome the rumbling was pretty intense. It's really loud, but people here don't seem to mind at all.

In the arena right now there were two fighters in the middle of battle. There's a short blond man with a scar across his eye holding two daggers and zipping around the circle attempting to land hits on his opponent. The opponent seems to be a tank of some sort. He's a heavier set man, so he can't match the speed of his opponent. All he's doing is positioning himself behind his shield and blocking every attack that comes his way.

The crowd seems to love it.

It's interesting, but these are clearly some lower-level D-Class fighters, maybe even high E-class with decent gear. I can follow their movements very easily.

Still, it'll be entertaining to watch.

I stood there watching the match ensue with my arms crossed while Bri patiently watched as well.

After 3 more minutes of pointless running around the dagger user started slowing down. He must have used up a lot of his MP or just regular endurance. The tank made his move.

With a loud yell, he jumped out from behind his shield while the dagger user attacked and faced him head-on. The tank raised his right hand and green vines sprouted out. He glowed bright green and let out a considerable amount of mana. It looks like this is his finishing move, he'd been conserving MP and waiting to use it.

Moments later the vines wrapped tight around the exhausted dagger user and he yelled out in agony as they slowly squeezed the life out of him.

“THAT'S IT! I FORFEIT! I FORFEIT! YOU WIN!”

The tank dropped him to the ground and he gasped for a breath. The tank raised both hands in the air and celebrated.

Half the crowd cheered and went wild, the other half booed and threw trash at the cage where the dagger user lay on the ground.

As the tank pumped his hands in the air and retrieved his sword I heard a loud voice echo from above. The crowd settled down.

“That's it for our U150 match today!! Our winner by forfeit is Tanner Mason! Congratulations!”

Two workers opened up the cage. Tanner bowed and kicked the kneeling dagger user on his way out. The crowd went wild again. They're ruthless.

“Our next match will start up in about 10 minutes, get ready folks. We have two new U250 fighters that will be competing to get a crack at our reigning champion for the main event! You're not going to want to miss this one! Please make sure to place your bets before the fight begins.”

I spun around to look at Bri, she just happily grinned at me.

“Come on, this way.”

She motioned for me to follow her.

“Hey! What’s this about?? I only need to win 1 fight right?? What’s all this about a main event.”

Bri kept walking and didn’t turn around.

“Correct, forfeit your second match if you wish. You have to win your first one before we can talk about that though.”

“Fine.”

I followed her to the opening in the cage and watched an amateur medic carry the dagger user out of the cage.

A worker approached us.

“Welcome, Ms. Briana! We haven’t seen you in a while, glad to see you back with a new fighter. You’d like to use the name listed here?”

He turned a paper to her and she nodded. I tried to get a look but he folded it in half and faced me.

“All right, please take out all the necessary items you’ll need for this match. HP and MP potions are prohibited, anything else goes. I’m going to have to ask you to take that item box off your waist. Items concealing potential banned items are also prohibited, this is more of a common sense ruling.”

I nodded and took my sword out of my item box. It didn't glow red this time, the blade just felt normal. I scratched my head for a moment, then untied the pouch and handed it to Bri.

“Uhh could you hold this for me?”

“Sure, but I want you to wear this.”

Seemingly from out of nowhere Bri handed me a dark black mask. There are red marks over the eyes that appear to be flames and small horns that come off the top, it's almost like a demon's face. I guess it looks cool... but...

“W-What is this? Why?”

She grinned.

“It’s just a good luck charm. You might not want any more people to see your face down here, especially while you fight. Wouldn’t you say so?”

I gulped and looked around. She’s right... Not a bad idea.

I took the mask and place it on my face. It magically fit like a glove. There aren't any holes in it, but i can see and breathe fine. I didn’t feel any different, and there's no change in my status.

“Thanks. Appreciate it.”

“No problem. Best of luck out there. Again... Remember to not die, I’ll look bad.”

With a smile, Bri turned and made her way to the back of the room into one of the VIP high roller seats.

I grinned and rolled my eyes.

The worker spoke up and pointed inside the ring.

“All right kid, get to the back corner. Your opponent should be here shortly.”

I nodded and walked to the back of the ring as he asked.

The crowd began to chatter.

I stood there in all black head to toe with a demon mask and holding a jet-black sword. I hope I look cool.. this isn't overdoing it right?

Less than a minute later a tall man with long flowing white hair approached the cage door. He wore lightweight silver armor from his shoes up to his neck. His face carried a blank expression as he looked at me with crystal-clear blue eyes. His skin is pale white and he glides gracefully as he walks.

What kind of outcast is this? I was expecting a grunt with a club.... Not some noble knight.

He talked to the worker and pulled a long silver sword from an item box before nodding and entering the ring.

The door shut behind him and we stared at each other as the metal cage rumbled the ground below.

A loud voice echoed above us.

“Thank you all for waiting! Our first U250 fight of the day is about to get started! Please welcome our two brand-new fighters!”

The crowd went wild.

I looked around to see all eyes on me. It's nerve-wracking but also exhilarating.

“I'd like to introduce our first fighter, the proud 11th son of our very own underground trade commissioner Mr. Solace. 21 years old, 186cm tall, and 93kg. His overall fight record in the Rumble Dome is 0 Wins, 0 Losses, and 0 Ties. It's all going to change today, let's hear it for Xavier Solace!”

He let out a thin smile and waved to the crowd as they clapped and cheered.

“Next, we have a new recruit being sponsored by the one and only Ms. Briana. It feels like a lifetime ago since she dominated the Rumble Dome herself, we can't forget a legend!”

The crowd jumped and screamed erupting into madness.

I looked around in awe. I had no idea she was such a big deal....

“Could this new recruit continue her legacy? Only time will tell! Coming in at 20 years old, 181cm, and weighing 84kg. With an overall fight record in the Rumble Dome of 0 Wins, 0 Losses, and 0 Ties. Please Welcome, The Flame Emperor!”

I froze.....

She really submitted my name as the Flame Emperor....

I guess I have to go with it now....

I slowly raised my sword up into the air and let my MP flow through it. It glowed light red as I activated my fire magic.

A massive eruption of flames ignited around the blade as I pointed it to the ceiling.

The building shook and ear piercing cheers came from the audience. The crowd went absolutely wild!

Chapter 65

Xavier stared me down with a cold look as I continued to shoot flames high up into the air through my sword.

The announcer's voice rang out again. I brought my sword down and let the flames go out slowly as I listened.

"Everybody knows the rules! There is no time limit in the ring, all tricks, magic items, and abilities are allowed! The winner will be decided by knockout, forfeit, or death. We will begin at the sound of the bell."

I brought my sword forward and pointed it at Xavier, he did the same with his own.

The cage around us rumbled and the crowd whispered and pointed.

\*DING\*

The sound of a bell rang and cheers came out from the crowd.

The white-haired swordsman scanned the arena for movements, but I was doing exactly the same. Each of us was waiting patiently for the other to make the first move and show weakness.

I used inspect.

[Lv. 217]

He sprinted to the left a split second after I activated my skill... almost like he could sense it. I reacted by jumping backward and to the right watching his movements.

Xavier is pretty quick on his feet, but I definitely have him beat in that department with these new boots. It's his eyes I'm more worried about. Every time I take a step in any direction or move my sword the slightest bit he tracks it like a hawk.

We basically ran around in a full circle for a few seconds as we examined each other's body movements.

This is getting boring.

I gripped my blade tight and ignited it back into a fiery display. I plant my right foot and lunge in to begin an attack.

Still expressionless, Xavier plants his foot and turns to face me with his sword by his side.

I lift my blade high in the air and aim it directly at his wide open body in front of me.

**\*CLANGGGG\*\*SCRAPEEEEE\*\*THUD\***

The moment I brought my blade down Xavier gracefully lifted his own sword and used my momentum to block my attack, but also curving his blade around my own to add speed to the swing. I was sent flying forward into the cage behind him.

As a defense mechanism, I erupted into flames to cover my full body the moment I lost balance. The exact moment I did, Xavier jumped backward to avoid being burned.

I smashed into the side of the cage but didn't take on any real damage. I got to my feet and let my body's flames go out, but keeping them lit around my sword as I pointed it at the white-haired knight.

He has an interesting fighting style. From what I see so far... Xavier isn't exceptionally fast or strong. He almost entirely relies on figuring out how to use his opponent's strengths against them. Probably... I'll have to do some more testing.

The crowd is oohing and awing trying to figure out which of us is their new favorite.

I'm not too worried about pleasing the crowd, winning the fight is my only concern.

I ran back in with a very similar attack, it produced a very similar outcome though.

Again, my attack was easily countered and the momentum of my brute-like swing was used against me.

Great... Looks like I'll have to use my brain, a little bit at least.

We squared up on opposite sides of the ring getting ready for our third clash. I initiated the charge and sprinted forward with my flaming blade in hand.

The moment we came within striking distance I let go of my sword and activated telekinesis. The blade shot off the left as I sprinted to the right cornering the swordsman on both sides.

His eyes finally changed. Those dull never-changing focused eyes opened wide, but it wasn't at the moment I expected. They opened moments before the sword left my hand... like he knew it was coming.

**\*CLANGGGG\***

With an elegant twist, he blocked my blade while keeping an eye on me. I motioned to bring my sword back and ran towards him. It flew in my direction and Xavier readied his own blade to counter.

Moments before we collided I caught my sword and began to swing it down at his head. He positioned to counter. At the last second, I twisted my own body to prevent our blades from colliding. There's just one issue, Xavier's blade is pointed straight at my stomach, and mine is pointed way off to the right side of his body.

**\*CLANGGGG\***

The white-haired knight's eyes opened even wider than before as a thick layer of black crystals covered my abdomen blocking his sword's impact. I twisted my body again and landed a fiery slash on the side of Xavier's right leg through a gap in the lightweight armor.

We both jumped backward after this exchange and I heard him let out a cry of pain. His stance and movements remained the same, but his eyes had changed. The cool and calculated stare from before is nothing like it used to be, now there's fear in those eyes.

I heard him speak up for the first time in a deep, yet young-sounding voice.

"How... how do you have so many skills? It's impossible."

I pointed my sword at him and it began to glow light red for a few seconds then returned back to black. I could feel it watching for a moment...

Xavier seemed to notice it too, his eyes opened even wider as he held out his own sword.

I grinned and ran forward igniting my blade. It's now or never, the best time to attack a genius is when he isn't right in the head.

I covered my full body in flames and ran in like a charging bull. Xavier went fully offensive and stabbed me in the chest, then again in the neck. I hardened the areas of impact milliseconds before every attack. He must have been professionally trained, these attacks would have definitely been fatal without my skill... such precision it's almost scary.

In the swordsman's angry confusion, I managed to land a hit of my own deep into the left side of his upper abdomen through another small gap in his armor.

We jumped backward after this exchange and he burst into flames. I left a good amount of excess fire residue behind. He burned bright red.

The crowd roared and the arena shook even more.

I grinned and pointed my sword toward him. He gritted his teeth and scowled while pointing his blade back at me. Again, my blade glowed a faint red color then faded back to black.

Xavier ran straight at me. He's frustrated, injured, and tired. If I didn't have so many wildcards up my sleeve he could easily beat an opponent much stronger than himself. Too bad he was paired with me today.

We ran at each other with our swords held out in front of us. Mine began to pulse red again as we ran forward. I felt an incredible surge of energy flow through me and erupted into dark red flames.

Xavier instinctively put his sword up to block my attack like all the others, but it did not go quite the same as it had before....

I charged forward and his shining silver sword clashed against my fiery glowing crimson blade.

**\*CLANGGGG\*\*CRACKKKK\***

Xavier attempted to maneuver my blade to the side like he always had, but there was much more force behind my blow this time. No matter the technique, not much could be done against this raw power.

My blade collided with his instantaneously shattering it into pieces. I followed through and cut his chest plate clean in half throwing the white-haired knight flying back against the cage wall.

The crowd erupted into even more cheers and some threw food and trash up into the air. They were eating up the savagery taking place before their eyes.

Xavier sat against the cage covered in flame residue and a bloody gash across his chest attempting to get up to his feet.

He looked me in the eyes. I pointed my glowing sword directly at him with a serious look on my face.

He yelled.

"THAT'S IT. YOU WIN! I FORFEIT!"

I nodded slowly and started to turn away.

Then....

My sword glowed even brighter, I could feel a presence seeping out of it into myself calling for me to finish the battle. It felt like a primal urge to hunt and kill the prey in front of me.

I ignited into a dark ball of fire and drove the sword into his chest letting out an explosion of flames.

[Level Up]

I crowd roared even louder.

It was all over before I realized what happened.... It was like I was in a trance....

"There you have it, folks! Never a dull moment in the Rumble Dome!!! Our U250 winner today is the one and only..... FLAME EMPEROR!"

I shook myself out of an adrenaline-induced daze to look around and see the crowd making a horrible mess outside the cage and chanting in unison.

"WE WANT THEODORE!"

"WE WANT THEODORE!"

"WE WANT THEODORE!"

They kept saying this over and over as I looked around the ring to understand what exactly just happened.

I looked down at my feet and saw a blue light hovering over a few pieces of armor in a pile of ash.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Appraisal[Special Grade]

[YES][NO]

I gulped and chose yes while looking around nervously.

The announcer's voice rang out again.

"It looks like the crowd is ready for another fight! We will give it to you shortly! Please take your seats and place your bets. Our new prospect The Flame Emperor will be facing off against our proud U250 defending champion Theodore The Destroyer! Please allow our fighters to rest and heal up, the main event will begin in half an hour. We will have a quick performance in the meantime."

The lights began to dim and a few workers came into the area to escort me out. I nodded and followed them out. Another team of workers disposed of the remains in the ring. One of them spoke to me as we stepped out of the cage.

"Hey, great show but don't you think you overdid it a bit? That was the trade commissioner's son ya know..."

I ignored what he said and scanned the crowd until I finally saw Bri slowly walking toward me through an ocean of screaming fans.

She had a huge grin across her face.

"Good fight, exactly as I hoped for. Come with me, let's get you healed up for the main event."

She put her arm around my shoulder and we started walking up to the VIP booth.

Dancers in provocative clothing piled into the Dome and started entertaining the audience.

I'm still in a bit of shock. The crowd parted all around us as we walked, I'm still holding the sword that killed a man moments ago with... I understand their concern.

We walked up the bleachers and into a small private room with a window to view the show.

I rested my sword up against the wall, sat down in a padded chair, and took off my mask.

I took a long deep breath in and out, looked over at my sword, then at Bri, and finally grinned.

"So, is there anything I should know about this Theodore guy? I'll be fighting him soon."

Chapter 66

Bri smiled while looking straight ahead at the ongoing performance.

"Theodore is strong. Much stronger than you."

I gulped.

"Really? Should I drop out?"

"No. You'll be fine. As long as you take control of that sword."

"Take control?"

"Yes. If you let it push you around like that again, its violent nature may consume you."

I felt my stomach churn as I looked over at my sword.

"S-So that was real? I really killed him in cold blood..."

I paused and looked at the ground, then back up to Bri. Reality is slowly setting in.

"What did you do to me?! What did you put in that sword?! What's going on here?!"

Bri grinned and finally turned to look me in the eyes.

“It was the element stone that YOU brought me. I didn’t do anything. Whatever monster that stone came from has a wild spirit that remains even after death. If you want to continue using your blade you’ll have to tame the beast, or it will tame you.”

The sword glowed a faint red color in the corner of the room then returned back to black.

I stared forward at the beautiful women performing in the ring to try and calm my mind.

“By the way... You don’t have to fight again, our agreement is complete. It’s your choice to decide if you’d like to continue. Either way, take these.”

Bri handed me an HP and MP potion. I didn’t really need them but chugged both just for the sake of it. She’s right... our agreement is complete. I could walk out of here right now and never see anyone in this underground hell hole again.

I nervously looked back at my sword, then remembered the exact moment I killed that innocent man. My heart pounded and my stomach churned. The mixture of frustration, anger, and anxiety became overwhelming. I began to sweat and fidget overthinking everything. There’s only one thing that puts my mind at ease in situations like this....

“I’ll fight.”

Bri grinned and turned back to the entertainment.

“Good.”

We watched the show in silence as my anxiety grew. It felt like there were eyes gazing at me from the back of the room where my sword lay.

It wasn’t even glowing or emanating any energy, I think it’s just pure paranoia at this point...

Finally, I heard the announcer’s voice chime in as the dancers left the arena.

“I hope you all enjoyed the show! Now! It’s almost time for our main event! Let’s have our fighters come forward, the brawl will begin in under 5 minutes.”

I looked at Bri and she nodded slowly.

“Best of luck out there.”

I looked her in the eyes before putting on the black and red demon’s mask. Then, turned around and grabbed my sword. I swung the door open and left without saying a word.

Again, as I walked through the crowd everyone parted all around me. No one wanted to get close. People grinned in awe, others scowled in disgust. It seems to be a mixed crowd.

I made it to the cage and the same worker from before let me in. I stood alone in the middle of the ring with all eyes on me.

I could hear the crowd’s mixed reviews all around me...

“Boooooo!!!”

“He’s really fighting again already?”

“Theodore will destroy him!”

“I think the Flame Emperor could be our new champ! I like this guy’s style! Kill or be killed, no questions asked.”

“Murderer! How can you stand up there with such a lack of honor? Take off the mask!”

“This will be the fight of the year! I’m betting on the new kid!”

“My money’s on Theo all the way, you’re crazy!”

“Get it started!!! I want to see this brawl already, enough waiting!!!!”

I had to just start blocking them all out. The more I try and listen the more anxious I become. With a deep breath in and out, I raised my sword up in the air and ignited it into a burst of flames.

I stared deep into the jet-black flaming sword and yelled.

“THIS IS MY FIGHT ALL RIGHT! I’M YOUR WIELDER, YOU MUST OBEY ME!”

The crowd went silent and the blade stayed black. There was not even a hint of a response from the sword and I just looked like an idiot in front of the crowd....

They all started to murmur again.

Seconds later the announcer spoke up while I still held my flaming blade high in the air.

“Thank you for the intro! With that, our main event is about to begin! We’ll get started with the man in the ring! You all know him well, the winner of our previous match coming in at 20 years old, 181cm, and weighing 84kg. He holds an overall fight record in the Rumble Dome of 1 Win, 0 Losses, and 0 Ties. Please Welcome back, The Flame Emperor!”

About half of the crowd cheered and clapped, but it was nothing like my last introduction. I looked around and bowed while giving them another burst of flames before bringing the sword back to my side.

“Now... The moment you’ve all been waiting for... Coming in at 29 years old, 198cm, and weighing 121kg. With an overall fight record in the Rumble Dome of 47 Wins, 0 Losses, and 0 Ties. Please Welcome our U250 reining champion, Theodore The Destroyer!”

\*THUDDD\*

\*THUDDD\*

\*THUDDD\*

The door of the cage opened up and a massive man walked through. He wore a thick silver chest plate, an odd necklace with a large tooth hanging from it, wrist guards, high boots, and a gladiator-style helmet that only revealed his eyes and mouth.

The champion carried a tall rectangular shield and a massive metal club almost as tall as me.

He had tan skin that almost looked orange, and muscles bulged out from every possible place they could. His steps shook the ground as he towered over me.

The crowd went crazy! As the cage door shut the room exploded into cheers and yells. They threw their shirts and hats in the air as they chanted in unison.

“THEODORE!”

“THEODORE!”

“THEODORE!”

“THEODORE!”

“THEODORE!”

I gripped my sword and stared at the menacing beast of a man.

I used inspect.

“Lv. 220”

Level... 220... and he's the champ? How is this possible...?

I curiously looked him up and down then remembered I picked up a new skill from my previous fight. I wonder what it'll show me.

“Appraisal”

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Active Items:

[Steel Helmet] + 100 Defense

[Steel Chest Plate]: +100 Defense

[Minotaur's Wrist Guards]: +175 Defense

[Steel Boots]: +150 Speed

[Dragon Tooth Pendant] + 30% Mental Strength

[Large Steel Shield]: + 200 Defense

[Steel Club]: + 300 Strength

Active Skills:

[????????]

---

I raised an eyebrow and grinned. This is a neat new skill I picked up.

He's a level 220, and his gear seems pretty standard. Just by looking at him, his defense and strength are most likely the strong points. Compared to my own base stats and gear, I don't think we're that far off.

How can he be the undefeated champion of this division with such average gear and not even a maxed level? I wonder what those question marks under the active skills section are.

The announcer's voice began to ring in my ears. I shook myself out of deep thought and gritted my teeth to stare down at my new opponent across from me.

"Everybody knows the rules! There's no time limit in the ring, all tricks, magic items, and abilities are allowed! The winner will be decided by knockout, forfeit, or death. As seen in our last match, anything goes. A forfeit places you in your opponent's mercy! We will begin at the sound of the bell."

Theodore stomped his feet and pointed the metal club at me.

"You're dead meat."

I grinned and pointed my sword back at him while letting the flames burn bright.

"I could say the same thing about you."

He smirked.

\*DING\*

Theodore charged forward at me with incredible speed, it's comparable to my own. I reacted on instinct and twisted my body to the right barely dodging his massive club swing past me.

I sprinted to the opposite side of the cage and watched the large man plant his leg and turn around to stare at me with bloodshot eyes. He's impressively nimble and quick for his size... he has almost no gear buffing his speed. Are these really just his natural stats?

Before I could think, he sprinted at me again with a murderous aura around him. It took me all the strength in my body to dodge to the right side again. His club came centimeters from my head this time.

I gulped and held my sword tight as the beast of a man turned to face me again. He smiled wide and his eye's looked even crazier this time around. They became more bloodshot and focused directly on me.

This time... I'll find a way to counter.

He came charging towards me with blinding speed. I challenged his attack with my own speed channeling a large amount of MP into my sword and preparing to use body hardening to soften the blow of his attack.

\*SHINGGGG\*

I swung my sword with all my might and twisted my body to curve around his club. I managed to land a small hit on his left shoulder where there was no armor... but it wasn't a deep gash. Is his defense really that high???

The moment I landed my attack, he registered this and corrected the swing of his own club.

**\*THUDDDD\*\*CRACKKK\***

Theodore landed a hit on me directly in the stomach. I had time to create a layer of crystal body hardening, but somehow it cracked and shattered instantly.

The wind was knocked out of me and my eyes opened wide as I flew across the ring to hit the back cage wall. My world felt like it turned slow-motion as the square necklace on my chest exploded into a thousand pieces.

That means his hit did 500 HP worth of damage minimum, and I even protected myself with body hardening. I checked my status, it read 1050/1065 HP and 990/1065 MP. My extra life is gone already.

I got to my feet and burst into flames to see him running at me again. With no time to think I sprint out of the way with all my might and narrowly miss the high incoming club.

Bri was right... he is a lot stronger than me. Possibly faster too... and better defense.... But HOW? Is it his skill? What's going on???

Theo ran at me again with the same bloodshot eyes and a grin ear to ear.

“Come hereeeee! It's only a matter of time now!”

He swung his club and lunged forward, he isn't tiring one bit. All I can do is dodge.

He came at me four more times and I swerved around his club nearly getting hit with a fatal blow to the head every time. His precision is getting more and more dialed in with every attack. He may be right... it's only a matter of time...

We stared each other down on opposite sides of the ring. I'm trying to stay focused as best I can, but the crowd is making a lot of noise.

“Come on!!! I came to see a fight!!!”

“The Flame Emperor Isn't so tough now!!!”

“THEODORE! THEODORE!”

“Get him!!! He's almost tired out!!!”

“What a wimp! Looks like the Murderer has met his match!”

The whole crowd is turning against me, and all I can do is run. How did I get myself into this situation anyways....

**\*THUDDDDDD\*\*CRACKKKK\***

I got distracted....

Theodore had run towards me and launched his usual frontal attack. I noticed after it was much too late. While hardening my abdomen and bracing for the impact he struck my left side and sent me flying through the air to the backside of the cage again.

The black crystal fragments flew everywhere and I coughed up blood as I regenerated and stood to my feet as fast as I could. My status read out 535/1065 HP and 875/1065 MP.

I gritted my teeth and glared at him.

Theodore charged in again.

I dodged.

Over and over.

We played cat and mouse for another 40 seconds straight.

The crowd booed me and chanted for Theodore as he tired me out.

I attempted to use telekinesis at one point, but every time the blade got close he easily swatted it away with his club or shield. It contains less mana when I'm not directly in contact with it, so I found it was just draining MP unnecessarily and stopped trying this attack method.

Theodore has had enough of me, I can tell he's getting frustrated.

"You annoy me kid! I'm gonna end it right here and now!!!"

He ran at me with his shield held in front of him and the club behind his back. I got in a comfortable position to get ready for a dodge to either side.

Once he got closer I decided to jump to the left. The moment I did, he awkwardly followed... With his shield up front, he swerved to the left. I continued to run, but he stayed close behind zig zagging until we got closer and closer to the back of the cage.

He pulled the club from behind his back and cornered me on the left and right side with his incredible wingspan. I gulped and scanned the area. His massive legs, shield, and club have me comply boxed in.

Theodore raised his club in the air and yelled as he swung it down towards me.

\*CLANGGGGGG\*

The only thing I can do is block.

I swung my fiery black blade up to meet his club. All that's left is a battle of strength and will.

Instantly, I could feel his strength overwhelm me. I erupted into flames and forced as much MP into my blade as possible.

Simultaneously, I plundered Theodore's MP to get a steady source of mana. His club overpowered my sword, and I'm being pushed to the ground attempting to latch onto any bit of leverage I can manage.

I yelled out to my only hope remaining, the sword in my hands.

"IT'S TIME. FIGHT WITH ME!"

Theodore Smirked and pushed his club down with more force as I pushed every last drop of MP into my blade.

"COME ON!!!!"

Sweat flowed down my face as the sword refused to answer.

“OBEY ME!”

Still... Nothing...

“FINE. I’LL DO IT MYSELF!”

I stopped sending MP into the sword and sent it directly to my own body erupting into a ball of fire 5m in diameter and covering my body in black crystals.

We both yelled as Theodore’s club crushed me under its immense weight, and I attempted to burn him to a crisp.

Theodore jumped back out from my ball of fire as he landed his brutal attack. I let my flames dissipate and regenerated my broken bones. I checked my status again. as I spit out a puddle of blood. It read 20/1065 HP and 545/1065 MP.

I stood to my feet and glared at the massive man in front of me as he patted out the flames covering his body. He was burned all over but didn’t seem to be phased by it. This is truly a monster...

His eyes met mine and I raised my blade.

It finally began to glow red.

Chapter 67

My vision is blurry, and my clothing is soaked in blood. Even after regenerating most of my body aches with fatigue.

That doesn't matter now though, all I can think about is the man I have to defeat in front of my eyes. My blood is boiling and adrenaline is pumping through my veins. Even though I'm face to face with death, I feel like I can take on the entire world. It's exhilarating. This feeling is what I fight for.

The sword in my hands is glowing brighter than I've ever seen it shine. There's a strong sense of bloodlust emanating from it, but I'm putting out a ferocious aura of my own.

As our raw emotions clash, it seems the beast within the sword recognizes my intentions. Even in my moment of complete and utter defeat against a superior fighter, I still have the will to face my opponent head-on. We've come to an understanding.

"Fight to Survive."

It seems I've gained my sword's respect.

Theodore glares at me from across the ring and we lock eyes. He charges forward as I begin to feed MP into my continuously glowing blade.

My opponent has dropped his shield behind him and sprints forward with his club raised to finish me off. One hit and I'm dead.

I grit my teeth and continue feeding every last drop of mana in my body through my hands into the shining weapon clasped between my fingers. The light keeps growing brighter and brighter as our auras clash to become one.

My vision almost goes black as I lift my sword to begin a mighty swing. Theodore charges towards me from over five meters away. All of the mana leaves my body and is released in one fiery slash.

A massive dark red crescent moon of flames is released from deep within the sword and flies through the air leaving thick trails of fire magic residue behind.

Time slows down as I hear the crowd yell and scream about the heat. Some members in the front rows fall over and run away from the dome.

Theodore's eyes open wide and his face becomes distorted as the fiery slash rockets toward him.

It's all over in a fraction of a second....

**\*SHINGGGGGG\***

Like a knife through butter, the dark flames slice through the entire right side of Theo's chest plate cutting off his arm, shoulder, and part of his chest. His club clangs as it hits the floor and he drops to his knees screaming in agony.

The dark crescent of flames slashes through the top of the dome's metal cage with an array of sparks and metal fragments. It continues upward over 20m and smashes through the warehouse roof as well.

I stumbled around and struggled to stay on my feet as I watched in awe. My vision wavered in and out and I questioned my own power. This is like nothing I've ever done before.

The crowd became silent....

Then erupted in cheers moments later!

"I knew he had it in him!"

"The Flame Emperor is our new champ!"

"My money was on him this whole time!!!"

"Who cares about his morals, we came for a good fight!"

"FLAME EMPEROR! FLAME EMPEROR!"

I snarled and rolled my eyes as I struggled to stay conscious. This crowd is awful, there's no loyalty in degeneracy. That's what this fight club and gambling ring are all about I guess, doing whatever feels good and riding highs.

At that same moment, Theodore attempts to stand to his feet. His club had rolled about 2m away and now he's trying to inch his way closer to it. I walk towards him with my sword raised in front of me.

The gaping hole in the dome above us is dropping shards of half-melted metal all around as the dark flames burn bright on his mangled body.

I stand over Theodore and touch the tip of my blade to his neck. I plunder as much MP as I can to build strength for an attempt at a final attack.

His eyes open wide and his face turns white as he desperately reaches for the club by my feet.

"I-I GIVE UP! I FORFEIT!"

My sword begins to glow, and I feel it edging me on to finish the prey in front of me. In my weakened state, It's an appetizing offer. The temptation is killing me.

I grit my teeth and shake my head as I pull the blade away from Theodore's throat and raise it in the air while turning my back and walking away to face the crowd.

I mutter under my breath.

"I'm in charge now."

Then smirk to myself as I take in the roaring applause of the audience.

Seconds later, Theo's yells out from behind me.

"I DON'T CARE ANYMORE! SCREW HONOR! YOU WON'T TAKE EVERYTHING AWAY FROM ME!"

I turned back around to see Theodore stumbling toward me with his club in his left hand. The crowd booed as he swung at my head.

His movements are much slower because of his injuries, I was able to dodge the attack and position myself for a counter.

I nodded and closed my eyes while channeling the remainder of his own stolen MP into my sword.

With a swift lunge, I stabbed him on his unguarded right side and released my flames deep into the already open wound. We both yelled as I plundered every last bit of his MP and turned it against him. It felt like such overkill, but he has so much excess HP and mana. All I can do is continue to burn him to a crisp until he gives up.

The crowd just couldn't get enough, it's a madhouse in here. The entire dome filled with flames and the audience roared with amusement. I didn't stop until I finally heard the ringing in my head that confirmed it was over.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

"13 levels.... b-but how...? That's impossible..."

I looked down at the pile of ash at my feet and saw the familiar floating blue text.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Conceal

[YES][NO]

In a dazed state, I chose yes and fell to my knees as the flames around me began to dissipate.

I heard the announcer's voice ring out above my head.

"What an incredible match! Who would have seen this coming? It looks like we have a new U250 champion... Everyone, let's hear it for The Flame Emperor!"

The crowd roared and I looked around the arena trying to stay conscious. Two workers came into the ring and helped me to my feet. I stumbled out and muttered to one of the workers to take me to the VIP area while vaguely pointing in the direction of the booth I came from.

My vision kept going in and out as the crowd parted all around me.

Finally, I saw Bri walking toward me with a smile.

"I'll take him from here boys."

"Y-Yes Ms. Briana."

Again, she put her arm around my shoulder and walked me back to the VIP booth. Bri handed me an HP and MP potion, I chugged them both before we even walked inside.

Once we did, she shut the door and I collapsed on the padded seats.

"Looks like you were able to control the beast in the end. Good job."

I opened one eye to look up at her.

"Yeah. I'm going home."

She laughed.

"Let me at least walk you out."

I grabbed my sword and shoved it into my item storage.

"Take me to the surface, then I'm leaving. If I ever do business with you again, I'm bringing all the gold in this entire city. Never again... will I accept a mindless condition instead of paying..."

Bri smirked.

"Pleasure doing business with you too."

Chapter 68

We let the crowd die down and disperse before exiting the arena. I kept my mask on to avoid being identified. No one's going to know who I am, but it's just better for people to not associate my face with an illegal underground fight ring champ...

Bri leads me into the main market. We walked no more than 500m and made a hard left to a nearby heavy metal door. It's attached to a staircase upwards. We climbed the stairs and I found myself in the back of an old wooden tavern. I put my mask in item storage and Bri spoke up as we walked in.

"Table for 1, it's Ms. Briana."

An old short man hobbled over with both of his eyebrows raised high.

"Yes, ma'am right this way."

She smiled at him.

"Feed this young man and treat him well, I appreciate you, Franklin."

He nodded and turned to me.

"Follow me, sir."

Bri turned back towards the stairs and waved.

"I'll see you again Jay, you know where to find me if you need anything."

Like that... she was gone.

I let out a sigh of relief and followed the old man to a table in the back.

Once seated I didn't even bother to look at the menu.

"Just bring me your special of the day, I'm not picky. I appreciate the kind gesture."

"Of course, coming right up."

The tavern is pretty much completely empty. I took out my sword and placed it against the wall beside me. It glimmered jet-black and didn't give off a scent of consciousness. I patiently waited and opened up my status out of curiosity.

[Status Open]

---

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 225

Hp: 1130/1130

Mp: 1130/1130

Strength: 545 [+420]

Speed: 646 [+388]

Agility: 672

Defense: 481 [+192]

Mental Strength: 545 [+109][+153]

Skills:

Absorption

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Self Regeneration

Spacial Magic[Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal[Special Grade]

Conceal

Items Equipped:

Golden Wolf Ring [+20% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+77% Strength][+28% Mental Strength]

---

"Interesting..."

As I studied my new stats I realized my sword's buffs increased slightly. The only reasonable explanation is that it's growing with me... I've seen enough improbable things today already, I guess this makes sense too. I'll have to ask someone I trust about this another time. My newest skill also intrigues me a bit. I whispered "Conceal" under my breath and a blue box of text appeared next to my status.

[Use Conceal]

[YES][NO]

I chose yes.

[Enter Changes]

Level

Hp

Mp

Strength

Speed

Agility

Defense

Mental Strength

Skills

Items Equipped

Bufs

Other

[Revert to Original]

I touch my right index finger to my status and a digital keyboard appears before my eyes. I'm able to edit my status. While mesmerized by my new ability the old man finally came over to my table with a steaming plate of meats, rice, and vegetables.

"Here you go sir, enjoy!"

I smiled and nodded to him then raised an eyebrow.

"Hey one second, what do you see what you look at this?"

I flipped my status window over to him and he took a look.

[Status Open]

---

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 250

Hp: 1255/1255

Mp: 1255/1255

Strength: 605 [+200]

Speed: 720

Agility: 650

Defense: 505

Mental Strength: 605

Skills:

Swordsmanship

Items Equipped:

Minotaur's Sword [+200 Strength]

---

"Well sir, it looks like you're a very strong swordsman. I didn't know Minotaur dropped swords, that must be a rare item you have there. Congratulations on hitting level 250 though, that's a big accomplishment."

I grinned ear to ear.

"Appreciate it, thank you."

The man bowed and walked away to let me enjoy my meal. I stared at my status and activated conceal again.

[Use Conceal]

[YES][NO]

I chose yes.

[Enter Changes]

Level

Hp

Mp

Strength

Speed

Agility

Defense

Mental Strength

Skills

Items Equipped

Bufs

[Revert to Original]

I chose "Revert to Original" and my status changed back to its true stats in front of my eyes.

"This solves so many problems..."

When I put my sword back into my item storage I realized I didn't have my item box on me... Bri really kept it.... She just wants me to come back so she can torture me more.

I rolled my eyes but grinned at the same time. It's kind of funny... I hope I see her again someday, I just need a lot more gold before I ever walk through her front door.

I happily finished my meal and felt a lot better. The old man eventually took away my empty dishes and walked me out the front door refusing to let "A friend of Briana's pay".

I got outside and realized I'm still on the totally opposite side of town, there were shining silver buildings way off in the distance so I decided to begin walking that way.

It took almost an hour to get back to the familiar tourism-filled residential area of the city. While walking, I had a lot of time to think over my current situation and new goals.

I'm going to tone it down for the next week or so. I just spent the majority of my money, and have been getting myself into some really insane scenarios recently.... It'd be best to slowly level up for a

while and stack cash. With my new sword and stat increases I'm sure grinding out the Minotaur dungeon will be a breeze.

I walked through the front doors of the Inn and was greeted by a friendly face.

"Back so soon? How was your day off?"

I laughed. He has no idea...

"Great... Great! Uhh by the way, any news on the surge today? Any big reports?"

He shook his head.

"Not much. I assume there's still a few mutants, but no major breaks. By tomorrow, the city will be back to normal."

"Great, I'd like to stay a few more nights if my room will still be available. Could I extend my stay until next Saturday?"

The Innkeeper sifted through a few important documents and then looked up at me.

"Of course, I can arrange that. You still have a few nights that are already paid for ahead of you, but we can make an extension. Would you like to pay now or once our current agreement is over?"

I rummaged through my item storage and pulled out 3 silver to place on the table.

"How's that?"

He nodded and wrote something down on his papers.

"Great, you're booked until Saturday morning. Enjoy the rest of your stay."

With a smile, I made my way back up to my room and straight into a hot shower. Afterward, I lay on my bed staring out the window admiring the view while resting my eyes for no more than 20 minutes. I'm physically tired from my fights earlier today, but there's no way I can fall asleep for a full night just yet.

I hopped out of bed, then stretched my arms and legs.

"Why not... I'll go raid a dungeon."

Without thinking much more I made my way downstairs and toward the Dungeon Hub.

It wasn't very crowded, and all the raid restrictions had been lifted. The Innkeeper was right, the surge has mostly passed.

I checked in at the main hub and made my way down to the D Class platform. I took a look at the dungeon list. There are a lot of interesting options but returning to the Minotaur Dungeon seems like the safest bet for now.

I boarded the train and entered the dungeon less than 10 minutes later.

While wandering around the dungeon for about 2 hours I encountered 5 groups of Minotaur.

They all ranged from level 155 to 195. Some were in groups of 2, others were in groups of 3. Fighting them was too easy with my new sword, boots, and the general increase in stats from leveling. My sword hasn't even glowed red once, nor have I had to use much fire magic at all. They dropped 13 mana crystals and 1 large axe in total.

After these smaller battles, I decided to check out the boss room. When I arrived it appeared to be completely normal.

The portal is light grey, meaning there's no sign of a mutant boss. With a shrug, I jumped through.

As I remembered, the boss room looks like an open plane. The initial wave is 7 Minotaurs. This time around, they were all normal spawns ranging from level 190-200. I easily defeated them before the boss even arrived. They dropped 7 mana crystals and no axes.

The boss appeared moments later, and it actually looked rather menacing. Compared to the death matches I was in hours ago though, this feels like a walk in the park. I used inspect, and appraisal.

[Lv. 234]

Active Items:

[Steel Axe] +225 Strength

[Steel WristGuards] +175 Defense

Active Skills:

[NONE]

I completely outpaced the monster and lit it up with fiery gashes all over. It took about 6 swings. The beast was defeated without landing a single hit of its own. I've significantly improved.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

The Boss only dropped a mana crystal, I wasn't lucky enough to get anything else. Once collected the white light transported me back to the dungeon's start point.

I turned right back around and decided to clear the whole dungeon again before it got too late in the day.

2.5 hours later...

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I collected another 17 mana crystals and 1 large Steel Axe along with gaining 2 more levels. Once I left the dungeon, the sun had already pretty much set so I headed to the market as quickly as possible to sell my loot to the old merchant.

"Hey, kid! How'd it go? Were they able to make you a sword out of that horn?"

"Kinda. I ran into a few bumps along the way, but I have a sword to fight with now. Thanks for the help."

I grinned and pulled out a massive pile of mana and 3 axes onto the table. The mana scale read out 6291.44MU.

"How much do you want for it all?"

"1 gold, 20 silver, and a small item box."

"What happened to the last one?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Long story."

The merchant chuckled to himself as he counted out my coins and placed them on the counter along with a brown pouch.

With a nod and a handshake, I was off.

---

I decided to take it pretty easy over the next few days. I enjoyed good food, slept well, and farmed in the Minotaur dungeon for about 6-8 hours a day.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I leveled up 8 more times, collected 436 mana crystals, and a total of 27 axes. In total, I profited roughly 15 gold. The only problem now... is my own boredom.

It's Friday morning and I'm standing at the D Class Dungeon Hub platform staring at the list. I didn't level up at all yesterday from defeating the boss 4 times and my sword hasn't glowed once since my arena fights.

I'll be taking the train back to my hometown tomorrow. The question is, do I play it safe for one more day or check out one of the other high-ranked D Class dungeons?

Chapter 69

"Hey! Would you look at who it is?"

I heard a familiar voice behind me and turned my head to see Hudson smiling and waving while walking in my direction. Trailing behind him were 4 hunters I'd never seen before.

"Are these your new recruits?"

He nodded and looked back.

"Yup! Fresh D Class Hunters, it's my job to train them this weekend."

"Hey uh- how's Nessa doing? She's not with you today?"

Hudson nodded.

“Nessa hit level 250 yesterday. She’s doing some special sword training at the guild to make sure she’s ready for the test next weekend.”

“Already??? How did she level up so fast? I can’t get much further in the Minotaur Dungeon.”

Hudson pointed at the list on the wall.

“Well, the only other two D Class dungeons that have higher levels than the Minotaur are the Giant Ape and Lizardman dungeons. I assume she power-leveled there with another guild member.

I took a look at the list. The Giant Ape dungeon seems straightforward enough. It’ll be worth checking out today.

“Okay, thanks. That’s exactly what I was looking for. Hey uh- Tell Nessa I’ll see her at the Exams!”

“Of course!”

\*Screeeechhh\*

With a wave of goodbye, we each got on different trains and headed off.

Minutes later I arrived. No one else got off at this stop, It looks like this dungeon isn’t very popular. I made my way up the escalator and took out my sword before jumping through the floating blue portal.

I’m bombarded by a hot and humid environment the second I enter this dungeon. There are thick trees all around and occasional small clearings that let in the shining artificial sunlight. The ground is covered in lush green plants and a variety of multicolored fruits and flowers. This is a jungle dungeon... It’s pretty cool.

I walk deeper in with slow cautious steps, but this eventually turns into faster jogging as I get more comfortable with the terrain. It takes about 20 minutes before I encounter my first monster.

As I’m walking along the jungle floor I see many tree’s shaking violently in the distance and ready my blade. A dark brown creature comes flying out of the top of the trees swinging on branches and squares up with me on the jungle floor about 20m away.

I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 213]

Active Items:

[Steel Machete] +200 Strength

[Steel Chestplate] +200 Defense

Active Skills:

[NONE]

It's a giant monkey.... The beast stood around 4m tall, and the ground shook after every step it took. The Shining silver machete and armor it wore made it look almost human, but the bloodshot eyes and fangs protruding from its mouth told me otherwise.

It let out a scream that shook the trees and ran at me. I ignited my blade and ran towards it as well. Within seconds the ape fell into fiery pieces.

I let out a sigh of disappointment and collected the mana crystal it dropped moments later.

“Hopefully the boss puts up a fight.”

It took about 2 hours, but I made it to the back of the dungeon. While walking, I faced off against 5 more apes. All of them ranged from level 210-220 and dropped mana crystals. One of them dropped a machete with +200 strength. I put all the loot in my item storage.

The boss room portal is light grey. I jump through without much hesitation. The inside is also a jungle environment, but the outer edges of the room are blocked off by very large thick trees. It seems there's no wave of Apes before the boss. All I hear is one large monster charging toward me in the distance.

I use inspect, appraisal, and enemy detection.

[50m]

[Lv. 246]

[Steel Machete] +250 Strength

[Steel Chestplate] +250 Defense

Active Skills:

[NONE]

Once it leaps out of the tree tops I can see that this beast looks almost identical to its underlings, it's just closer to 6m tall.

It let out a roar and our battle began. Although its defenses were a bit stronger, my speed and boosted strength wildly outclassed this boss. In Just 3 hits, the Giant Ape fell to its knees and collapsed.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

I'm too powerful for these D Class dungeons... I let out another long-winded sigh and collected the large mana crystal that dropped while letting the white light transport me to the dungeon start point.

“Well... That was a waste of my time.”

I left and boarded the train to check out the lizardman dungeon, apparently, these two are at the top of the list. If this one doesn't impress me, I guess it's hopeless.

After a short ride, I made it to the lizardman portal. I readied my sword and jumped through to find myself in a desert dungeon.

The air is dry and the sand is hot. There isn't a single tree in sight. I ventured forth to see what this dungeon had to offer.

Unfortunately... I was slapped in the face with reality. My gear and level are just way too strong.

I came across 7 monsters on my way to the boss room. They were all roughly 2.5m tall, with green scaly skin, humanoid bodies, and lizard heads. Some held spears and others had swords. Most of them wore some type of armor. They were much more agile than the Apes I fought earlier, but not nearly as strong. They ranged from level 215-225. Each battle lasted 1-2 hits max and they all dropped mana crystals. I did not level up or get any special drops.

Once I arrived and entered the boss room I fought a much bigger and darker version of the regular lizardmen. It stood around 3.5m tall and its scaly skin was almost black in color. The beast was level 251 and carried a long silver sword. It did not put up much of a fight against my overpowered stats.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

As I collected its mana crystal and transported back to the surface, I checked my status.

[Status Open]

---

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 241

Hp: 1210/1210

Mp: 1045/1210

Strength: 582 [+448]

Speed: 694 [+416]

Agility: 720

Defense: 515 [+206]

Mental Strength: 582 [+116][+163]

Skills:

Absorption

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Self Regeneration

Spacial Magic[Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal[Special Grade]

Conceal

Items Equipped:

Golden Wolf Ring [+20% Mental Strength]

Cyclops Eye Pendant [+40% Defense]

Dark Elf Boots [+60% Speed]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Fire Aspect][+77% Strength][+28% Mental Strength]

---

“Interesting...”

Even though my level raised significantly since I checked it last, My sword's stats haven't raised at all. I curiously examined my black blade before putting it into item storage and walking out of the dungeon.

I've definitely graduated from these D Class dungeons... It's best to just call it a day at this point.

I walked to the market and sold my loot for around 50 silver. After a decent meal, I stopped by a comic store and grabbed a new book I haven't caught up on yet before making my way back to the Inn.

Once upstairs, I opened to the first page and began to immerse myself in another world. There's not much else to do today, and I'm kind of bummed out about my current dungeon situation.

The comic I grabbed today is all about an S Class hero that protects the world from monsters, it's the new volume that I've been waiting on for a few months. Although his position as a hero brings him fame and fortune, he's been doing the same thing every day for years. No monsters or even humans can come anywhere close to his level of power. Most of the chapters involve him daydreaming about fighting stronger monsters and being upset when he snaps back into reality where his battle has already been won. Although I'm nowhere near the world's strongest, I relate a lot with him today.

The hero almost gives up on being a hero because it wasn't entertaining his immediate wants and needs. Eventually, he finds fulfillment and a larger purpose in helping the people around him stay safe and grow to reach their own goals.

To be honest, I got a little lost on that last part. The whole craving a stronger opponent was all that stuck in my head. The end of the comic left us readers with a cliffhanger hinting that there may be a villain of much greater magnitude than he ever imagined. Of course... I can't wait to buy the next volume!

With that, the sun slowly set and I fell asleep dreaming about fighting my own world-ending monster.

I woke up with the rising sun and hopped out of bed to make my way downstairs.

“I hope you enjoyed your stay, sir! Please do come again.”

I nodded to the Innkeeper and left him the room key.

“I had a great stay, thanks!”

After a quick breakfast, I hopped on the train and watched the buildings, trees, mountains, and lakes whiz by on my way back to the countryside.

\*Screeeeech\*

A few hours later the train came to a halt at my stop. I stepped out and looked around. This place doesn't feel the same at all anymore, everything is so small.

I walked back to my old apartment building and climbed the steps to my door. There's a note on the handle.

“You're welcome, Jay. You owe me one;) -M”

It's Maria's handwriting... but I owe her one for what?

I opened my door and walked inside. Looking around, this place is a mess. There are clothes on the ground and old water bottles all over the place.

Not to mention my standard of living has significantly increased since leaving here. This old wooden-floored 2 silver month apartment is not going to cut it. I have to get a new place... scratch that, I need to move to the city for good!

I tidied up the apartment a bit before deciding to head off toward Pace Guild to check in on everyone.

About half an hour later I walked through the front door. The woman in the lobby greeted me with a surprised look on her face.

“Welcome back Jay! I thought you vanished for good.”

With a sarcastic stare, I replied.

“Yeah, you wish. Is Jack in today?”

“Sure thing. He just organized our morning raids, I'm sure he'd love to meet with you. Knock on his office door.”

With a nod, I walked down the narrow hallway and knocked on Jack's door. It swung open moments later and I was greeted with a smile.

“Hey! It's you! Welcome back! You look a whole lot different!”

I walked into his office as he motioned for me to do so.

“Really? What's changed?”

He stared at me for a moment.

“It's your eyes. They've definitely seen a bit more action since the last time we met.”

We both grinned at each other. I can't tell if he's just greasing me up, or genuinely complimenting my improvement. Either way, I'll take it.

"Well, the capital just seems like the place to be. I'm going back, I just thought it'd be best to check back in... Plus, I know you had something you wanted to talk about last week. Could it have been the C Class exams?"

Jack sat down at his desk.

"Are you close...To level 250?"

I nodded.

"Yep, very."

"Well, that's great to hear! I can send in your application today! Although you aren't very active in our guild, it would still be appreciated if you competed under our name."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Competed under your name? What do you mean?"

"Every Region holds its own C Class exams separately, but the number of passes is regulated by the country as a whole. Well, it's actually regulated by the Hunters Association if you want to get into the nitty-gritty details. Every guild from around the region applies with their top D Class Hunters over level 250 and they will compete in an event to decide the top of the class. If you don't make the cut the first time around, you can enter again as many times as you'd like. It may take a few tries to achieve the "C Class" Rank but that's only natural. It doesn't only take raw leveling power to defeat most C Class Monsters. This is what they test for in the exam."

I nodded slowly.

"Interesting... So if your guild submits a D Class Hunter that passes the exam, I assume that raises your prestige a bit?"

Jack smiled.

"Well, yes of course."

I nodded again.

"Sign me up. I'll be more than ready in a week."

"Great."

We locked eyes and shook hands, then Jack spoke up.

"You know, we've been power leveling and training Maria a lot this week. She became much more motivated after she came back from the city. I doubt she'll make it to the

necessary level by next Saturday, but her magic is progressing at an extraordinary rate. You may want to train with her a bit this week.”

“Alright, maybe I will. Are there any High D Class Dungeons around here? Ones that are borderline C Class? Or a real C Class that hasn’t been rated yet if that’s even a thing? I need something to get my last couple of levels and cure my boredom for the time being.

Jack put his hand on his chin and thought for a moment, then rolled his eyes.

“You’re looking for a dungeon that bends the rules aren’t you?”

I grinned and he nodded in acknowledgment.

“Let me contact Rei, I’ll have her take you to the High Orc Dungeon. You’ll like it.”

Chapter 70

“Uhh- sure. Sounds good to me!”

Jack left the room and came back around 5 minutes later.

“They should be back from a raid within the hour. You’ll have to wait around for a little while.”

I nodded.

“That’s fine.”

Jack looked me up and down.

“Rei told me you got a new sword at the city center. Want to go to the training rooms real quick? I’d love to see how much you’ve improved! Swordsman to Swordsman.”

I grinned.

“Sure, but I’ll have to go easy on you.”

“Hey come on now!”

We both walked out of his office and entered the white-walled room. Once I drew my sword Jack’s eyes lit up.

“Oh-huooo! Look at that!”

He drew his sword as well.

We began to spar casually for almost an hour. Neither of us used full strength of course, but we had a good time. Clashing blades with a swordsman is like sitting down and listening to their whole life story, I learned a lot.

“Good warm-up, you’re not half bad!”

Jack smirked and wiped the sweat from his forehead.

“Oh yeah? Breaking 3 practice swords in less than an hour is what you call a warmup?”

I glanced at the shards of steel in the corner of the room.

“Not my fault this sword is so strong!”

We both had a good laugh and sat down by the resting area and replenished our HP and MP.

\*Knock\* \*Knock\* \*Knock\*

The training room door opened and two familiar faces popped their heads through.

“Jay!!! Welcome back!”

Maria came running in with a full set of lightweight armor on head to toe. Rei poked her head in close behind.

I instinctively used inspect and appraisal as she ran toward me.

[Lv. 156]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +125 Strength

[Steel Chest Plate] +100 Defense

[Steel Wrist Guards] +75 Defense

[Steel Shin Guards] +75 Defense

[Enchanted Boots] +100 Speed +100 Agility

[Golem's Pendant] +30% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Ice Summoning]

She wore light-colored clothing under the thin sheets of steel armor plates that fit around the curves of her body perfectly. Also... level 156? Jack wasn't kidding. She's been power-leveling like crazy this week!

Maria jumped through the air and put her arms out wide. Moments later she hugged me tight, I returned the favor. This is a surprise.

“Good to see you too Maria!”

She dropped down to her feet and looked up at me with a smile that quickly turned to a mildly annoyed pouting look.

“Did you get my note??”

I raised my hands in the air with a confused look. All these emotions at once caught me off guard.

“I- uhh. Yeah, why??”

“You were gone so long you didn’t pay your rent Jay! Our landlord was knocking forever..”

“Oh...I-“

“I paid it for you, so you’re good!”

With an embarrassing looking on my face I sifted through my item box to pull out some silver.

“Let me pay you back, I’m sorry about-“

“Nope! I don’t want your money, take me hunting with you today!”

She looked straight at me and smiled with her deep blue eyes piercing my soul.

I didn’t have time to answer before Rei interrupted.

“Hey! I’m not so sure you’re ready for the dungeon we’re about to go to! I didn’t know you actually wanted to come with us, I thought you were just welcoming Jay back home...”

She pouted again.

“You guys always treat me like a little kid. I’m really strong now ya know!”

Rei looked at Jack and he just nodded.

“You’ll be fine, just don’t dive too deep. I’ll give the green flag to all three of you. Just be careful.”

Rei nodded.

I looked back down at Maria.

“Well, looks like it’s a yes from me too. I guess I do owe you one.”

She nodded and grinned.

I turned to Jack and shook his hand. He spoke up.

“Had a great time sparring with you Jay, glad you’re back. I’ll have that application sent in today.”

“Appreciate it.”

Maria, Rei, and I walked out of the training room and through the guild’s back doors moments later. Rei spoke up.

“It’s about 40 minutes of walking from here. This dungeon is kinda way off the radar.”

Maria and I nodded, then followed close behind. We caught each other up on important info and how our dungeon diving had gone the past week.

Maria basically doubled in level. She’s been exclusively training with Rei in low, mid, and even high-level D Class dungeons around here. The Guild supplied her with this gear because she’s been

progressing so quickly. Maria has to work on battle technique more than anything else, her magic power is off the charts. I'm looking forward to seeing how she fights now.

I asked Rei why she doesn't dive into any C Class dungeons. The answer honestly surprised me. Apparently, they're too dangerous. Hudson said the same thing in the capital though, I guess there must be something to that... She just gets paid a monthly salary to train the newbies here. A simple life, can't knock her for it.

Also... one of the wildest things Rei told me... the guild master is Jack's Dad! He is usually out traveling, or on business. That's why a D Class is running the place and giving orders. Everything makes so much more sense now!

As we walked and talked, the course Rei took us was way off the main road. There's a large forest area with a few medium-sized mountains south of our town. Apparently, there are a few old and abandoned privately run guild dungeons up here.

"Just a little further, if I remember correctly it's right over here."

Rei pointed to an opening in the tree line and we walked through. On the other side, we came across a small wooden shack. The door had a small sign on the front that read "Property of The Pace Guild - Do Not Enter".

It creaked open as we walked inside. The shack is empty with a blue portal floating at its backside. We all drew our weapons and switched into battle mode while walking through.

I looked around in awe, new worlds never get old....

The ground is completely black and made out of a material I'd guess is some kind of hard stone. The terrain is completely flat, but there are occasional odd-looking black trees and mounds of rocks every 10m or so.

It feels like a desert, but the coloring is very off and there's no sand at all. The lack of green just makes me think there's no life in here. The sky is a light orange color, and the dungeon itself is reasonably well-lit.

"This has to be one of the weirdest dungeons I've ever seen."

Maria nodded and looked around while holding her sword tight.

"I agree. What is this place?"

Rei spoke up.

"Keep your eyes peeled. Anything can happen in here. As long as we don't face the boss, I'm able to handle most monsters in here solo. I'll let you two fight and only step in if you need me."

Maria and I both nodded.

We all walked further into the dungeon.

Like clockwork, 20 minutes or so into our trek I felt a sinister presence approaching.

I used inspect, appraisal, and enemy detection.

[70m]

[Lv. 246]

Active Items:

[Steel Mace] +250 Strength

[Steel Sword] +250 Strength

[High Orc Heavy Armor] +300 Defense

Active Skills:

[Berserker]

My eyes opened wide as I watched a beast appear from behind a pile of rocks. Rei jumped backward and motioned for us to take it on.

I looked at Maria, and she looked back at me.

“Let me at it! I got this!”

I gripped my sword and stared at the beast running at us for a moment, then back at Maria. She nodded at me with a serious look on her face, I stepped back and let her take the lead.

“All you. I’ll be your backup.”

She grinned and started sprinting toward the oncoming beast. With a worried look on my face, I watched her closely getting ready to step in at a moment’s notice.

The High Orc charging at us is about 3.5m tall. It’s not as massive as some of the other beasts I’ve seen, but there is something menacing about its appearance. The monster is swinging a spiked mace around in its right hand and has a sheathed sword on its left leg. The dark green skin almost looks brown and ripples over the defined muscles below. The High Orc is basically wearing a full set of armor covering its arms, legs, and most vital areas.

The way it’s scanning the terrain and swinging its weapon rhythmically gives me the impression that this is a fairly intelligent monster.

Maria glowed bright blue as she approached the sophisticated beast. It let out a roar, and she screamed back at it while covering her sword in a thick layer of Ice. I could feel the temperature around us begin to lower and the ring of blue light around her began to grow larger. Everything within 5m of her is being affected. The trail of ice behind her is thick and shows no signs of melting.

The High Orc and her collide moments later. I can’t believe the sight in front of my eyes.

As the Orc swings its Mace, Maria shoots a wave of Ice at its oncoming weapon. The beast freezes in its tracks, literally... The entire right side of its body including the mace is covered in a thick layer of ice. It lets out a roar as she begins to run past.

It was all over in an instant...

Maria circles back and releases another wave of ice across the left side of its body. The High Orc is frozen solid from head to toe.

This beast is completely immobilized.

I can't believe my eyes. She just took down a monster 100 levels greater than her like it was nothing.

Maria looks back at me with a grin.

Then I hear a cracking sound....

The pristine white statue of ice begins to splinter and break. A dark red light starts to seep through the cracks glowing brighter and brighter from within.