

D. Diver 71

Chapter 71

CRACKKK

The High Orc roared as it broke free from its ice prison. The dark red aura around its body gave off an immense power that definitely was not present before.

I looked back to see Rei standing close behind us with her arms crossed. Maria had turned back to the beast looking ready to attack again. Her base magic stats are naturally boosted about 2x that of an average person, but I can't help wanting to jump in and help her.

She yelled the moment I took a step toward her.

"I got this. Trust me Jay!"

I gritted my teeth and stared at the beast in front of us.

"Fine. I'm right behind you though."

She nodded and began to glow bright blue.

The High Orc charges at Maria and she does the same. It swings the massive Mace over its head in a fit of rage.

The second before impact, Maria created a thick wall of ice in front of her and sprints off to the left. While continuing to glow red, the monster breaks straight through the wall without much resistance. Ice chunks fly everywhere and the battlefield is temporarily covered in a vale of small ice fragments that look almost like snow.

SHINGGGG

I hear the distinct sound of a blade hitting flesh and see Maria fly out from the dissipating cloud of snow. The monster roars and I see a large chunk of Ice stuck in its back in the shape of a sword's slash dripping blood.

Maria took out an MP potion from her item box and drank it while squaring up with the beast again.

I released the grip on my sword slightly.

"I guess you have this under control."

She grinned and ran at the monster again, It fell for the same trick. After smashing through Maria's wall of Ice it creates a blind spot for her to attack. The beast is clearly stronger, faster, and has much higher defenses. Tricking it into making optimal conditions for a surprise magic attack is the only way Maria could win. It seems like she's fought opponents like this in the past.

I looked over to Rei and she smiled admiring her young protege at work.

I watch in disbelief. Earlier, I saw the skill "Berserker" when I used Appraisal. This commonly refers to an increase in strength and endurance. It seems to be the case, but I'll just have to test my theory when I get to face one of these High Orcs myself.

Maria continues to create massive Ice Walls and the monster keeps destroying them. She lands cheap shots whenever possible leaving Ice residue behind after every slash. It's clearly hurting the

beast, but very slowly... She's drank 4 MP potions so far, and landed about 10 good hits on the High Orc. It's slowing down as the ice magic seeps deeper into its body.

The game of cat and mouse continues. Maria makes walls, and the beast knocks them down. This only leads to the walls of Ice being blown into more pieces and the eruption of snow gives Maria even more cover. The more hits she lands, the more effective each one becomes leaving deeper icy wounds all over the Orc's body. Doing so just makes it more angry and irrational continuing an endless loop.

With a final slash to the back of the head, the monster finally falls to its knees. Maria takes this opportunity to release a large amount of mana into the beast and covers it completely with Ice. She doesn't stop until it freezes solid. With a confident downward swing of her blade, the High Orc shatters into a thousand tiny pieces.

Maria drinks her 7th MP potion and turns to Rei and Me with a big grin across her face.

"I just gained 23 levels. Now that was a good fight!"

Rei clapped slowly and I watched the Ice fragments disappear with the remains of the Orc. A mana crystal drops and Maria picks it up.

"Ya know... I'm impressed. You've really improved."

"Thanks, I told you I've been training hard! Look at this."

Maria opened her status and turns it to show me.

[Status Open]

Name: Maria Cortez

Level: 179

Hp: 705/705

Mp: 705/705

Strength: 388 [+125]

Speed: 421 [+100]

Agility: 404 [+100]

Defense: 395 [+100][+75][+75]

Mental Strength: 797 [+239]

Skills:

Combat Magic [Ice Summoning]

Items Equipped:

[Steel Sword] +125 Strength

[Steel Chestplate] +100 Defense

[Steel WristGuards] +75 Defense

[Steel Shin Guards] +75 Defense

[Enchanted Boots] +100 Speed +100 Agility

[Golem's Pendant] +30% Mental Strength

My eyes open wide.

"That explains a lot... your magic is still off the charts!"

She smiled and blushed a little.

Just like that, Maria has become one hell of a fighter. Her overuse of MP is alarming, but it works. That mental strength growth rate is insane. I'm sure she can handle the same High Orc with ease now, she'll only get exponentially stronger with every new superior opponent...

We all venture off further into the dungeon while I'm stuck deep in thought.

Maria and Rei explain what kind of training they've been doing in more detail as we walk. It's mostly sword skill work, lower level D class dungeons for funding, then higher D class raids once she has enough MP potions saved. The guild isn't just throwing money at her, she has to work for it. I guess that's good. This dungeon is the most difficult one she's ever faced, but it seems like it won't be an issue!

Almost half an hour passed.

Finally, another High Orc appeared.

"My turn."

Rei and Maria stepped back as I drew my sword.

The Orc that appeared looks almost identical to the one earlier. I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 248]

Active Items:

[Steel Mace] +250 Strength

[Steel Sword] +250 Strength

[High Orc Heavy Armor] +300 Defense

Active Skills:

[Berserker]

I make the first move and charge straight toward it. The beast follows my lead while swinging its mace in a rhythmic fashion.

CLANGGG

Surprisingly, we're almost equal in strength. If anything, it may be a little stronger....

CLANGGG

I entertain the monster while gauging all of its abilities. My speed and agility are far greater, I'm not worried about getting hit at all.

I ignite my blade and run around its backside after our second collision and land a fiery hit without much effort. I plunder MP, and leave a solid amount of fire residue behind.

The Orc lets out a roar and flails its spike mace around in circles trying to hit me. I jump backward and we stare each other down about 10m apart. It snarls and begins to glow dark red. I grin.

"One hit is all it takes for you to get pissed huh? Let's see what you've got."

The High Orc charges at me in a straight line with its weapon swinging wildly in front of it. The ground shakes as it comes closer. Out of curiosity, I run at it and raise my blade.

As our weapons collide, I'm completely overpowered. The weight of its mace combined with its newfound strength sends my sword attack flying to the side. I quickly re-position myself and jump out of the way following the momentum of my blocked sword. As I stare down the beast again, I wonder to myself with my body hardening, how well could I take a hit in its strengthened form...? Maria and Rei are right behind me watching with their eyes wide open. Realizing this, it's probably better if I just end this quickly and leave the fun stuff for later.

While circling back behind the Orc, I ignite my full body into a ball of fire. I plant my right leg and jump toward the monster's back as it attempts to turn as well. I land another deep fiery slash across its back and the monster lets out an angry roar. To my surprise, the gash is much deeper than my last. Its defenses haven't gone up at all in this fit of rage, if anything they've lowered...

A few moments later, our battle was over. I ran circles around the monster and cut it down to a pile of ash with 4 more hits. My sword didn't glow once.

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Berserker

[YES][NO]

I choose yes and stare down at the burning corpse by my feet.

Maria comes running toward me.

"Wow!!! You got a lot stronger too! I knew it!"

I turn and smile.

Rei follows close behind.

"Both of you handled these High Orcs pretty well. Looks like I won't have to step in at all today."

I nod.

"Do they ever use their swords?"

Rei crossed her arms and nodded while motioning for us to follow.

"Yeah some will as we get closer to the boss room, they'll use more than just that sword."

I collected the mana crystal at my feet and looked out into the vast orange sky.

"Interesting. Maybe I'll actually get a serious fight today."

Rei chuckled and started to walk deeper into the dungeon. Maria and I followed.

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We walked for another 20 minutes or so.

The terrain changed a little bit. There are much fewer rocks, less trees, and the ground feels a lot harder. It just seems like there's unlimited flat ground surrounding us in all directions... it's a bit eerie.

Finally, a new monster appears up in the distance. Rei steps back.

"Both of you should take this one on, High Orc's this deep in the dungeon can be stronger than the ones you just faced."

Maria and I acknowledged her. We nod at each other, then ready ourselves for the approaching beast.

It lets out a roar, I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 257]

Active Items:

[Steel Mace] +250 Strength

[Steel Sword] +250 Strength

[High Orc Heavy Armor] +300 Defense

Active Skills:

[Berserker]

[Swordsmanship]

"Interesting..."

It looks exactly the same as any other Orc we faced charging toward us swinging its mace. This one has a swordsmanship skill, I wonder how differently it'll fight?

"Jay! I'll distract it, then we'll both attack!"

Maria sprinted forward before I could get a word in. I followed close behind avoiding the path of ice magic she leaves behind in her tracks.

She began to form a massive wall of ice in front of her while I veer off to the right side.

Moments later the beast falls for her trap and shoots thousands of ice fragments into the sky making a cloud of snow. I use enemy detection and ignite my blade while diving into the heavy snow cover.

SHINGGGG

Both of us fly out from either side of the snow cloud. I leave a fiery gash across the Orc's chest while she leaves shards of ice deep in the monster's back. The snow dissipates and it lets out an ear-piercing roar. The mace flies out of its hand and the beast begins to glow dark red.

Maria and I grin at each other while admiring our dual attack's damage. The High Orc reaches for its sword and glares at both of us.

Maria runs forward and glows bright blue. I follow and veer off to the right again. As she creates an ice wall, I see a shift in the monster's eyes. This will be different... I change my trajectory and watch the events unfold.

SHINGGGGG

The High Orc slices the Ice wall in two with ease, it narrowly misses Maria as she dodges to the left. Her eyes open wide with fear.

I ignite my sword with flames and run toward the beast as fast as I can. The sudden change in temperature as my flames burn bright catches its attention.

"OVER HERE TOUGH GUY!"

It grunts and turns to face me, then charges.

CLANGGG

I'm met with the overwhelming force of a much stronger opponent's blade. This time I didn't have much time to dodge, I'm more focused on distracting it from Maria.

The monster follows through and pushes my sword back effortlessly, throwing me to the ground and landing a deep gash across my abdomen. I reflexively burst into a ball of flames and the beast shrieks while stepping back.

I quickly regenerated the best I can to stop the bleeding and dart away. My status reads 655/1215 HP and 1040/1215 MP.

I look around to see Rei still just standing by with her arms crossed and Maria getting to her feet glowing bright blue 20m behind the Orc.

I grin.

"Looks like I'll get to test this out sooner than I thought."

Maria and I lock eyes and both start running toward the beast from both directions. Resilient, even after being totally overpowered she's able to face off against this monster seconds later without hesitating. I like what I'm seeing.

The High Orc lets out a roar and focuses its attention on me. Then begins to charge.

I erupt into a massive ball of flames and follow its lead. With a thick wall of fire surrounding me on every side, I decide it will mask my next move perfectly.

"Berserker."

The flames around me seem to burn darker as I activate my new skill. Power and intense energy surge through my body. It feels like I just took 10 shots of adrenaline mixed with Hudson's strength buff.

I feel incredible....

I let out a yell and charge forward covered in a veil of dark flames. All I can see is the enemy in front of me, I have laser focus and feel like a killing machine. The closer I get to the beast the more tunneled my vision becomes.

I jump through the air to let out an attack. Flames trail behind me as I travel faster than ever before. My blade flashes red for a moment as it slices through the High Orc's Neck like butter.

SHINGGG

THUDDDD

[Level Up]

I fly past the beast and land behind it. My flames die down and I deactivate my berserker skill. It's all over so quickly, maybe that was overkill.

"Well, whatever. That was rush...."

I turn around to admire my work.

The headless High Orc's body still stands upright, with its entire lower body frozen solid.

I see Maria 10m away breathing heavily and drinking an MP potion. She locks eyes with me and smiles.

"11 more levels!"

Rei walks over as well.

"You two work well together, I wasn't expecting it to go that well."

I turn to her.

"Thanks? I think?"

She laughed.

The monster's body disappears and drops a large mana crystal along with a large steel sword.

I pick up the sword and use appraisal with two blades in hand.

Active Items:

[High Orc's Sword] +250 Strength

[The Flame Emperor's Sword] Fire Aspect +77% Strength +29% Mental Strength

It looks like my sword's stats have been raised again. The mental strength went from 28% to 29%. Seems like it only levels up with me when it glows... Interesting.

I hand Maria the Orc's sword and grab the mana crystal off the ground.

"Hey, try this one on for size."

She takes the blade and swings it around.

"Looks like you can handle a heavy blade now huh?"

Maria looks up.

“Maybe, this strength boost makes it a lot easier to swing. I haven’t ever felt a sword like this!”

She keeps swinging it around aimlessly with a grin ear to ear. Rei chimes in.

“Well, any further and we’ll get pretty close to the boss room. I’m not sure if it’s a good idea to challenge it today. Maria, how much MP do you have left?”

“Six more potions!”

Rei turns to me.

“What about you Jay?”

“Uhh- I’m not sure, enough though.”

“Okay... well, I think our best use of time and resources today would be farming around the dungeon’s start point. One or two more fights for Maria would be ideal, then I guess as many as you can handle Jay.”

I nod.

“Fine, makes sense. How tough is the boss though?”

“Well, I don’t think you should face it alone. It’s definitely a C Class monster, a dungeon like this being labeled D Class would not slide in the capital. That’s for sure.”

I smirk to myself.

“Good to know. Maybe we can face it together sometime this week?”

She looked at Maria and me curiously.

“Maybe.”

We all turn around and begin to walk back the way we came.

Over the next 4 hours, we circled around the starting portion of the dungeon.

Maria faced off against 2 high orcs and gained another 21 levels. She’s level 211 now. They both dropped mana crystals, but no weapons.

The first fight took 3 MP potions and the second only took 2. Her speed of progression is pretty insane!

I faced off against 5 more High Orcs. When fighting solo I can focus more on utilizing my speed and agility to land easier hits. I gained 5 more levels, I’m at 248 now. The Orcs all dropped mana, and one dropped a mace.

I tried to give all my items to Rei, this is a guild-run dungeon after all... my contract is still valid. She let me keep the mace, apparently, this amount of mana is more than enough to compensate for today. I happily accepted her offer.

We all left the dungeon as the sun began to set. Maria spoke up as we made our way down the mountain back toward town.

“If I train here a few more days I could hit level 250 this week too!”

Rei and I both turn to each other, then look at her. I reply.

“Yeah... you’re right. I thought I leveled up fast, your progression is crazy... like... this has to be some kind of record.”

Rei chimes in.

“Yeah. Honestly, it’d be a good idea for both of you to train together this week. As long as you don’t face the boss, power leveling here would be the most efficient use of your time.”

I turn to Maria.

“I’m down. How about first thing tomorrow morning?”

She nods.

“Let’s do it!”

With that, we walk back into town and report to the guild. There happens to be a class going on in a training room with new student recruits. Maria and Rei both step in to help out.

I leave immediately, helping newbies just isn’t my thing... I’m not interested. Food is much higher on my priority list right now.

The sun fully sets as I head into town and eat a big meal at a local diner. Next stop, the village market!

The streets feel empty compared to the crowded chaos of the capital.

As I near the trade area I hear a familiar voice.

“Hey!!! Is that Jay??”

My old merchant friend recognizes me from a distance.

“It is! How’s business?”

He nods.

“Slow recently.”

I pull out the giant mace from my item box.

“Well, how about this? Can I speed things up for you?”

The old merchant’s eyes went wide as he examines the mace.

“Where’d you get this???”

“Some guild-run dungeon around here. Pretty cool huh?”

“It’s... Incredible. We don’t get many items like this around here. At the auction, I’m sure this could go for over 1 gold, but I-”

I interrupt.

“Name your price. I know it’ll be way under auction pricing. You have to make a profit too, especially around here. The market must be volatile.”

He nods.

“Appreciate it, would you take 45 silver?”

I eye the items in the back of the shop.

“How about 10 MP and 10 HP potions? D Class, if you have that much?”

His eyes lit up.

“Sure thing! Right Away!”

The old merchant rummages through the shop’s storage and comes back with handfuls of potions.

I place them all in my item box and shake the merchant’s hand.

“Pleasure doing business with ya old man! Hope I see you again soon.”

“You too kid! Thank you!”

I wave and leave. I could have definitely gotten a much better price, but I just wanted to do a good thing. I don’t really need the money anyways, after farming Minotaur all week I’m pretty loaded.

With a smile across my face, I make my way back home.

Once inside I take a hot shower and collapse into bed. It’s been a long day.

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I wake up after a good night of rest and crawl out of bed. There are birds chirping outside to the rising sun.

I get dressed and open my door to be immediately greeted by a familiar face.

“You ready Jay??”

Maria is sitting on the upper ledge of the apartment building stairs, resting the new High Orc sword across her shoulders. She’s smiling and staring at me with her piercing blue eyes.

“Well, yeah I am. Good morning to you too I guess...”

She laughs.

We walk down the apartment building steps and into town. After grabbing a quick breakfast we head off to the forest near the south side of town.

I strike up some conversation on the way.

“So, how was that class last night? Any promising new recruits?”

Maria thinks to herself.

"I can't tell, they were all under level 30. It's pretty hard to gauge their potential, but it was fun."

"Hmmm. So they were all just average."

She looks at me with a curious look.

"Average?"

"Yeah. Average. So many hunters in the world just seem to be average... and no one talks about it. It almost demotivates me to progress sometimes. Don't you think it's a bit crazy for Jack or Rei to just sit around in their positions? To not get stronger? So many people just stop getting stronger..."

Maria grins.

"So you want to be the strongest too?"

We lock eyes.

"The strongest?? Hey, I never said that! We aren't superheroes ya know, it's not like we have to save the world. I just want to become the strongest version of myself... and face off against the strongest monsters. So sure, in a roundabout way. Maybe I do want to become the strongest."

"Hmmpf."

"What?"

"Whoever kills the most High Orcs today is the strongest okay?"

Maria blushes but has a serious look on her face. I grin.

"Sure, I'll take you on. Loser has to buy dinner, how about that?"

She nods.

"You're on."

We make our way up the heavily wooded mountain and jump through the portal in the dungeon run shack.

While staying within 2km or so of the dungeon entrance we each farmed High Orcs for the next 6 hours. Every 2 hours we reported back to the dungeon entrance to check up on each other.

Maria faced off against 14 opponents and gained 37 levels in total. 9 MP potions had to be used, but by the end of the day, she could one-shot kill the High Orcs with a solid magic attack. They dropped 14 mana crystals, 1 mace, and 1 sword.

I faced 18 High Orcs, gaining 6 levels in total. They dropped 16 mana crystals, 1 mace, and 2 swords. I used 0 potions.

Maria is level 248, and I'm level 254 now. We meet back at the dungeon start point for the third time.

"Hey Jay! I think we should face the boss room together, these regular monsters are getting boring."

I smirk.

"You think you're ready for it?"

She looks at me with an annoyed stare.

"Do you think YOU'RE ready for it?"

I laugh.

"I wouldn't mind a challenge. Rei will kill us if she finds out though. You know this is no joke right? We'll have to work together flawlessly."

"I know what a life or death battle is! I'm ready, and just won't tell Rei. I can handle myself."

She crosses her arms and looks me insight in the eyes.

"Hey! I'm just making sure we're clear. This isn't going to be a walk in the park. How many potions do you have left?"

Maria sifts through her item box.

"Four more. That should be enough if we're fighting it together."

I nod.

"Great, I have extra if needed."

Maria raises her sword toward the back of the dungeon and stares off into the sky.

"Let's go!"

Her eyes seem different than I remember, she's hungry for battle. Something changed in her recently... In my opinion, it's for the better.

I raise my sword to match her energy, just like our first day hunting together.

"Let's go!"

We walked deep into the dungeon.

Only 3 High Orcs appeared on our way. I let Maria Take them out because she seemed more eager to do so. Each battle was over in an instant. With one touch of her sword, she's able to turn these Orcs into frozen white statues that fracture into pieces with a single swing of her blade. It's pretty crazy to consider it took 7 MP potions and half an hour for her to defeat one of them just yesterday....

Finally, we make it to the floating grey portal. Without hesitation, we both jump through.

The sky is dark orange, almost red... The ground is jet-black, completely flat, and goes off in all directions further than I can see.

Maria and I stand side by side looking deep into the void...

I gulp.

“This is weird....”

“Yeah...”

Cautiously, we both walk further into the boss room. About 3 minutes later a rumbling can be heard in the distance.

I use enemy detection and inspect.

[200m]

[Lv. 258]

[Lv. 259]

[Lv. 259]

[Lv. 260]

[Lv. 260]

[500m]

[Lv. 295]

[1000m]

[Lv. 334]

My eyes open wide and I yell to Maria.

“We have company! There’s a pack of 5 coming our way, and more behind them.”

Maria nods and we both charge forward to meet the enemies. 30 seconds later we are face to face with 5 dark red glowing High Orcs. 3 of them are swinging a mace above their heads and 2 are handling swords.

I burst into flames and activate berserker while veering off to the right towards the two sword-wielding Orcs.

Maria veers off to the left creating dense Ice chunks everywhere she steps to take care of the other 3.

I’m able to bob and weave my way through the angry monsters with my speed and agility. They’re no better than the normal mobs outside the boss room. Moments later the two sword users are nothing but ash on the ground, while the mace users shatter into a thousand tiny ice fragments behind us.

We look back at our work and grin while locking eyes for a fraction of a second... Then we hear an ear-piercing roar in the distance....

A behemoth approaches us from the horizon and I use my inspect skill again along with appraisal.

[Lv. 295]

Active Items:

[Steel Mace] +300 Strength

[Steel Sword] +300 Strength

[Steel Helmet] +300 Defense

[Steel Chestplate] +300 Defense

[Steel Wristguards] +200 Defense

[Steel Boots] +100 Speed +100 Agility

Active Skills:

[Berserker]

[Swordsmanship]

“This one might put up a decent fight.”

A massive High Orc appears in front of us and draws its huge sword.

The beast stands around 5m tall and has much darker skin than the smaller Orcs we just defeated. Its armor is shining silver. It looks very thick and durable.

A dark red aura surrounds its body, indicating its berserker is active.

Maria and I dart around it shooting off in opposite directions. She takes the left side, and I take the right. While igniting my flames and activating my own berserker skill I look down at my sword... since yesterday it hasn't glowed red one time. It still remains black.

The massive monster runs towards us, but it's much more fixated on me after my display of flames.

The High Orc is less than 50m away, Maria takes advantage of its hyper fixation and circles around behind it. I ready my sword and wait for her to make a move.

Moments later I hear Maria's battle cry and a bright blue light glows behind the charging monster. A fast-moving sheet of ice creeps up behind its feet and stops it in its tracks 10m away from me.

I use this time to launch my own attack. I dart in and land a fiery slash across the beast's abdomen right under the heavy metal chest plate. I plunder some MP and leave as much fire residue behind as possible.

It lets out a roar as I quickly jump out of the way of its own oncoming sword.

CRACKKK

CRACKKK

I turn around to see the High Orc break free from its Ice shoes and begin to charge after me.

The gash I felt on its frontside is visible, but it doesn't seem to be too hurt from it.

SHINGGGG

From behind, Maria attacks the monster's backside leaving her own ice residue. It doesn't slow the Orc down, but damage is damage.... can't complain.

Maria and I weave around in circles to create some distance between us and the boss. The power level gap is about the same as when Maria faced off against an Orc for the first time. It won't be easy, but with enough technique and patience... we can beat this thing sooner or later. I yell to Maria.

"Hey! Make Ice walls! Your strategy from yesterday will work!"

She looks over to me wiping sweat off her forehead and drinking an MP potion.

"I'll need more mana!"

I reply.

"We have the speed advantage here! Follow me, I'll give you some potions!"

I turn and run.

Maria follows.

We run further into the dungeon away from the beast.

"Here take these."

I take out a handful of MP potions, it's 7 in total. She puts them in her item box.

"Thanks. Looks like I'll have to get creative here. You're right, Ice walls it is."

We nod and run back in toward the beast. It keeps charging at us like an angry bull. The games begin.

Maria charges at the High Orc head-on, while I veer off to its right side. She glows bright blue attracting its attention and making a massive Ice barrier.

BOOM

The strategy still works perfectly, even with a boss like this. I grin and run into the massive cloud of ice and snow using enemy detection to locate the beast's exact location.

SHINGGG

As I leave my fiery gash in its lower back, my eyes open wide as I feel the presence of another enemy way too close for comfort...

Inspect and enemy detection read out these numbers.

[10m]

[Lv.295]

[100m]

[Lv. 334]

I dart away from the beast to see Maria fly out of the ice cloud on the other side. I yell to her.

“THERE’S ANOTHER ONE!”

I scan the area furiously using enemy detection, appraisal and inspect all at once in every direction.

I can’t find it... That other presence just vanished... All I can’t detect now is the High Orc in front of us...

The beast roars and charges at Maria again. She looks at me in confusion, then goes back into battle mode to face the murderous behemoth.

I shake my head and run at it as well. It must be further than I imagined... Or.... Well, I’m not sure what I just imagined...

Maria creates another Ice wall and we land a dual attack on the High Orc again. When we fly out from opposite sides of the ice cloud the snow dissipates. The Orc roars and faces us with its bloodshot eyes. Our slashes are slowly chipping away at its health, but this is definitely going to take a while.

It charges and Maria creates another wall of Ice. The beast blows the Ice barrier into a million pieces and I run straight toward it.

I activate inspect and enemy detection.

My heart skips a beat...

[1m]

[Lv. 334]

My vision goes black...

I ignite into flames and activate body hardening around all my vital areas.

Still, I can’t see a thing...

I use appraisal.

Active Items:

[High Orc Commander’s Sword] +350 Strength

[High Orc Commander’s Armor Set] +500 Defense

[High Orc Commander’s Ring] +50% Mental Strength

Active Skills:

[Dungeon Walker]

[Intimidation]

“What... is happening...?”

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The darkness around me suddenly dissipated. I can see waves of black and purple energy dissolving all around me to reveal the dungeon’s orange sky again.

I grip my sword tight and keep all of my skills active while staring down the odd sight before me.

This is a completely different section of the boss room. I can sense the presence of Maria and the High Orc we were just fighting almost 200m away now...

"But how..?"

The moment I spoke out loud a portal appeared about 10m in front of me. It's that same black and purple energy form before.... I grit my teeth and point my sword at it as an ominous being walks out slowly.

It's a humanoid creature holding a long silver sword and wearing lightweight armor that looks very similar to the High Orc's. The only issue here is... this thing doesn't look like the beasts in this dungeon at all. How could it be their Commander??

The monster in front of me is about 2.5m tall with dark brown skin and jet-black tattoo-like markings across its arms and chest. Horns protrude from its forehead on either side about 20cm, they shine ruby red and wrap around its skull pointing backward.

The Commander looks at me with no emotion on its face. I can see small black pupils glaring at me, but the rest of its eyes are completely white...

Suddenly the monster's pupils shrink and I feel a wave of invisible energy hit me.

Sweat runs down the side of my face and the monster begins to walk around me in circles very slowly.

I'm frozen with fear... My legs won't move the way my mind tells them to. What is this???

SHINGGGG

The Commander gracefully draws its sword and slashes me across the chest. Blood spurts everywhere and I take a huge deep breath in as the pain releases me from this trance.

I jump backward regenerating my wound and igniting my body into flames. My status reads 855/1275 HP and 1120/1275 MP.

The monster slowly circles around looking at me with its calm white eyes. Then a wave of fear hits me again...

I'm frozen.

It's like prey caught in the gaze of a far superior predator. All the possibilities and strategies of battle are rushing through my head, but for some reason, my body won't react. It's like I'm stunned.. completely helpless until the spell is released.

It charges forward.

SHINGGGG

Again, the sword cuts deep into my abdomen. Blood pours out and I'm released from the curse.

I jump backward regenerating while coughing up blood. I glare at the beast while checking my status again... it reads 435/1275 HP and 1110/1275 MP.

I tightly grip my blade and start to run at it, but am stopped dead in my tracks moments later by a wave of fear.

SHINGGGG

A clean shot to my neck. My eyes open wide as I fall to my knees. The commander watches over me calmly.

Blood pours out as I desperately regenerate and grab an HP potion from my item storage. My status reads out 15/1275 HP and 1090/1275 MP moments before I chug my healing potion....

This must be his skill... Intimidation...

I stand to my feet just to be hit with another wave.

SHINGGGG

Its sword plunges straight through my stomach and I gasp for breath as blood flows out of my mouth.

Again, I jump back and regenerate to the best of my ability.

Another wave...

SHINGGGG

Another wave...

SHINGGGG

I'm trapped in its loop of spells over and over. I struggle to get to my feet while drinking another HP potion. It wants to defeat me mind and body at this point... This is torture.

I yell out in pain. Frustration and fear of my own come over me, these feelings aren't forced by its intimidation. This is raw emotion that I haven't felt in a while.

I'm facing an opponent, and I have no way to win...

My body is becoming weak. There are only so many HP potions and regenerations I can handle. My endurance and fatigue can't withstand being on the brink of death too many more times.

I let out a yell as I stare down at the emotionless beast in front of me. I activate berserker and run at it full force.

Then... I'm hit by its intimidation wave once again.

SHINGGGG

Another slash across the torso forces me back down to the ground. I jump away the moment I regain mobility and regenerate.

I let out another yell and turn berserker back on. Waves of fear, fatigue, frustration, and anger are all compounded every time I'm hit with intimidation.

SHINGGGG

It lands another bloody slash across my chest...

I can't even feel the pain anymore, the only thing on my mind is killing this monster... By any means necessary. I don't even bother regenerating. I just need to land a hit for my own sanity.

I turn and run after the creature while glowing dark red covered in flames and screaming with rage. My blade begins to glow red with me.

A devious grin appears across my face as I feel power seep into my veins. My vision tunnels just like it did before and the dark red aura of my berserker skill begins to mix with the ego of my sword erupting into even darker red flames.

The Commander turns, and I see its pupils shrink...

I'm hit with a wave of intimidation, but this time I break through. With a battle cry, I nullify its mental attack and continue charging straight toward it.

The Commander's face finally changes. The monster's eyes open wide, then it grins....

I jump in the air swinging my blade directly at the monster's neck. My sword begins to glow brighter and brighter the closer I get.

I let out another yell as I swing my sword at its unguarded neck.

SHINGGGGG

I make contact...

The blade hits the Commander's neck and I see the glint of red blood.

Then dark purple and black swirls of energy form all around us.

WHOOOSH

The Commander is gone...

My sword slices through the open air.

Immediately, I use enemy detection while planting my right foot and turning around.

"This must be its other skill, Dungeon Walker...It's some kind of movement magic."

Another black and purple portal appears 10m away from me and the Commander steps out pointing its sword straight ahead. There's a small scratch on its neck dripping blood.

That's all I needed for a boost of spirit.

"I'm back in this thing. Bring it on!"

I point my sword at the monster as well declaring the start of our real match. With my flames burning hot and my sword glowing red we both charge at each other.

CLANGGGG

Our swords clash and we both grin at each other with malicious intent. Two monsters begin a battle to the death.

I jump back and it does the same. We both assessed each other's physical strength and abilities.

Our speed and agility is very similar due to my natural boost and boots. Our strength is also very similar as well... That is, it's similar when I'm using berserker. All that leaves is defense and Mental Strength. Its armor is much better than mine... It most likely has me beat in defense stats, but I have a ton more HP potions so it shouldn't matter that much.

It'll all come down to a battle of abilities.

We stare each other down again from about 10m away. Then, we both charge.

SHINGGGG

The moment I step forward it does too, but into a portal of darkness appearing less than a meter behind me stabbing a blade right through my back.

I cough up blood as the monster dodges my counter-swing and runs back to a safe position. While regenerating I chug an HP potion and keep my eyes locked on the savage.

“Didn’t see that one coming.”

It grins and grunts while charging at me again. I return the favor.

Every 10 seconds or so I’m hit with a wave of intimidation. It’s getting easier and easier to fend them off. My theory is I’m getting more focused on battle, and my sword’s ego combined with my own makes us stronger than before. My mind cannot be controlled.

SHINGGGG

I’m hit with another blade in the center of my back and fall to my knees.

My movements, on the other hand, It’s definitely controlling those right now.

I activate enemy detection and regenerate while facing the beast again.

“Focus...”

We charge at each other. I’m fully prepared for an attack from the rear this time. It won’t fool me again.

CLANGGG

I turn at the last moment and block the Commander’s blade. It takes a step back and disappears into another portal. My eyes scanned the entire dungeon around me... It’s nowhere in sight... berserker is heightening my senses and enemy detection is scanning the area constantly for any sign of life.

Seconds later I feel a sharp pain from behind in my lower thigh. It hit me again. The moment I sensed it and turned to counter it was already too late. I’m milliseconds off... Just a little more speed... and I could have blocked it. I collapse to the ground. The monster towers over me for a moment while pulling out the blade and jumping backward.

I regenerate, drink an MP and HP potion, then stand to my feet.

I need to be a little faster... somehow...

Again, it disappears into thin air and appears seconds later to slash the back of my legs. It’s learning... how to out-think me more and more.

Every new attack is hitting non-vital areas, It’s just wearing me out. Sometimes I can guess where it will attack and get a lucky block in, but other times it comes out of nowhere and leaves a deep gash. This commander loves to play with its prey... My legs, arms, torso, back, and even feet are getting slashed to pieces.

Over and over... it goes on for over 5 minutes straight as I continue to regenerate and attempt to block its attacks. I drink another 3 HP potions and 1 MP.

My berserker skill, flames, and enemy detection are still active. My blade keeps glowing brighter and brighter, but it's useless if I can't even land a hit.

I'm exhausted, fatigued, frustrated, and scared... but for some reason... Excitement still flows through my veins. Even in a time like this, I'm still grasping onto a glimmer of hope and enjoying the rush of battle.

Each time the Commander appears I get another try at increasing my reaction speed. I'm almost there, it's just outpacing me by fractions of a second every time...

The monster disappears into its dark cloud again and I activate enemy detection.

The boss room goes completely silent.

All of a sudden, I feel a large presence in the distance fade away, then hear a familiar ringing sound in my head...

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

"I leveled up 12 times... Did Maria beat the boss? Wait... if that was the dungeon boss, then what is-?"

CLANGGGG

At the last moment, I sense a sword appear behind me and turn to block it. A perfect clash, I block it on instinct alone this time.

I meet the gaze of a surprised Commander, It thought that was a surefire hit.

I grin.

Normal mobs in dungeons don't share exp with all the hunters in a boss room unless an individual does a majority of the damage. The perk of equal exp sharing without damage regulations only applies to the boss itself. That means this commander is definitely not the boss. It shouldn't even be here at all... This is an entity from another dungeon that must have taken control... Should I even call it a High Orc Commander anymore?

It's more like... A Demon.

Chapter 75

The Demon looks me in the eyes as our swords clash.

I grit my teeth and watch the sparks fly. I use plunderer while releasing a wave of flames through my blade toward the monster. It lets out a wave of intense intimidation as we test each other's limits.

My flames glow hot illuminating the area around us. I burst into a massive ball of fire pushing the monster backward while burning its chest and arms. It lets out a roar and disappears into a dark portal behind it.

I smirk.

This is the first time during our battle I've had the upper hand.

I sense a presence behind me and swiftly turn to block the incoming blade. We lock eyes again as sparks fly. I use its own mana against it. While refreshing my own MP up to full, I release another wave of flames and lunge forward.

It gets slightly burned but disappears into a dark portal once again.

We clash blades over and over for another full minute. I manage to land minor burns from my flames but our swordsmanship, strength, and speed are completely equal. One wrong move for either of us and the other will be critically injured.

Every time the demon appears I block and attempt a counter, but it's too crafty... The moment my blade touches its skin, it disappears into a void of darkness.

I scan the area around me and wait.... It's time to turn it up a notch. I'm going to try something different this time.

I sense a blade appear behind me, but purposefully don't turn around to block it. The sharp metal sword slices deep into my back and out through my stomach on the other side. I would have definitely darted away or blocked in any normal circumstance, but this is part of my plan...

"Body Hardening"

Black crystals form around the exit and entrance wounds. I feel the monster attempt to pull its sword free, but it's stuck inside me.

I grin and twist my body while swinging my sword at the Demon's neck. Its eyes open wide with fear.

SHINGGG

It's a hit! A deep fiery gash appears on the monster's throat and it shrieks while falling backward into a black portal.

I rip out its sword from my stomach and fall to my knees... blood gushes out as my vision starts to fade. I regenerate and struggle to grab one more HP potion. While shaking my head and chugging the potion I slowly stand to my feet regaining full consciousness.

A hand appears from the void and grabs the bloody sword off the ground while I regain my strength.

Seconds later, it appears from a portal behind me.

"This is it...."

I stare down at my bright red glowing sword and concentrate every last bit of MP I can into the blade. Berserker is active, and my body is covered in dark red flames. With a yell, I spin my body toward the danger and go in for the kill.

"ARHHHHH!"

I feel its blade sink into my stomach as I turn... but I pierce its chest as well.

My sword glows brightly as it releases all my flames deep into the Demon's heart. I suck it dry of mana using plunderer while burning its body to a crisp.

Both of us let out a final battle cry as it attempts to lift its blade. Again, I use body hardening to stop it in its tracks while continuing to plunge my fiery blade deeper and deeper.

A portal appears behind the monster, but It's much more transparent than before. The dark purple magic is beginning to fade. It can't escape.

Moments later... our battle is finally over.

I fall to my knees with exhaustion as the charred body of the demon falls to the ground in front of me.

[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]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Dungeon Walker

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Intimidation

[YES][NO]

I choose yes on both, and open my status.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 290

Hp: 375/1455

Mp: 890/1455

Strength: 702 [+597][+351]

Speed: 836 [+502]

Agility: 865

Defense: 626 [+250][-157]

Mental Strength: 702 [+140][+288]

Skills:

Absorption

Swordsmanship

Combat Magic [Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection

Body Hardening[Special Grade]

Self Regeneration

Spacial Magic[Item Storage]

Plunderer

Telekinesis

Appraisal[Special Grade]

Conceal

Dungeon Walker

Intimidation

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][+85% Strength][+41% Mental Strength]

Bufs:

[+50% Strength]

[Increased Endurance/Alertness]

Debuffs:

[-25% Defense]

With a grin, I collapse forward onto the corpse of the demon. A white light appears before the body has time to disappear.

I'm transported back to the dungeon's starting point.

"Jayyyy? Hello?? Can you hear me?"

I open my eyes to see Maria standing over me with a concerned look on her face. It turns into a smile as I sit up.

"You disappeared all of a sudden!! Where'd you even go?? I had to fight the boss all by myself! I was... worried."

She looks down at me.

I sift through my item box to find another HP potion.

"Well, it seems there was another boss in that room. I took care of it.... Barely."

She watches me curiously as I drink my potion and sigh with relief while standing to my feet. There's no point in telling her what happened right now, I'll keep the details to myself.

"Hmmpf, I'm glad you're okay Jay. Anyways, I had a fun time beating that boss. It took me only 5 MP potions. I went up a ton of levels too!"

I grin.

"Yeah. I had a good time too, but I'm definitely done for the day... Let's get out of here."

She nods.

We leave the dungeon and start making our way down the mountain. I'm breathing heavily as we walk, my body is really exhausted.

Half an hour later we make it back to the guild. Rei and Jack are both standing around talking with new guild recruits in a training room. We decide to pop in and say hi to report our results in training today.

"We're back!!!"

Maria jumps in the room and I follow close behind. Jack walks over to us.

"How'd it go? Have any good loot for us?"

We emptied our item boxes to dump out a pile of mana crystals and a few weapons onto the floor.

Jack turns around.

"Hey! Come take a look at these Arnold."

One of the new recruits walks over and starts touching the swords. His eyes open wide and he looks up at us through thick-framed glasses.

"These are borderline C-Class swords..."

Jack grins, then looks at Maria and me.

"Good work! I assume that means you two managed to surpass level 250 today? I've already sent out both of your applications either way."

I nod. Maria smiles wide.

"Yep! I'm level 264 now!"

Rei does a double take, then leans in.

"You two didn't fight the boss did you...?"

Maria covered her mouth with her hands and blushes turning to me.

I nod while grinning. I guess it would have come out sooner or later.

"Yeah, we did."

Jack and Rei look at each other, then back at us. They look concerned, but proud at the same time... Rei speaks up.

"Well, as long as you can handle it. I'm impressed. That High Orc Commander is a tough one, that beast is huge. I guess you two don't need me for training anymore!"

Maria nods while I think to myself.

Her words confirmed my suspicions from earlier. My opponent wasn't the regular boss... It was an outsider... but how?

I look up.

"Are there any more dungeons like that around here?"

Jack laughs.

"I'm afraid not. That's our only loophole dungeon. Usually, it takes months to master that one... You two have some scary progress speed. You'll have to wait until you have C Class clearance to dive into any stronger dungeons. Sorry."

"Ahhh, well okay."

I look at the ground and a wave of fatigue hits me as my stomach gurgles. I'm hungry, tired, and need some alone time to think about what happened today....

"In that case... I'll be heading out. See ya."

I turn to leave and Maria speaks up.

"Want to train again tomorrow?"

I nod.

"Sure, you know where to find me."

She chuckles as I wave goodbye to everyone and walk out the door.

Chapter 76

On my way home I grab a bite to eat and stroll around Alpine Park for a while to think about the monster I just faced.

It wasn't the dungeon boss, that's for sure. My only guess is it was a random mutant spawn, or has something to do with this skill... "Dungeon Walker". I'm leaning toward the latter.

As I ponder, I come across the old starter dungeon portal. This is the goblin dungeon where I started my journey as a hunter. I grin and jump through.

The fresh air, green grass, and blue skies are pretty nostalgic. I walk into the dungeon and admire the beautiful view around me. After 10 minutes or so of wandering, a goblin appears. I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 4]

Active Items:

[Goblin Dagger] +5 Strength

Active Skills:

[NONE]

I laugh and watch the mini green man run toward me with determination across its face.

This is the perfect time for me to test out my new skills.

"Intimidation."

The goblin stops in its tracks and its eyes roll back into its head. Its little green knees buckle and it falls to the dungeon floor. I slowly walk around the creature examining it, then turn the monster into a pile of ash moments later.

I guess a stronger opponent would have been a better use of the skill... but at least I've learned how it to use it properly for the future.

"Now... it's time for Dungeon Walker."

I stare forward and concentrate. Instantly, a black and purple swirling portal appears in front of me. I slowly step inside.

Everything's dark.... Just like when that demon transported me before.

I concentrate harder. All of a sudden, I start to visualize all kinds of familiar places in my mind.

"These are... Other dungeons...."

In my mind's eye, I can see the distinct landscapes of every dungeon I've ever been to. It's incredible, but a bit overwhelming at the same time. There are so many pathways connecting every step I've ever taken inside every dungeon... it's like a massive map.

I gulp.

Then visualize the Minotaur dungeon from the capital. It's crystal clear in my mind.

I focus.

Then step through...

My eyes open wide as I take in the landscape of the Minotaur dungeon all around me.

"I can teleport... to any dungeon I've ever stepped foot in."

I check my status and am very surprised to see my MP read 955/1455. One jump took over 1/3 of my mana...

While concentrating again, a dark swirling portal appears in front of me. I step inside and visualize a dungeon nearby, the slime dungeon.

Just like that, I step out into the grassy plane and check my status, it reads 865/1455 MP.

"Interesting... closer jumps take much less MP."

I visualize the area 50m in front of me, then create a portal to jump through. Moments later I step out on the other side to check my status, it reads 855/1455 MP.

I grin.

Looks like this new skill is all figured out. It'll be even more useful than I imagined. This saves a ton of time for traveling. Plus, this finally explains where that demon came from... well, at least it explains how it got to another dungeon in the first place.

I use Dungeon Walker to teleport back to the Alpine Dungeon and walk out with a satisfied smile across my face. It's been a successful day. I walk home, shower, and sleep like a rock.

The next morning I wake up fully refreshed and step out the door.

“Morning Jay!! You ready??”

I smile at Maria.

“Sure am, let’s go!”

This began our hunting extravaganza.

Over the next week, we defeated the High Orc Dungeon over a dozen times.

In total, we took down 198 High Orcs with levels ranging from 240-260. They dropped 7 Maces and 11 Swords, plus tons of mana crystals. These were all added to the guild’s training supplies.

We took down the real High Orc Commander boss 21 times. It’s level ranged from 285-295. One time, it dropped an “Orc Commander’s Ring”, it’s the same one that demon was wearing... We gave it to the guild, as per our contract. For all 21 battles, that demon was nowhere in sight. That solidifies my theory, it was 100% from another dungeon.

We had a good time. Although beating the same dungeon boss got boring after a day or two, I learned to fight in tandem with Maria pretty well. We focused more on working together and reading each other’s movements, using the boss as our punching bag. The only skills I used with her were berserker, flame combat magic, and swordsmanship. I guess I trust her, but there still hasn’t been a good time to let her know about my other skills... maybe I won’t ever have to.

By the end of the week, Maria and I both reached level 297. It seems we can’t level up any higher in this dungeon.

[Saturday Morning]

I roll out of bed with a yawn and step out the door before the sun even rises. We all agreed to meet at the guild first thing in the morning to get on the train to the capital together.

“Morning Jay!! You ready??”

“Morning Maria. Yep! I’m as ready as I’ll ever be, how about you?”

She smiles.

“Oh I’m so ready!”

We make our way over to the guild.

Once we walk through the front doors I see Jack and Rei standing in the lobby waiting.

“Sorry if we made all of you wait too long.”

Jack smiles.

“No problem at all, we’ll be right on time for the train. Got everything you need?”

I check my item box and feel my pockets, then nod. Maria does the same. Jack speaks.

“Well, great. Let’s head out!”

We all followed in agreement. I could have easily slept in, teleporting to the capital would have been a piece of cake. It would just be kind of hard to explain...

Screeech

“All aboard!”

We board the train and pile into the private guild room. Maria and I sit on one side while Jack and Rei sit on the other. I speak up as the train starts to move.

“So, Rei. What’s this exam really going to be like anyways? Everything I’ve tried to read about it seems to make me even more confused... It seems like this whole test is a mystery.”

She nods.

“Well, you’re right. It is a bit of a mystery. Every time the exam is taken, the Hunters Association mixes things up. Back when I took the test we all had to defeat a series of private Hunter Association-run dungeons in a specific time frame. Sometimes solo, and sometimes with teammates. There were representatives watching us every step of the way. I’ve heard from others that past exams were totally different.”

Maria and I look at each other, then back at Rei.

“So we’ll be able to work as a team?”

“Exactly. It’d be in your best interest to work together. Other guilds have definitely created teams to succeed in the exams, entering as a small guild like us has its disadvantages. You too are pretty over-leveled though. The exam may be hard, but I know you’re up for the challenge.”

I nod.

“What kind of dungeons did you face?”

Rei grins and shakes her head.

“It doesn’t matter. As I said before, It’s different every time. There’s no point in thinking about it until the test actually starts. It’s impossible to prepare, you just have to be a competent hunter and take on the challenge in front of you!”

Maria and I nod.

“Well, thanks. Great motivational speech.”

I look out the window and watch the buildings fly by. I didn’t mean for my response to come out that sarcastic.

Rei chuckles.

“You’re welcome.”

The train continues to bring us closer and closer to the capital. I’m starting to shake with excitement.

Today is the day of the C Class Exams.

Chapter 77

Screeeeech

The train finally makes it to the capital as the sun rises.

We all walk out onto the platform and take in the view of a busy market. It looks like everyone's in high spirits today.

I follow Jack through the market as the hunters and merchants go about their daily business dealings. We make our way toward the Hunters Association's main headquarters in the city.

Once we arrive in the general vicinity, large crowds start forming. Jack spoke up with a grin.

"Looks like we're in the right place!"

There's a slow line that has formed entering the main building, we got in and stood patiently. There are all kinds of people waiting beside us. Rei starts pointing at some of them and explaining a few things.

"See those 4 there? It looks like they're a group of 3 hunters and a guild master, pretty similar to us. Groups like this will be the most common."

I use inspect.

[Lv. 361]

[Lv. 254]

[Lv. 252]

[Lv. 251]

The level 361 is an old man with short grey hair, light skin, and dressed in a formal suit.

The other 3 seem to be your average-looking hunters, with decent gear. It's your run-of-the-mill steel swords and steel armor adding 200+ or so stats for each stat category. Some of it is battle worn, but it does the trick. They're definitely from a small-town guild like us.

Rei points at another group.

"See them over there? It seems that group of 5 is from the Hunters Association. You can tell by their gear."

I use inspect.

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

They're all exactly level 250.... And Rei is right. Their armor is all lightweight steel and exactly the same style with dark bodysuits underneath. That's the Association for you, predictable and organized.

Rei points behind us as a group of 7 arrives. The crowd moves out of the way to let them get in line behind us. She whispers to us in a low voice.

"It seems a party from the big 3 has arrived. These guys are no joke, one of the Viridian Guild teams is here."

I use inspect.

[Lv. 544]

[Lv. 269]

[Lv. 267]

[Lv. 266]

[Lv. 266]

[Lv. 265]

[Lv. 263]

This team is being lead by a B Class hunter... They are no joke...

All of their gear looks brand new. There are two big tanks and 4 smaller hunters with them that look like some kind of sword or combat types, but none have their weapons drawn. They're all wearing matching dark green raid suits underneath their shining armor. Some of it is % based, other pieces are 300+ stat boost. This is some serious gear, definitely funded by a top guild.

As we move further and further up the line Rei pointed to one last team of 3.

"Hmm, looks like there's a wild card team. Look, It speaks for itself."

I use inspect.

[Lv. 288]

[Lv. 271]

[Lv. 259]

I examine the 3 massive men Rei pointed out. They were all tattooed head to toe, and wore unusual gear. One wore a heavy steel chest plate with 500+ defense, his only skill is body hardening. He must be the tank. Another man had a dark cloak on with a 50% speed buff. I've never seen his skill before, but its self-explanatory "Extreme Speed". He must be some kind of rogue. The last teammate was just a swordsman, but he wore an assortment of rings... the tattoo on his right hand had a dark snake with red eyes.

Rei spoke up again as we neared the door.

"They're an independent party. You have to apply through the Hunters Association directly if you're not guild associated. Pretty rare, but not impossible to see. They

aren't with a guild master, we can assume they're self-submissions. Occasionally a group of nobles will apply as an independent party as well, we haven't seen any of them yet though. Looks like this exam will be an interesting one!"

I nod slowly.

"Looks like it."

We enter through the front door.

There's a long table in front of us with two middle-aged men in black suits standing in front of it. The one on the left has short brown hair, blue eyes, and a clean-shaven face. He spoke up.

"Guild Name?"

Jack steps forward.

"We're from the Pace Guild. Our two applicants are Jay Soju and Maria Cortez."

The man nods and sifts through a notepad.

"May I see your ID's and status screens?"

Jack nods and turns to us.

I activate conceal as I reach into my item box to take out my Hunter's ID. Maria takes hers out as well, and we both hand over our cards to the man.

He examines both of them as I open my status and begin to edit it furiously. Moments later he hands us our cards back and we both show him our blue screens.

I left everything exactly the same except for my skill section. I deleted everything except for Swordsmanship and my Fire Combat Magic.

His eyes still lit up and he laughed.

"Level 297? Nice! There are a couple of guilds over-leveling this time around. I guess it's just a trend recently. Well, looks like you two are in the clear. Go see Rodrigo to get fully checked in."

He points to a man sitting at the long table behind him in the center of the lobby.

Jack and Rei's body language both change. They seem on edge... We walk over to the table and the man behind it stands up to greet us with a deep voice.

"Welcome."

As he stands, I start to understand why Rei and Jack were acting so off...

This man is powerful. I sense an unusual, yet familiar presence emanating off of him.

He's over 190cm tall, with olive skin, long jet-black hair, and a short sharp beard. His eyes are too light.... They're almost white. All of his fingers are covered in gold rings with assorted gemstones, and to top it off... His suit is bright red with black accents.

I use inspect, and my jaw drops.

[Lv. 1391]

He speaks.

“My name is Rodrigo. I’m the A-Class Hunter on special order from the Hunters Association. I will be in charge of your exam today.”

I gulp.

“Nice- Nice to meet you.”

He smiles.

“Please, may I see both of your left hands.”

Maria and I do as he says.

He hovers his hands above ours and I see up his sleeve for a split second. I make out a solid black tattoo in a thick line that runs all the way up his left arm. A bright light flashes for a moment, then it fades out.

I look down at my wrist to see a thin silver bracelet. Maria has one too.

He nods.

“These will be necessary for the first part of your exam. It’s been a pleasure meeting you. Hopefully, we meet again.”

He gestures to the door on our left and all 4 of us leave without saying a word. Once we’re through and begin to walk down a narrow hallway, we all let out sighs of relief. Rei speaks up.

“That was.... something all right.... I wasn’t expecting to meet an A Class today, that was my first time.”

Jack looks over at her.

“Mine too. They must be testing out something new with this exam to ask an A-Class to make the journey out to the Vice region.”

I step in.

“So... That’s an A-Class...”

Maria grins.

“He was so cool!!!!”

We all stare at her blankly for a second, then laugh together while continuing to walk through a hallway. We approach a door with 2 more men in black suits. There are large wooden crates lining the walls beside them. One of them speaks up.

“Show us your wrists.”

Maria and I look at each other, then raise our left hands.

He nods.

“All right, take off your item boxes.”

I look at him with confusion.

He replies.

“Outside healing items will not be permitted in the exam. Only the gear on your body and in your hands may enter this room. Necessary HP and MP potions will be provided by the Hunters Association.”

We nod.

I reach into my item box and pull out my sword. I don't really have much else in my item box, all my money and interesting items are in my item storage anyways. Nobody has to know about that...

We hand our item boxes to Jack. He smiles.

“They're in safe hands.”

The guard nods as we turn back towards him. He reaches into a crate and grabs two new item boxes.

“Take these. They're full with 5 HP and 5 MP potions each. Use them wisely.”

We accept the items and put them on. He speaks up again.

“Only you two are allowed inside.”

Jack nods.

“All right, good luck you two! It's a private event, we'll be waiting on the outside to hear the good news.”

Rei speaks up as well.

“Best of luck, even though you don't need it!”

With a smile and a wave, they both turn to leave. We walk through the next set of doors into a wide-open room.

The hum of mana shields is loud, and there are white walls all around us. The room is about 50m long and 30m wide. It has a small stage and podium at the back with no one behind it. Hunters are everywhere... There are over 200 in this crowded space already, and more are piling in.

We walk further into the room together. The exam is about to begin.

Chapter 78

We walk into the large white-walled room.

Hunters of all kinds are standing around talking within their guilds. I can see a massive group from the Hunters Association with well over 50 people in identical outfits. We walk by them closer to the stage, then I hear my name being called out.

“Jay??? Is that you?”

I turn to see a familiar face pop out from behind two large tanks. A short woman with bright green eyes and matching florescent green hair runs toward me. She's wearing the dark-colored Hunters Association raid suit and minimal armor. I stare forward in disbelief.

"Abby?!"

She jumps up in the air smiling.

"Who would have thought?? I haven't seen you in a while... I can't believe you're already level 250... and... You too??"

Abby points at Maria.

She smiles hesitantly and nods, then Abby continues to talk.

"It's a pretty big turnout today. I heard they made a last-second change to the exam because of the recent surge in the city. Exciting isn't it?!"

She looked at me wide-eyed.

I smiled and opened my mouth to reply.

Then a tall blond swordsman and a thin black-haired mage appear behind Abby. They're both very light-skinned and have serious looks on their faces.

"Hey, Abby! This is our competition you know. Don't tell them all our secrets..."

Abby rolls her eyes playfully.

"Jay, these are my teammates for the first part of the exam. Meet Connor and Dasha. We may be competing later on, but it can't hurt to be friendly now."

She grins and looks at us. The swordsman and mage scoff, then turn around. Connor speaks up.

"The exam is about to begin, finish up with your little friends and come join us when you're ready."

They turn and leave, Abby stays.

"I think they're just nervous about making a good impression and passing the exam, usually they're pretty nice people. Don't mind them!!"

I nod.

"Looks like everyone is on edge around here."

We look around as more people enter the crowded room. Hunters are fidgeting and arguing all around us. It's definitely a rather tense environment.

Abby speaks.

"Well, anyways. I hope we meet again during the event. Possibly as allies... not enemies. See ya Jay! Oh- and Nice seeing you again Maria!"

Just like that, she hops away into the crowd of Hunters Association minions. I kind of wanted to talk longer and ask her a few things... but I guess that's not happening.

Maria finally talks.

"You know Abby well?"

"I- uhh, Yeah I guess. We used to train together. That is until I joined the Pace guild and took leveling seriously... I still don't know much about her. She seems nice enough though."

Maria nods.

We continue to weave our way through the crowd closer to the podium.

Once we finally got within 5m or so a commotion arose. Two men from different parties were yelling at each other loudly. They both seem to be their party leaders. One is a tall muscular man with short black hair, heavy silver armor, and a long sword. The other is a tall thin man with long brown hair and two black daggers.

The swordsman's voice is loud and deep. He seems to be yelling at the dagger user for taking to one of the female mages on his team.

After 3 or 4 verbal exchanges back and forth they begin full-blown yelling at each the for no reason... Everyone backs up and starts forming a small circle as they grit their teeth and stare each other down.

The brown-haired man starts to glow light grey and gets into a half-squatting stance with his daggers held in attack mode by his side. The swordsman begins to glow light green as he points his long silver blade at the man in front of him and yells out.

"You really want this? I'll kill ya before this exam even starts!"

The dagger user grins.

"Bring it on tough guy!"

They both yell and run toward each other with their weapons drawn.

I can't believe it...

They're really starting a fight in here...

CLICK

A bright light flashes from the back of the room as the door opens. I'm blinded for a fraction of a second.

Once the light fades I'm hit with a wave of shock, then can't help grinning with excitement.

The dagger user and the swordsman have stopped dead in their tracks. Both of them have their weapons less than a meter away from each other's necks. The only thing stopping them is... Rodrigo.

The tall olive-skinned man is standing in between their blades stopping both of them with a single index finger on each hand. He's staring straight ahead with a blank look on his face.

“That’s enough.”

Instantly, the two men drop their blades and bow their heads.

Rodrigo nods and slowly walks through the crowd toward the podium.

It’s silent. The only thing making noise are the footsteps of our exam master’s black shiny shoes as he gets on stage.

The crowd slowly moves toward the podium as he looks out at all of us with his emotionless white eyes.

“Welcome. We have closed the entrance. Everyone in this room will be attending the C Class Exams.”

The crowd watches attentively.

“We have all met briefly on your way in, but just to remind you all I will introduce myself. My name is Rodrigo Morales. I’ve been an A-Class Hunter in the Association for 8 years now. I will be the only instructor for your exam today.”

The audience starts murmuring to each other. I look at Maria. She looks back at me and whispers.

“It’s really starting...”

I grin.

“It really is.”

Rodrigo continues.

“If you would all look to the back of the room, you’ll see 40 C-Class and above Hunters from the Association that will be monitoring your progress and reporting back to me. They are all wearing yellow armbands. If you need help or have questions during the exam, feel free to track them down.”

The whole audience turns their heads to see a long line of hunters in the back of the room.

“You’re all here because you’ve made it this far already. Level 250 is a big achievement in the world of hunters, but progressing further is a much greater challenge. The dungeons in your future will be nothing like the ones you’ve faced before, that’s why we have this exam. It is a rite of passage. If you can pass, then you’re ready to continue your journey. If you fail, you may always come back and take it again. Let’s see. Raise your hand if this is your first time taking the exam.”

Maria and I raise our hands, then slowly look around the room. To my surprise... There aren’t as many people raising their hands as I thought there would be.

“That seems about right. This year we have 348 applicants from around the entire Vice Region. 96 of them are first-time applicants. Overall, the Association has submitted 71 applicants, the big 3 submitted 64, 44 smaller guilds have submitted

172, and there are 41 independents. This is a record-high number of applicants in the Vice Region. This only means our exam will be even more strict. It will consist of 3 tests. You must pass all 3. If you fail 1 test, you fail the entire exam. Less than one third of you will be walking away with a C Class certification."

The crowd began to murmur again.

"Without further ado, I will explain the rules of our first test. Please, everyone, look down at your left wrist. If you do not have a silver bracelet on, speak up or leave this room immediately."

Silence fills the room.

"Great. These bracelets have been crafted with my unique skill, along with the help of a friend. They will be a vital part of our first test. Each bracelet has 2 extra lives stored inside it. This means the magic item will absorb all the damage that your body would normally take in from a fight. Once your HP reaches 0, the bracelet reverses the physical effects on your body and teleports you in full health back to a starting point that I've already set. Understood?"

The entire crowd talks amongst themselves for a few seconds with confused expressions.

"I will demonstrate how it works."

All of a sudden Rodrigo raises his left hand and a blinding white light fills the room. I feel extremely hot for a fraction of a second and almost cry out in agony... but then the pain is gone moments later.

The white light fades and I can't believe my eyes.... The ground beneath me is made of stone slabs and I can see a bright blue sky as I look up. There are large green trees and mountains in the distance. Right in front of me, there are over 300 hunters confused and dazed taking in their surroundings as well.

I hear Rodrigo's voice and see him standing on top of a large boulder with a floating green portal in front of it.

"Now, you all have 1 extra life remaining."

It clicks in my head. He just killed us all... instantly....

I gulp. He continues.

"Due to the recent surges in the capital, many unique dungeons have been popping up in the wilderness just outside the city. One of the most unique ones is this brand new labyrinth."

I gasped and stared at the glowing portal with wide-open eyes.

"With permission from the Hunters Association and my surveillance, our exam will be taking place inside. Your first test will be defeating the boss on floor 10 within 48

hours. The maximum number of hunters allowed to pass this first test is 200. I will be waiting on floor 11 to begin the next stage.”

The audience of hunters went wild. First of all, the shock of literally dying and instantly being brought kilometers away from the city is a lot to comprehend. But also, the fact that our exam is being held in a labyrinth... This is a pretty big deal!

Rodrigo speaks up again.

“For those of you that aren’t familiar with labyrinths, let me give you a quick refresher. Once entering the labyrinth you will be transported into a normal-looking dungeon. Most of the time, the starting dungeons are lower E ranked. Every time you defeat a dungeon, the boss room will spawn you up to the next “floor”. We call them floors to keep it simple, but they are just dungeons that progressively increase in difficulty. The easiest dungeon is “Floor 1” and the floor numbers raise as the difficulty increases. Once you challenge a boss, you cannot leave through any portals. You either defeat it, or it defeats you. If you’d like to return to the outside world while in the normal labyrinth, you may take the exit portal on each floor that leads to the floor below. These will appear at the start point of each dungeon and when walked through they will spawn you back in front of the boss room portal of the previous lower floor.”

The entire audience listens attentively.

“As I said before, you have 48 hours to complete the first 10 floors and meet me on floor 11. If 200 of you make it before the 48 hours is up, then our timer will be cut short. Killing and sabotaging other hunters is allowed. Each player has 1 extra life. Your silver bracelets will transport you back to this very spawn point outside the dungeon. It may be in your best interest to sabotage other hunters on the higher floors so they have to waste time climbing the labyrinth again. Killing hunters without an extra life is allowed, but may be frowned upon. It will not guarantee a failing score but will be taken into consideration for your hunting profile. With that being said, anyone that loses their bracelet, know that you are risking your life to become a hunter. If you’re not ready, you may leave at any time. This is all part of the exam, only the strong will move on.”

I looked over at Maria, she looked at me as well. We both gripped our swords tight.

“I have also placed a few gifts on varying floors along the way. There isn’t nearly enough for all of you, but I’m sure those of you that find my presents will find them helpful.”

He grins.

“There is no minimum or maximum team size requirement for this first test. Get to the 11th floor by any means necessary. Form your teams and get in a line facing me.”

Everyone lines up in a surprisingly orderly fashion. Maria and I manage to squeeze in near the front, probably in one of the top 20 positions.

“Once the last person enters the portal, the timer will begin. I wish you all the best of luck. Meet you on the 11th floor!”

Rodrigo steps back into the portal and disappears.

The line begins to move forward rapidly as everyone runs through after him.

Moments later, Maria and I jump through the green portal ourselves.

We enter the Labyrinth.

Chapter 79

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 48 Hours]

Maria and I jump through the portal and enter a grassland dungeon. I can see 10 or so parties in front of us splitting off in all directions.

Not many people are using magic, they must be trying to conserve it for later.

We sprint forward and dive deep into the dungeon.

The grass is short, and there are patches of pink, yellow, and blue flowers. Occasional trees pop up into view, but they seem to be pretty rare.

After about 5 minutes of running, I hear a deep voice yelling out from behind us.

“HEY! You two, stop right there!!”

Maria and I turn our heads to see a massive bearded man chasing after us with a steel chest plate and an enormous silver sword. There are two shorter men behind him carrying swords as well. He keeps yelling.

“My first victims! Come here!!!”

His eyes are bloodshot and his teeth are showing through a malicious smile.

I take one look at Maria, she’s grinning ear to ear.

I nod.

We stop running and turn to the group of men chasing us. Maria runs forward at them and begins to glow bright blue.

It’s over in a matter of seconds....

She runs through them all leaving trails of ice in her tracks. With a single touch of her blade, they’re all frozen solid instantly. She turns to me and laughs.

The leader still has an angry look on his face with his mouth wide open mid-yell as he points his sword high in the air. He's petrified in Ice standing upright with his dedicated followers frozen close behind him. They never saw it coming.

"I say we let them thaw out on their own."

I laugh back at her.

"Good idea. Those Idiots chose the wrong party to blindly attack."

We turn and continue running toward the back of the dungeon. A party approaches us from the rear as we're leaving, but swerves away at the sight of Maria's Ice sculptures. I turn to Maria mid-stride and point out the new party running away from us.

"This exam might be easier than we thought."

"Hmmp, might be."

Finally, about 20 minutes later we found our first monster. A horned rabbit... With a single kick, I easily killed it. It's still cool to see a new monster species though.

They're about half a meter tall and look like oversized muscular rabbits. They have bright white fur, red eyes, sharp jagged teeth, and a single brown horn protruding from their foreheads.

After the first one, I just ignored them moving forward. They're all between levels 5 and 15. There isn't much to worry about.

Another 20 minutes go by, and the hunters have really spread out a lot. I can only see one team in front of us far off in the distance, and none behind. That ice attack must have skewed the path people are willing to take....

As we continue, the party ahead of us starts becoming larger... No wait, we're just getting closer. It seems they've stopped moving.

We approach them cautiously but do not change our speed.

At closer inspection, I can see it's a team of 4. They're all wearing matching silver armor with gold accents. Their under-suits are white and elegant... its really nice gear. They seem to be examining a few sheets of paper while trading magic items around on the ground. A man with long blond flowing hair and bright blue eyes steps out in front of the other three and yells to us.

"We do not wish to fight, but If we must... I shall destroy you."

Out of curiosity, I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 275]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Armor Set] +600 Defense

[Dragon Scale Pendant] +50% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Barrier Summoning]

Swordsmanship

I grin.

“Now here’s a real opponent. Maria, I want this one.”

She steps back.

I run toward the man igniting flames around my sword and preparing an attack.

He nods slowly, then draws his own sword.

“Fine.”

He begins glowing white as I swing my burning blade toward his neck. The swordsman lifts his own blade and covers it in a soft white aura. I bring my sword down and he counters with his own.

My blade stops in mid-air... Less than a meter from his blade. I grit my teeth and push forward with all my strength. It begins to move. Slowly but surely, I bring my blade closer and closer to his. Sweat rolls down my forehead as I let out a yell activating berserker.

CLINK

My sword touches his and we’re both blown backward by the built-up force from our attacks. The grassland around us is destroyed and a dust cloud forms from all the dirt thrown in the air.

As it slowly settles, we both stand 10m apart pointing our blades at one another. He speaks.

“Again, I do not wish to fight. You are a strong adversary, I believe it would be a waste to drain our strength now.”

I grin at him and don’t move a muscle for a few seconds. Then nod and put out my flames while pointing my sword at the floor.

“I’m Jay by the way. You’re probably right, It would be a waste to fight now.”

He points his sword to the ground too.

“I’m George Arden the Third. A pleasure to spar.”

It seems our mutual test of strength is over.

We back away from each other slowly.

With that, we give each other a formal head nod and I motion for Maria to follow me. He turns to his team and they all continue looking at the sheets of paper from earlier. Maria and I head off past them just like that. What an interesting guy....

We continue forward, and the group of armored men fades into the distance behind us. I can’t see any other teams in any direction. It feels like we’re all alone in the dungeon now.

After another 30 minutes of running, we still make no contact with the other teams. In total, we’ve had about 5 horned rabbit encounters I’m starting to get out of breath. I’ve been training hard

recently... but no matter how you put it, running for over an hour gets tiring. I turn to Maria, she's breathing heavily as well.

"Hey, want to slow down and walk?"

Maria turns to me.

"Let's make it through the first floor, then we can take a breather!"

I nod resentfully.

She has a good point though...

"Sounds good."

We continue chugging along at a solid pace. 10 minutes later, we make it to the first boss room.

A floating grey portal stands alone in the middle of an open field.

"Well, it was a bit closer than I thought it would be..."

Maria laughs and we jump through together.

The boss room has a dirt floor with no plant life. It's dark and there are sloped walls creating a cave-like environment. It feels like we're underground, in some kind of burrow....

Red eyes appear from the back of the room and a massive horned rabbit hops out. It looks very similar to the normal mobs, just... huge...

It gets up on its two hind legs and shows us its teeth standing almost 1.5m tall.

I use inspect, then smile.

[Lv. 37]

We walk over to it slowly. The monster gets on all fours and starts running at us while growling.

SHINGGG

I cut it in two like butter.

Maria and I look at each other, then she speaks up.

"One floor down, nine to go."

I nod.

"Yup."

The rabbit disintegrates and white transport magic teleports us to the next dungeon a few minutes later.

"NEW GUYS ARE HERE! GET EM!!!!!"

As we're spawned into a forest-like environment. There are thick trees in all directions and fairly rocky soil. I see two men and a woman less than 5m away with their weapons fully drawn. There's a massive dark-skinned man with a silver shield and long thick sword lunging at me. A slim dark-

haired fair-skinned woman wielding daggers runs at Maria. A short red-haired man stands behind them both glowing bright yellow.

The tank lets out a yell as he shoves his sword at my chest. I instantly react by erupting into flames and creating a layer of body-hardening crystals over the front side of my body.

CLANGGG

His sword smashes into the hard crystal armor and his eyes open wide in disbelief.

Maria gasps as she sees my defense out of the corner of her eye while instinctively putting up her own shield of Ice to block the woman's ambush of daggers.

I face the man standing in front of me, he stands over 205cm tall, wearing makeshift leather armor, and deep scars on his face.

I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 258]

Active Items:

[Heavy Iron Long Sword] +200 Strength

[Heavy Iron Shield] +250 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Armor Set] +200 Defense

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Extreme Strength

Bufs:

[+35% Speed & Agility]

I smile and raise my sword pointing it at the large man's head.

"You call that an ambush?"

He grunts and stares me down while beginning to glow orange. A new Buff appears in his appraisal stats.

[+50% Strength]

I grin.

"Interesting..."

The team member behind him must have a speed and agility party-wide buff skill, while he has his own strength buff skill. Unfortunately for him... it's not going to be enough.

I ignite into flames and look the man straight in the eyes. I activate berserker and intimidation.

"ATTACK THEM N-"

He stops yelling mid-sentence and freezes with fear. My vision tunnels and I charge forward.

SHINGGGG

Without hesitation, I slice him in two then stab the short red-haired buff caster through the chest in the same attack.

Instantly, they both dematerialize into a flash of white light.

“So that’s how the bracelets really work.... Good to know.”

I turn to see Maria facing off against the dagger-wielding woman. Her eyes open wide as she sees her teammates easily obliterated.

Maria places her hand on the ground and releases a wave of Ice. The woman turns to run as the frost creeps up her ankles. She lets out a scream and drops her daggers before turning into a glistening white statue. Maria walks over to her and slashes the ice into a million little pieces. The white light appears again, indicating she’s been sent back to her party members.

I think to myself for a moment. If I really killed them, I’d be able to absorb their skills. So it looks like I won’t be getting to farm skills that easily today...

Maria speaks up.

“Hey look! That woman left her weapons!”

She bends down and picks up the two black daggers off the ground. I use Appraisal.

[Enchanted Dagger Set] +250 Strength +250 Agility

I nod.

“Nice. I guess they’re yours now. Looks like you have to be holding your items to be transported with them.”

Maria smiles and places the daggers into her item box, then points her sword in the air toward the back of this new dungeon.

“Let’s go! I hope we get to fight some stronger opponents soon. Monsters or Humans, I don’t care.”

She starts walking forward.

I nod and follow.

“I’m sure the higher we climb, the more challenging this test will become.”

Chapter 80

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 46 Hours]

As we walk further into this new forest dungeon the trees get thicker and the soil becomes rockier. I can still see the sky overhead, but it’s a huge change of pace from the meadow-like dungeon we just departed from.

Maria and I continue jogging at a steady pace through the forest. About 20 minutes into our trek we hear movement in front of us deep behind a patch of thick green leaves.

I use inspect and enemy detection.

[30m]

[Lv. 44]

[Lv. 51]

Moments later, two large hobgoblins come running into our vision with their swords pointing at us. They stand over 2m tall, have light green skin, hold long silver swords, and wear rags for clothing.

Maria and I sprint forward and slice them both in half without activating an ounce of magic.

We continue running forward like nothing happened.

After another hour and a half, and 4 more hobgoblin encounters, we finally make it to the boss room portal. I turn to Maria.

“Seems like the teams are getting pretty spread out. We only saw one in this dungeon.. and it was at the very beginning!”

She nods.

“Yeah, maybe that camping team thinned the crowd in front of us and we’re just outpacing the crowd behind for now.”

“True, you’re probably right...”

“You ready?”

“Ready.”

We jump through the floating grey portal and enter the floor 2 boss room.

The ground is hard, and the light is dim. It feels exactly like the previous boss room, just with walls completely made of stone.

Footsteps begin to sound as a 3.5m tall mutated hobgoblin appears.

I use inspect.

[Lv. 68]

Before it can even let out a roar, Maria runs forward and cuts it’s head clean off. She turns back to me.

“Two down, eight to go!”

I nod slowly, then let out a small laugh.

A few moments later the corpse disappears and the white light appears transporting us into a new dungeon.

I open my eyes to see a unique sight.

It’s a wasteland....

The ground feels soft and wet, but still easy to walk on. There’s very minimal plant life here, and the soil is an off-putting reddish-purple color. The entire landscape is full of mildly sloping hills with no trees in sight.

As I look up, the sky is grey with a hint of blue... This dungeon is depressing...

"Let's walk this one. I think conserving energy would be the best thing to do right now."

Maria nods and we walk forward into the dungeon with caution. The moment we do, I hear a rumbling in the distance.

I use enemy detection and inspect. Instantly, I sense over 20 monsters running our way between levels 70 and 100.

"Here they come!"

Maria replies.

"Already??"

We both grip our swords tight and get ready for whatever beasts are about to show their faces....

The rumbling gets closer. It sounds more like hundreds of footsteps now. I can hear clicking, scurrying, squealing, and scraping sounds coming closer and closer.

Then on top of a small hill in front of us, a wave of giant rats appear...

My stomach drops.

I'm not scared of them because I think they're dangerous... these things... just look disgusting....

Over 20 fat brown rats crawl over the top of a dirt hill and charge toward us. I can smell rotting flesh from here. They have beady red eyes, long pink noses, crooked white teeth, matted brown hair, and scar-covered fleshy tails.

They're over 2m long...

I look at Maria. We both gulp and run at the wave of rodents.

I ignite into a ball of flames and Maria begins to create a barrier of Ice fragments all around her. I swerve off to the right, and she takes the left. Together, we release a wave of magic up the hill of rats and obliterate them all in the blink of an eye.

We continue our charge all the way up the hill, not stopping until every last one of them is frozen solid or burned to a crisp. Once we make it to the top I activate enemy detection again, and widen my search distance.

"There's... thousands of them... everywhere..."

I can sense groups of rats piling together across the entire dungeon. Doing so used up a bit of MP, but I'll manage. It let me pinpoint a few other teams as well. It looks like there are 7 other parties in here with us. Their numbers vary, but none are too close by.

I turn my head to a far corner of the dungeon as I sense an odd presence. It's kind of strong... but is definitely not a hunter. I point in its direction.

"Let's make a quick detour, I'm curious about something. I might pay off."

Maria looks up at me.

“Okay, fine with me.”

We turn and begin to trek toward the odd presence.

After traveling about 1km off track, we finally near our destination. There were 3 more waves of rats along the way, all increasing in size. Our last ambush consisted of over 50 rats.

They’re easy to kill, but pretty hard on the eyes...

I point to a large dirt hill in the distance.

“That’s it. We’re here.”

The moment I open my mouth, the beast I was looking for appears.

I use inspect.

[Lv. 143]

“Nothing special... but we’re getting somewhere.”

On top of the hill stands a massive mutant rat. It’s easily 4m long and covered in scars with dark black matted hair. There seems to be a glowing white light behind it as well. It’s making the rat stand out in this gloomy environment.

I grin and run at the monster. It screeches and a wave of rats appears behind it. There are easily a hundred of them...

I burst into a ball of fire and begin massacring the wave. Maria follows close behind and begins freezing dozens of them at a time as well. Every time I land a hit with my sword I use plunderer to restore my MP.

Moments later, we both make it to the top of the hill leaving trails of fire and ice behind us.

SHINGGG

In perfect synchronicity, Maria and I cut the mutant rat into pieces. We stand on top of the hill admiring our handiwork.

Although, after a while, I have to cover my mouth and nose as the burning rat corpses disappear one by one.

The white light from earlier doesn’t fade as the mutant disappears. It seems like there was something on top of this hill before we got here. It was just hidden by the wave of monsters.

Finally, the burning flesh turns into piles of mana crystals and reveals a glowing white box on the ground.

We look at it, then at each other, then back at the box. I walk over and examine it.

It’s about a meter long, half a meter tall, and half a meter wide. It’s completely white and is humming like a mana shield. There are no handles or indicators of how to open it.

“What could this be...?”

I reach my sword out toward it and tap the blade against the top of the box.

CLICK

The lid flies open and reveals a piece of paper, 2 potions, a silver ring, a bag of dried fruit, 4 large bottles of water, and another bag of dried meats.

I grab the note and read it.

“It looks like you have found a gift box, luck is on your side! These items may help you on your journey, use them wisely to stay alive.

-Rodrigo”

I turn the note over for Maria to read, then I use Appraisal on the potions and ring in the box.

Active Items:

[D Class MP Potion]

[D Class HP Potion]

[Enchanted Silver Ring] +150 Speed

“Interesting... let’s split this up evenly. You can have the ring, I think you need it more than me. Next rare item drop is mine though, got it?”

She smiles.

“Sure thing!”

I toss Maria the ring, and we take half the food and water each. Maria drinks an MP potion on the spot, and I place the HP potion in my item box. Apparently, Maria has already used up a full MP bar, I guess we have used a lot of magic in this dungeon so far.

I look around and see over a hundred mana crystals all over the hill...

“It’d be a waste not to pick these up right...”

Maria laughs.

“I guess s-JAY!”

“STOP RIGHT THERE!”

CLANGGGGG

Two silver daggers appear out of nowhere and I instinctively raise my sword to block them as I hear a deep voice yell at me. The daggers scrape against my blade overpowering me and pushing me to the floor. I scan the area with enemy detection, inspect, and appraisal to try and figure out what hit me.

Nothing registers at first...

Then a man appears 10m in front of me seemingly out of thin air. The stats finally show.

[10m]

[Lv. 279]

Active Items:

[Steel Dagger Set] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +400 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +200 Speed

[Griffin's Talon] +40% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

The man is well-built with short dirty blond hair and light skin. He has brown eyes and wears a few pieces of medium-weight armor. He looks a bit too bulky to be using daggers... but I guess that's his thing.

Standing around 180cm tall, he's about my height. Just a lot more muscular.

He yells out.

"Hand over everything from that box and I'll spare your lives!"

I step forward.

"Yeah right.... Bring it on!"

He smirks and takes a slow step backward.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

I grip my blade and ignite it with flames.

He takes another slow step back.

Then disappears...

I scan the area around me with enemy detection, but his presence is gone. While turning around in circles I begin to ignite my full body in flames.

"Is this some kind of.. teleportation ski-ARGHHH"

SHINGGG

I feel a sharp dagger pierce my right side. The man appears from nowhere and lands his attack this time around. I begin to swing my blade back at him, but he disappears in front of my eyes.

My sword slices through the air. I cough up a bit of blood and regenerate my wound while letting my flames burn even brighter.

He appears 10m in front of me with that same smirk across his face.

"I'll say it again, give me everything you got from that box and I'll spare your lives."

Maria yells to me while glowing blue and running at us.

"JAY!! You-"

“Let me handle this Maria. This guy is starting to piss me off.”

She stops mid-stride and nods, then steps back.

“Hmmpf. Okay, I’m here if you need me.”

I turn back to the dagger-wielding man.

He takes a step back, then another, then, poof.... He’s gone again.

I scan the area, but like before, there’s no sign of him. It’s silent, the only noise I can hear is the crackle of my own flames.

SHINGG

A silver dagger appears out of nowhere and pierces my left thigh. The man becomes visible and I swing my flaming sword again, not hesitating from the pain this time.

WOOOSHH-SHICCC

The man disappears as my blade comes down... but I hit something...

“ARHHGHH! HOW???”

The man reappears 10m away with a small gash on his right arm. It’s bleeding onto the ground and he’s glaring at me.

My eyes open wide. Then I remember... I’ve seen this before. Back a long time ago when I trained with Abby in that Bat Dungeon. The boss could do the same thing.

This is a stealth skill...I took a glimpse his status, but it didn't click with me at first. He’s not teleporting, he’s just disappearing from my vision.

I grin, then activate berserker. My senses heighten and my strength increases. I lock eyes with my prey. I’m filled with confidence now that I understand what’s going on. He smirks and takes a step back into nothingness.

I sprint forward and scan my surroundings with a new objective in mind.

It’s faint... but I can hear the pitter-patter of light footsteps coming at me on the left side. I instinctively predict his movements using the sound of his feet and slight movements in the wet dirt to launch an attack of my own.

SHINGGGGG

It’s a direct hit! The man appears visible again as I make contact with my flaming sword. It cracks right through his chest plate landing a devastating blow to his midsection. Blood flies and he yells out in pain while falling backward.

I stand over him with my sword drawn at his neck, then activate intimidation.

A wave of energy hits him and he freezes with fear.

“I want everything you’ve got. Looks like the tables have turned.”

The man doesn’t respond at all, he just stares forward with dilated pupils.

“Fine. I guess we’ll do this the hard way. Just like you wanted.”

I bring my sword down and cut the item box from his waist, then pierce my sword through his chest plundering MP as his body disintegrates and transports back to the respawn point.

I pick up the pouch and turn to Maria with a smile while looking inside.

“There are 4 HP potions and 2 MP, nothing else. What do you want?”

She nods slowly.

“As much MP as I can get.”

I throw her 1 HP and 2 MP potions. I take 3 HP for myself.

“There, that’s fair.”

I drink one of the HP potions, then throw the other two into my item box. I have 8 in total now, I couldn’t care less about the MP potions. I get mana for free by killing monsters, Maria can have them all.

She looks at me curiously for a moment but accepts the potions without a fuss. We collect the mana crystals covering the hill, then start walking back the way we came.

Our next stop is the boss room.