

D. Diver 81

Chapter 81

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 43 Hours]

I use enemy detection to navigate through the rest of the rat dungeon avoiding as many monsters as possible.

By the time we make it to the boss room I can sense over 30 teams scattered across the wasteland behind us. It seems our detour allowed for a lot of other parties to catch up.

We enter the boss room.

It's a dark and damp cave-like room. I instantly hear the scraping claws of rats coming our way.

Maria glows blue and looks at me.

"I'll handle this one."

I nod.

A wave of rodents appears from the backside of the cave followed by their leader. It's a giant mutant rat, similar to the one we fought on that hill earlier.

Maria charges forward freezing the oncoming wave while jumping through the air and aiming her sword at the mutant's neck.

SHINNNNGGG

She turns to me with a grin as the large rat's frozen head falls to the floor shattering into ice.

"Three down"

I walk over to her and reply.

"Seven to go."

The rats begin to disappear. We collect the mana crystals while waiting for the transfer magic to kick in. Moments later, a white light brings us to the next floor.

The sky is bright blue and there isn't a cloud in the sky. The grass is short and light green. It's covering rolling hills with occasional trees.

I smile.

"Now this is more like it."

I use enemy detection and inspect to quickly survey the area.

It seems like there's a decent amount of monsters in the area, but they travel in groups of 1 or 2 at most. They're all between levels 90 and 110. I can only sense 6 teams ahead of us at the moment. That is, in this dungeon anyway.

We begin walking forward.

After about 20 minutes of peacefully taking in the artificial sunlight and beautiful blue sky our first pair of monsters appear.

Two light blue globs of liquid creep over a hill in front of us. I turn to Maria.

“Slimes. I’ve fought these before. Physical attacks won’t hurt them, we’ll have to use only magic.”

She nods.

“Got it.”

Without much effort, we both run up the hill and destroy the slimes in our path with Fire and Ice.

We continue running forward deeper into the slime dungeon. That peaceful walk was nice, but It’s time to pick up the pace again.

I continue leading the way to avoid nearby teams. Our path isn’t exactly straight, but Maria doesn’t seem to mind. As we approach the boss room I sense a team of 3 standing in place.

I use inspect and enemy detection.

[500m]

[Lv. 266]

[Lv. 259]

[Lv. 255]

I turn to Maria and point out the specs of people in the distance.

“We have company. Looks like they’re standing outside the boss room.”

She nods and we slow down to cautiously approach them.

[300m]

I can vaguely make out a glowing grey portal in the distance now. They’re not jumping through for some reason...

[100m]

Maria and I point our swords forward and continue to walk slowly at them. The level 266 steps in front of the others and raises his hands in the air.

We walk within talking distance and he yells out. He’s visibly out of breath.

“P-Please, could we ask you to do us a favor!”

It’s a man carrying a silver sword on his back and is dressed in standard leather and steel armor. He’s a bit shorter than me, with short black hair and brown eyes. As we approach, he keeps his hands raised. The two men behind him don’t say a word. They seem tired too, it looks like they’ve been running for a while.

I raise an eyebrow and use appraisal on the 3 of them.

[Lv. 266]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +250 Strength

[Leather Chestplate] +150 Defense

[Steel Wrist Guards] +150 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +200 Speed

[Ring of Protection] +35% Defense

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Team Buff[All Stats +25%]

Crafting

[Lv. 259]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +250 Strength

[Leather Chestplate] +150 Defense

[Leather Wrist Guards] +100 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +200 Speed

[Ring of Protection] +25% Defense

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Swordsmanship

[Lv. 255]

Active Items:

[Heavy Steel Shield] +300 Defense

[Leather Chestplate] +150 Defense

[Leather Wrist Guards] +100 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +200 Speed

[Ring of Protection] +25% Defense

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Body Hardening

Extreme Defense

“What do you want...?”

The three of them seem to be your run-of-the-mill, middle-aged, small-town guild hunters. They may be decent fighters, but nothing special sticks out to me. This is so odd...

The man in front speaks again.

“Please defeat the slime boss for us, we’ll do anything!”

He bows.

“I-uh-what?”

“....”

I turn to Maria, she shrugs, then I turn back to the man with a confused look on my face.

He speaks.

“None of us have any combat magic abilities. We can’t defeat this boss with just our swords.”

I chuckle, then Maria chimes in.

“We should just kill them now! Sending these three back to the start would be a better use of our time, I mea-”

I cut her off mid-sentence while pointing my sword at the leader’s neck.

“Let’s hear them out. We’ll do it, what can you give us in return? She’s right, you may be better off leaving this exam if you came this ill-prepared... but I’ll help you if you can help us.”

I grin.

The man smiles back thinly and turns to his teammates. They sift through their item boxes and pull out a few bottles of potions.

I shake my head and roll my eyes, then point to his left hand.

“How about that ring? You said anything.”

The man gulps, then nods slowly and takes off the golden ring containing a small dark green gemstone on the face of it.

“Very well.”

I motion for him to place it on the edge of my blade. He does and I bring the ring closer to put it on. It magically fits next to my other ring and I grin as I feel the effects of its defense buff.

I turn to Maria.

“You want anything?”

She eyes the men up and down then replies.

“Give me your MP potions. I want at least half.”

They hand Maria 7 MP potions in total. She sighs, then puts them in her item box.

“This will do. Let’s kill the boss before another team comes along.”

I nod.

“Agreed.”

The three men look at us with hopeful eyes. I guess we were their only chance of getting through this dungeon.

All 5 of us step into the slime dungeon boss room.

The room seems to just be a smaller version of the dungeon we just left. The grass is green and short. The hills raise up around us in all directions creating an arena-type environment.

Moments after we enter, a large blue glob of liquid appears. I use inspect.

[Lv. 151]

Maria grins.

“I got this.”

I nod.

“Go for it.”

She begins to glow bright blue while running at the slime with her blade out in front.

SHINGGG

Maria slices the slime in half. The points of contact begin to frost over and consolidate into Ice.

Instantly, the blob freezes into a solid and falls to the ground in two parts. She brings her blade back around and shatters the Ice to bits.

Maria holds up four fingers, then points one down to the floor.

I yell back and smile.

“Six to go.”

We all walk over to her as the fragments of ice begin disappearing. The team we came with hasn't said a word since we entered this room. I see the two men take off their rings and hand them to their leader.

The white light appears and we're all transported to the next floor.

CLANGGGG

I roll my eyes as I activate body hardening to block the sword being swung at my back.

“Seriously...?”

The team leader staggers backward with fear in his eyes after his failed attempt at a surprise attack.

I look at Maria, then briefly take in the new landscape of a mountain range dungeon.

“You were right. These fools weren't ready. We should have saved the time and killed them earlier.”

She grins and starts glowing blue.

The man speaks.

“H-How? I-I’m sorry. Just how strong are you two?”

I ignite my blade into flames and motion for Maria to handle the other two men. She nods and I walk towards the leader who tried to stab me in the back, literally...

He raises his sword and I activate berserker while continuing to cover my entire body in flames. I sprint toward him and instantly land a hit across his chest. My speed is in another class than his...

I turn back to see the man still standing, but flames are burning brightly from his chest. He turns to me with bloodshot eyes and starts glowing bright yellow.

“YOU AREN’T GOING TO TA-”

SHINGGGG

I launch another attack before he finishes his sentence. A blow straight to the neck. He dissolves instantly in a bright flash, being transported back to the outside world. I turn to Maria and see two statues of Ice in front of her.

She laughs.

“I think we should just leave them.”

I nod.

“Good idea. Serves them right.”

We leave the frozen men behind and begin walking deeper into the new dungeon. I use enemy detection to scope out the landscape and sense 8 teams ahead of us. One of them isn’t too far away, and there’s a hunter with a higher level than me...

I grin and point to a rocky mountain in the distance covered in dark green pine trees and small boulders.

“This way, another detour. Get ready for a real fight.”

Maria nods and turns to me as we depart.

“Sure, let’s do it. But umm, I’m curious about something.... What was the ability you used to block that sword attack earlier?”

I stop walking to look Maria directly in the eyes. She speaks up again.

“Jay... Do you have a third skill?”

Chapter 82

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 40 Hours]

“I...”

Maria looks up at me with curious innocent eyes.

I gulp.

“I do... have another skill. You’re right.”

She smiles wide, drops her sword, and starts jumping around with her hands in the air.

“I knew it!! I knew it!!! Your sword is special too! And you-”

I cut her off with a serious tone.

“Let’s keep this between us, okay? The fewer people that know about it, the better. I have... a few skills... I trust you not to tell anyone, and to not ask too many questions.”

Maria stopped jumping and looked me in the eyes with a serious stare.

“Hmmpf, of course, Jay. I’ve been waiting.... I can keep a secret, don’t worry!”

She smiles again, picks up her sword, and turns to continue walking while bobbing her head side to side humming softly.

I sigh with relief...

It’s been weighing on me for a while now. I was trying to find the right time to tell her. The more floors we climb, I’m more likely to use other skills. I guess she’s known for a while and was also just waiting for the right time to say something.... Maybe I’ve been a bit careless about flashing my skills around lately.

Either way, that was much easier than expected. Hiding my visible abilities from Maria is one less thing to think about.

I follow her deeper into the dungeon and use enemy detection to locate the team I was tracking earlier.

[900m]

I call out to Maria and point at the mountain in front of us again.

“The base of that mountain is less than a kilometer away, we’re getting pretty close.”

The trees begin to thin out the closer we get. The team hasn’t changed its position yet.

[500m]

They still aren’t visible from this distance, and there are many trees and rocks in the way now. Our trek toward the mountain continues.

[200m]

Finally, as we step into an open clearing our next adversaries come into view. A pair of men are sitting on top of a large boulder. We begin approaching with caution. There isn’t much tree cover at all, so an ambush would be hard to pull off here. We walk at them straight on with our swords ready.

[50m]

The men see us coming but don’t seem alarmed at all. One of them waves and the other ignores us. At closer inspection, a large glowing white box is on top of the boulder next to them. They found a gift box too! As we get closer, the man that waved jumps down and yells out to me.

“What do you want kid? Get lost if you know what’s good for ya. You’re already on the fifth floor, don’t make me send you two back to the start.”

I grin and raise my sword while Maria begins to glow blue. As we do this, the other man on top of the rock jumps down.

I use inspect on both of them.

The first man is about 185cm, with a shaved head, heavy shining armor that only covers his vital points, and a large silver axe. He looks a lot older than me... Maybe close to 40. He’s pretty tan and very muscular for his height.

[Lv. 303]

Active Items:

[High Ogre’s Axe] +350 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +500 Defense

[Stealth Boots] +300 Speed +300 Agility

[Dragon’s Scale Pendant] +50% Magic Resistance

[Serpent’s Ring] +70% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo’s Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Combat Magic [Lightning Summoning]

The man approaching behind him is a bit shorter with dark black hair, but he makes up for it with his width. He’s one of the most muscular men I’ve ever seen... With a full suit of heavy armor as well, carrying a long silver sword.

[Lv. 299]

Active Items:

[Steel Sword] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +600 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +300 Speed

[Dragon’s Scale Pendant] +50% Magic Resistance

[Gargoyle's Ring] +60% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo’s Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Swordsmanship

Extreme Defense

I ignite my sword with flames and turn to Maria.

“These two are very strong, and they’re packing some serious gear... Think you can handle them?”

She nods and begins to glow even brighter.

I turn my attention to the axe-wielding man and stare him directly in the eyes. He smirks showing me the right side of his crooked smile.

“You asked for it, kid. Abe, you take the girl. Let’s make this quick.”

His partner slowly walks over to Maria and raises his sword.

“Got it.”

Our brawl is about to begin...

This should be a stressful situation but I’m grinning ear to ear. The excitement of a real fight is surging through me and it hasn’t even begun yet.

The man in front of me begins to glow light yellow, then charges straight ahead with his axe raised. I activate Berserker and sprint at him to counter.

CLANGGGGG

Our weapons collide with equal force and we’re stuck at a standstill. I erupt into flames and the man begins exploding with electricity. He jumps back to avoid my flames, and I do the same to escape the discharge.

Large bolts of electricity strike my sword as I retreat. The shockwave travels through my body and I let out a scream as I feel myself being cooked from the inside out.

It’s one of the most painful things I’ve ever experienced...

I drop to my knees momentarily with my skin covered in black sizzling burns. I use self-regeneration and stand to my feet as quickly as possible. My status reads 870/1455 HP and 1360/1455 MP.

I grit my teeth and face the man as he laughs.

“That wasn’t too bad, you’re strong for a youngster.”

He smirks and raises his axe, then charges at me again. I erupt into flames, activate berserker and run full force at him too.

“Intimidation.”

I activate my skill and a pulse of energy hits him moments later. The man’s eyes open wide for a split second... but he keeps running forward. I let out a yell as our swords clash again with equal force. We both let out flames and lightning as we both jump back.

I let out another yell as my sword conducts more electricity frying me to a crisp once again. My status reads 295/1455 HP and 1220/1455 MP. I regenerate and stand to my feet.

He laughs and points his axe forward. The man lifts his hand to show me a shimmering red scale on a string around his neck.

“Another good trick, but your magic won’t affect me. This is the end boy.”

I’m breathing heavily and gripping my sword tight. Maria is less than 30m away in the middle of her own battle.

She’s running circles around the large man, but her Ice magic isn’t doing much damage. He’s breaking free of her spells with ease. Maria is clearly in over her head... but managing to stay out of danger. Me on the other hand, I have to get my head in the game here.

I gulp and reach into my item box to grab an HP potion. The man runs toward me glowing yellow as I rip the cork off with my teeth and chug it down.

CLANGGGGG

I manage to drink most of the potions and raise my sword in time to block his onslaught. The electricity flows through my body on contact as he ducks out of range again.

I regenerate and let out a yell of frustration. I point my sword forward and glare at the man before me. My blade begins to glow bright red. This is the first time it’s done so since we entered the labyrinth.

I let out a chaotic laugh and run straight forward. I’m starting to have some fun...

My vision tunnels, my senses heighten, and my magic power becomes more focused surrounding the glowing sword as I sprint at my enemy.

SHINGGGGG

I land a hit and continue running past the axe wielder. When I look back I see the man turning toward me without hesitation.

There’s a small gash across the front of his steel chest plate, it barely goes skin deep and the flame residue has almost burned out entirely.... He speaks up again.

“You’re just full of surprises aren’t ya!”

He points his axe in the air and glows brighter than before. Instantly, I drop to my knees and yell out in pain. A bolt of lightning comes down and shocks me to my core.

I regenerate my charred skin and turn to run.... I need more time... He’s strong...

My status reads 80/1455 HP and 940/1455 MP.

I dart away while fumbling to grab an HP potion from my item box. I hear the man’s voice close behind me as I scan the area for my next potential plan.

“You can only run so far! Come on kid!”

I see Maria in the corner of my eye being cornered by the sword wielder. The round is covered in Ice from all of her failed attacks and she’s backed up against the boulder from earlier.

The man facing her brings his sword down as Maria tries to block it with her own.

CRACKKK

My eyes open wide as I watch her sword shatter into metal fragments from a distance. She’s been completely overpowered... How could this happen...

I turn my head back again to see the axe-wielder gaining on me. I rip the cork out of another HP potion and chug it down as he gets closer.

“JAY! HELP!!! ME I-“

I hear Maria screaming in the distance as static makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand straight up.

I see the sword wielder readying his blade to finish Maria off...

I let out a yell of frustration, visualize the area between them, then activate my skill.

“Dungeon Walker.”

A dark swirling portal forms in front of me and I leap through head first.

Instantly, I’m teleported right between them. Without touching the ground, I fly through the air to grab Maria.

I create another portal behind her, and we both fall through disappearing from the battle entirely.

“J-Jay? What is this? It’s so... dark...”

I focus for a moment, then teleport us back to the start point of this rocky mountain dungeon where we spawned in.

The light shines down on us as my portal disappears I fall to the ground breathing heavily. Maria looks around with confusion.

“H-How did you... Is that another?”

I smile.

“Another skill.”

“....”

I slowly get up to my feet and let out a long sigh.

“I guess we’re not the strongest ones here...”

Maria replies in a shaky tone.

“I guess... we’re not.”

Chapter 83

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 39 Hours]

“Let’s go! We don’t want them catching up to us anytime soon.”

Maria nods and follows close behind as I start jogging toward the back of the dungeon.

After about 20 minutes I’m already starting to get winded, and my legs are getting really tired. I hear grunting in the distance and activate enemy detection along with inspect.

[50m]

[Lv. 151]

[Lv. 149]

[Lv. 148]

The grunts grow louder as we venture into the heavily wooded forest. I draw my sword and get ready for whatever's coming at us....

Moments later, three massive wild boars appear. They're dark brown with short hair and massive muscular bodies. The boar's eyes glow red and two massive tusks protrude from the sides of their mouths. Each of them is over 3m from head to tail.

I make quick work of the beasts without even having to use fire magic. I use this opportunity to plunder as much MP as I can. Maria stays close behind and doesn't join the fight.

"Hey Jay, I know you said not to ask too many questions....but one of your skills can locate enemies, right? Can we find a group of hunters? I need a new sword. I'm not too confident with these daggers and my Ice sword uses up way too much MP to rely on it."

I look back to see Maria awkwardly handling the daggers she picked up from one of our previous fights today.

I activate enemy detection as the boars begin to disappear by our feet. There are 12 teams in this dungeon now... and some of them are pretty strong. That team of two we faced moments ago is over a 1km to our right side, there isn't much to worry about there. We have 4 other teams behind us, they're all lower levels, but there's no sense in moving backward. Out of the 7 teams ahead, there are a few that look like easy prey, others look like they should be avoided... I lock onto a team of 5 and point forward with my blade.

"Sure. Let's find you a new sword."

We continue at a steady pace weaving through the rocky forest. After an hour we run into 4 more small packs of boars and successfully avoided any unwanted trouble from strong teams. Finally, we come across the team I've been tracking down.

I can hear footsteps in front of us get louder and louder until the team finally comes into view as the forest begins to clear up. I use inspect.

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

[Lv. 250]

"HEY! WAIT UP!"

As I yell out, a small woman in a green outfit and lightweight armor turns her body quickly firing a glowing arrow straight at my head. With a grin, my eyes track the arrow and I move my head away at the last second. I was expecting an attack, but a bow and arrow? That's new.

The group of 5 stops and turns at us. Maria and I stop in our tracks as well to face the team.

They're all wearing Hunters Association gear. That explains why their level is so uniform.

It seems like the girl with a bow is their captain. There are two large men with shields, one swordsman, and a thin girl without a weapon. She may be their healer, I don't really have the time to inspect or appraise them all right now though. The leader points her drawn bow at my head again and speaks up.

"What do you want? It's 5 against 2. Don't pick fights you can't win."

I grin and raise my sword at her while igniting the blade's tip.

"Same goes for you."

Maria looks at me, then at the swordsman. She puts her daggers away and speaks directly to him.

"Hand over your sword, unless you want to do this the hard way."

He smirks and looks at the woman with the bow.

"You hear that captain? They're serious."

Maria starts glowing blue and the woman yells as she steps back behind the two shield-carrying men.

"Defensive-Attack formation number one, let's go!"

The tanks make a wall with their shields and begin pushing forward. Maria quickly darts to the left side targeting the swordsman.

I grin.

"Go get your sword, I can handle the rest of them."

Maria nods and begins to form a blade of Ice with her magic. I ignite my body into flames and run at the defensive wall while activating Berserker.

SHINGGGG

They never even stood a chance....

My flaming blade slices through the two tanks' shields landing hits on both of their torsos. I activate intimidation as I run into the center of the group destroying their entire formation in a matter of seconds.

Maria occupies the swordsman to my left as I slice the two tanks in half while they're frozen in fear. They dematerialize and are gone with a flash of white light. It took 2 hits, they weren't too weak after all.

I face the two women frozen with fear. Their eyes are bloodshot and dilated. They can't even manage to get out a word. With one fiery slash, I plunder their MP and send them both back to the labyrinth's starting point.

I turn to Maria.

The ground is covered In Ice, and the swordsman is frozen solid with a look of pure terror captured perfectly on his face. Maria turns to me holding a long silver sword, grinning ear to ear. I use appraisal on it.

[Enchanted Steel Sword] +250 Strength +100 Speed

“Not bad, you happy with it?”

Maria swings the blade around aimlessly testing out its power.

“Yeah, this will do! It’s even better than my last one.”

“Great, let’s continue.”

We leave the Ice sculpture of a man standing alone in the wilderness. He’ll thaw out eventually, or just die and respawn....

Another hour of slow jogging, fighting boars, and avoiding teams with enemy detection carried on until we make it to the boss room. We jump through the portal and defeat a level 163 boss with ease.

We’re spawned onto floor 6 moments later.

It’s a desert environment, but the ground is still more dirt than sand. There are small shrubs scattered along the dungeon floor, but no trees in sight. The sky is light blue and artificial sunlight beats down on us overhead. I turn to Maria.

“You ready? I say we take a breather soon. We’ve been running and fighting for almost 12 hours straight... my legs are getting tired.”

She nods.

“Agreed. Let’s find a good place to rest as soon as possible. Walking through this dungeon rather than running may not be a bad idea.”

I look around and scan the area with enemy detection. There are only 6 other teams ahead of us here, the monsters on the other hand... seem to be traveling in packs.

We start walking deep into the desert. Finding a place to rest is easier said than done... The artificial sunlight is making me sweat like crazy. I finish off a full bottle of water, and Maria does the same.

In the distance, dust clouds begin to form as we trek further and further into this desert wasteland. I use enemy detection and inspect to sense 12 targets moving in fast. They’re all between levels 150 and 165.

“We’ve got company.”

Maria and I start running at the cloud of dust with our weapons raised. As we get closer, a pack of disgusting creatures appears.

They’re... humanoid hyenas. The leader of their pack stands on two legs over 3m tall carrying a long metal spear. It’s body is covered in brown and red rags like makeshift armor. The orange matted fur with black spots sticks out from beneath its clothing as 11 minions in similar attire and

weapons follow. Their hands and feet have enormous sharp claws and they all growl as they show off jagged white teeth.

I burn red, and Maria glows blue. We slice through all of them in a matter of seconds leaving piles of cloth, weapons, and fur on the desert floor.

I turn to Maria mid-stride.

“Let’s get out of here... this is not the place to take a rest.”

She laughs in agreement.

We keep our running pace up for as long as possible. After another hour passes we’ve defeated 3 more packs of hyenas and almost make it to the boss room. Both of us drink more than half of our second water bottle. This desert is deadly... and its not the monsters.

Most of the teams in this dungeon are moving very slow, and the visibility is clear for kilometers. Dust clouds mean fast-moving enemies are approaching, and specs in the distance just mean slow-moving non-hostile hunters or monsters are out there. Other than a few packs of hyenas, no one bothered us in this dungeon.

We make it to the boss room eventually and take out the overgrown level 177 hyena boss with ease.

As we spawn onto floor 7 I let out a long sigh. I take in the view, internally accepting this swampland dungeon over a desert any day!

“I need a break... this is getting exhausting. After that, I want a good fight! At this point, our exam is just a running competition. Do they just want to make sure we’re in shape or something... Come on!”

I yell while pointing my sword in the air.

Maria laughs.

“Well, let’s see what kind of monsters show up here. Then we can rest up for a while.”

I nod in agreement.

We venture off into the swamp dungeon.

No more than 20 minutes later, a massive green ogre appears carrying a large silver axe. It’s slow-moving, grunts, roars, and is traveling alone. The monster wears dark brown leather armor over its wrists, chest, and legs. This one is level 172. These will be much easier to fend off than packs of hyenas.

Maria slices it in half, and we continue walking for another 10 minutes or so off the main dungeon path.

“How about over here?”

I point to a large dry area in the distance with some trees for cover.

Maria nods.

“I think it’s perfect.”

We walk over and both collapse under a green tree with a sturdy brown trunk. I sift through my item box and pull out some dried fruits and meat while laying on my back looking up at the sky through the thick leaves above us.

“Just 4 more floors. I know this is just the beginning of the exam... but it’s been pretty easy so far.”

Maria replies.

“Well, we probably would have run into a lot of other teams without your enemy detection skill.”

“True... I uhh- I guess you’re right.”

I look over at Maria to see her eyes closing, then she shakes herself awake when she notices me watching. I laugh.

“Maybe some sleep wouldn’t hurt. I can take the first shift to watch. We have 4 dungeons to go including this one. I think a quick power nap for each of us would be a good idea. I can wake you up in 2 hours.”

Maria smiles and closes her eyes.

“I like the sound of that. Wake me up in....”

Before she could finish her sentence, she falls fast asleep. I guess Maria was even more tired than me... she’s just better at hiding it.

I stand up and lean up against the tree we’re under and use enemy detection. Over the next 2 hours, only 7 more teams enter the dungeon, and 4 Ogres attack. I used them to replenish my MP slightly, and one of them even drops an axe. I put it in my item storage and along with the mana they drop. I also decide to move all of the mana crystals from earlier into my item storage, from my item box. The only items I left in there were the MP and HP potions.

At around the 2-hour mark, I check on Maria and she’s still sound asleep. I can’t wake her up just yet... not in this state.

Out of pure boredom, I start fidgeting around with some leftover mana crystals. I throw them in the air and attack with my sword, attempt to light them on fire, and even partially learn how to juggle! Not really... juggling is actually pretty hard. Maybe there’s a skill for that?

Then... I try using plunderer on a mana crystal...

It works... The gem begins to glow light pink and I feel a rush of energy flow into my body. Moments later, the crystal begins to dissolve and crumble into dust.

My eyes open wide.

“NO WAY! THIS ACTUALLY WORKS?!”

I laugh to myself and start dancing around in sleep-deprived delusion.

“Huhhh? W-What?”

Maria raises her head and rubs her eyes. I turn to her with a smile ear to ear.

“Oh- Good morning. Sorry to wake you so abruptly, I didn’t mean to.”

She gets to her feet and stretches her arms.

“It’s fine. Thanks. You can rest now if you want.”

I nod happily.

“Sure, sure. Wake me if any teams come nearby.”

She nods and I collapse under the tree with a grin on my face falling asleep dreaming about my new accidental discovery.

[~2 hours later]

CLANGGGG

I wake up to the sound of metal on metal from a distance. My vision is blurry as my senses come back to me after a well-needed nap.

I see Ice covering the trees all around me and Maria glowing bright blue battling a group of 4 all by herself. Through my blurry vision, enemy detection, and inspect I can make out a woman with a sword, one with a pair of daggers, and two large men carrying shields.

[30m]

[Lv. 271]

[Lv. 256]

[Lv. 255]

[Lv. 255]

I rub my eyes and grab my sword from item storage while igniting it into flames and activating berserker.

“HEY! Why didn’t you make me up? Save some fun for me!”

Maria turns her head while putting up an ice wall to block an incoming tank.

“Sorry, they came out of nowhere!”

I run in to get a piece of the action... Then get a closer look at the woman with a sword. She’s short, with bright orange hair, light freckles, and a black combat suit covered by some small silver armor pieces.

We lock eyes, then I yell out in surprise.

“N-Nessa? Is that you??”

She stops in her tracks.

“Jay?”

Chapter 84

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 30 Hours]

I let my flames simmer down, but keep my sword pointed straight ahead.

“So... are we friends or enemies today?”

Nessa lets out a sigh of relief.

“Friends, I hope.”

She lets her sword down and turns to her teammates.

“Hey! I know them! Hold back!”

I turn to Maria and nod. She understands and lets her ice wall crumble while backing up slowly.

I’m still skeptical, so I scan the area. At closer inspection, one of the tanks and that woman with daggers look familiar. They were both there when I fought that mutant minotaur... but the big guy.... He’s new. Nessa caught me sizing him up.

“Hey Bruce! Meet Jay. Jay, meet Bruce. This is our team captain.”

The large light-skinned man with dark features walked over to me slowly with his heavy metal shield to the side. I use inspect and appraisal.

[Lv. 271]

Active Items:

[Heavy Steel Shield] +400 Defense

[Steel Armor Set] +300 Defense

[Leather Boots] +150 Speed

[High Ogre’s Ring] +50% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo’s Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Body Hardening

“Nice to meet you. If you’re a friend of Nessa’s you’re a friend of mine!”

He reaches out a hand and I shake it hesitantly, but keep a smile on my face.

“Nice... To meet you too.”

I continue scanning the area around us, using enemy detection and inspect on a huge radius. Nessa’s eyes light up as she looks at me using multiple new skills, but I’m not too worried about it.

Our bigger problem is the 27 other teams on this floor right now. It seems like we overslept, it’s getting crowded here.

Maria walks over to me.

“How was your nap? Ready to continue?”

I smile.

“Yeah it was pretty nice, I ju-”

“YOU WERE SLEEPING?”

Nessa looks at me like I’m insane.

I laugh.

“Yeah, we did take a small break. Nessa, Meet Maria... and uhh, Maria, meet Nessa.”

They stare each other down for a moment, then both nod before looking away in different directions.

I gulp softly, then notice Nessa holding herself up by her sword... The other 3 teammates doing the same thing, using their gear to keep themselves upright. Now that I take a closer look, they’re all pale and exhausted.

“Hey- Are you guys all right? You all seem sickly...”

Nessa looks back at me and nods slowly.

“Yeah, we’ve just had a long day. Moving slowly and only engaging with parties much smaller or weaker than us is tiring work. If you didn’t wake up during our fight, I’m not so sure what would have happened. It’s taken a while to climb this high. Plus, that last dungeon was brutal.”

Maria looks over at me with a grin on her face.

“I would have wiped the floor with them if you didn’t stop me.”

I laugh.

“Oh yeah?”

Nessa looks over at her with an annoyed glare, but didn’t say anything back. Maria is right... and she knows it.

I open up my item box and throw her my half-empty water bottle.

“Don’t drink it all, but take what you need.”

Nessa’s eyes light up as she catches the bottle and begins drinking from it instantly.

The moment she does, something feels off.... and very familiar... I yell out.

“Stay alert. Someone else is here...”

Everyone starts looking around and drawing their weapons. I erupt into flames to hide my use of berserker and expand my range of enemy detection.

Still... Nothing shows up on my radar. Was it a false alarm? My eyes move back and forth as I scan the woods around us in my paranoid state. The rest of the group stands on edge in confusion as well.

Then I sense a small pitter-patter of footsteps and it clicks.... just a moment too late.

SHINGGGG

30m in front of me, I watch two shining daggers pierce through the neck of the tank leaning against a tree. He instantly dissipates into a bright white light, then the daggers disappear into nothingness.

I yell out.

“RUN! This is a hunter with a stealth skill! Unless you can sense him, you’re no match!”

Maria turns to me glowing bright blue.

“Is it that guy from before?”

I look around sporadically to try and sense him again.

“Yes. I need to concentrate in order to face him. Run! I’ll catch up, trust me.”

Maria nods and darts off. I motion for Nessa to follow, she sprints off moments later.

As they run, I watch two silver blades emerge from thin air slashing the woman dagger user in half... She glows bright white and disappears instantly, indicating shes been transported back to the respawn point as well. Their captain Bruce yells in frustration as his team gets slaughtered in front of his eyes.

“COME ON! FACE ME!”

There’s no response. He’s just yelling at the empty forest at this point.

I grit my teeth and focus harder. I feel the cool breeze, the leaves swaying slowly back and forth, Bruce’s heavy breathing, and then... the light vibrations of footsteps shaking the ground.

Then I finally look up and lock on.

[20m]

[Lv. 286]

Active Items:

[Steel Dagger Set] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Steel Armor Set] +400 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +200 Speed

[Griffin’s Talon] +40% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Silver Ring] +30% Speed

[Ring of Protection] +25% Defense

Active Skills:

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

It looks like his level is even higher than before, and he's picked up some new gear. This maniac climbed the labyrinth solo a second time on a mission just to come and kill me...?

I run toward the faint sound of footsteps.

CLANGGGG

Moments later his daggers meet my blade. Sparks fly as the man appears from his stealth mode. We jump back and stare each other down. He grins and yells out to me.

"Fancy meeting you here. Looks like I'll get to give you the payback you deserve. It's been a real pain ya know!"

As I start to reply he takes a step backward and disappears. I decide to yell at him anyways.

"If I beat you this time you're dead for real. You know that? Go pick on somebody else!"

I look around waiting for a reply, but hear nothing.

With all my active sensory skills on overdrive, I take a deep breath in and out to visualize the battlefield. Nessa and Maria have safely made it about 50m to my right. They're hidden behind a clump of trees while still moving quickly away. The tank named Bruce is still standing 15m to my left side behind his shield attempting to search for the enemy. He's too stubborn to back down...

I watch the dagger user attack the tank beside me. I should have known he's trying to pick off all the weaker opponents first. The maniac makes contact with Bruce's shield, but also sinks one dagger deep into his left arm. He yells out in pain as I dart over to try and help.

The dagger user disappears, then suddenly stabs the tank deep in the back. To my surprise, he's still standing. Bruce lets out a yell and manages to slam his shield against his opponent's head as he disappears into stealth mode again.

The tank grins at me while coughing up blood searching for something in his item box. I yell to him as I intercept the dagger user's next attack.

CLANGGGG

My sword blocks a pair of daggers from reaching his neck.

"GET OUT OF HERE! I SAID I'LL HANDLE HIM."

With his eyes open wide watching the sparks fly off clashing steel less than a meter from his neck, the man turns and runs.

"GOT IT. All you kid!"

The daggers disappear again and I'm finally alone on the battlefield facing my old opponent. Again, I let my eyes scan the area using enemy detection and allow my sense to flow with the heightened nature of my berserker state. I make out the light sounds of footsteps less than 10m to my right side.

I turn and speak softly.

"This is your last chance to leave."

I let my flames burn bright while my vision tunnels on the vague wavering outline of a man in my mind's eye.

There's no response. So I let my blade soar.

SHINGGGG**CRACKKK

The black sword flickers red as it makes contact with the man's daggers. He attempts to block my slash, but both of his blades shatter into pieces as I release a crescent-shaped wave of dark fire magic from deep within me.

The fragments of his weapons fly in the air as he's thrown 20m backward into the base of a tree while reappearing and coughing up blood.

I sprint over to him with a malicious grin and a red blade glowing brightly. There's a fiery gash across his chest, but he's still managing to move around slightly. I point my blade at his neck and use intimidation.

"What was that you said before? The payoff I deserve or something?"

He looks at me with a face full of disgust and fear while frozen in place. With his final will to live, he manages to spit at me....

I bring my blade down to incinerate the large glob of saliva in mid-air, slicing the disrespectful man in half without a second thought.

I turn and scoff, but then see blue text appear.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Dagger Mastery

[YES][NO]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Stealth

[YES][NO]

I nod slowly, then choose yes on both skills while looking over my shoulders to make sure no one's watching. The flaming corpse in front of me is a horrific sight to see, but the battle adrenaline mixed with the ego of my blade makes it seem just like a plain old pile of loot.

I take off the man's rings and necklace, then put them on myself as an extra prize for beating him twice. I warned him... so I don't really feel too bad.

With a sigh, I use enemy detection to locate the group of 3 pretty close by, but my heart skips a beat as I sense someone above me...

[Lv. 451]

I erupt into flames again activating basically every single one of my skills as a defense mechanism, but then calm down as I realize who it is...

I sigh, put down my sword, and relax as I see a Hunters Association Representative with a yellow armband nod at me, then quickly dart away jumping along the treetops.

It's just one of the examiner's helpers. He did see me kill a man... but that's not against the rules, so I should be fine. I shrug and locate the others.

[200m]

[Lv. 297]

[Lv. 271]

[Lv. 256]

My flames go out slowly, berserker fades off, and my sword returns back to black. I make my way toward Maria, Nessa, and Bruce. Hopefully, they're doing okay after losing 2 of their teammates...

Chapter 85

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 29 Hours]

I make my way back to the group and Maria is the first to speak up.

"Mission accomplished?"

I grin and wave my new talon-shaped necklace at her to confirm my victory.

Bruce, the tank is fully healed now, he turns to me with a thankful look on his face.

"I appreciate the save back there, we wouldn't have made it out in one piece. You said you'd faced him before? How'd that happen?"

I nod.

"Yeah. I fought him on a lower floor too. Fortunately, or I guess unfortunately he's not coming back this time. Sorry about your teammates, at this rate they won't be passing the exam..."

Bruce crosses his arms and shrugs.

"We already made an agreement before entering. If any of us fall behind, it's in our best interest to keep moving forward. We may have come as a team, but each of us is here to pass the exam as an individual."

I look around to see Nessa nodding as well. I turn to Maria, she's close by my right side.

"How about us? What's our plan?"

Maria shrugs and replies.

"I guess we can do the same deal. We're too far in to wait for each other now."

I nod and look around with confidence.

"Agreed. I doubt we'll run into that scenario anyway."

Nessa jumps in.

“Well you’re full of yourself today aren’t ya? I know you just saved us, but come on, this is still just test 1!”

We all laugh a bit and keep walking toward the back of the dungeon. I lead the way using enemy detection to keep us away from as many teams as possible. Maria takes the lead every once in a while to make our weaving path a little less suspicious. Nessa and Bruce just seem to be thankful there are no enemies around, they don’t speak up to question it. I have a feeling Nessa knows exactly what’s going on though, her skill is Mimic after all.

We battle 6 more groups of Ogres, then make it to the boss room without facing any other teams. Before we enter, I speak up.

“Hey Nessa, what skill are you using today?”

She grins.

“How about I show you?”

I nod, then all 4 of us enter the boss room.

It’s a gross wet cave-like environment with high rocky walls, pretty much the same as every other mountain or forest dungeon boss room. We wait around in silence for a few seconds until a massive mutant ogre appears. It’s level 198, 4m tall, has dark green skin, and smells like rotting flesh.

Nessa runs forward and we all stand back to watch.

Her long silver sword begins to glow with a light pink tint. I’ve never seen anything like this before....

She jumps up at the roaring beast and slices through its neck like butter. This isn’t overly impressive, there’s still a pretty large skill level gap, but that was no ordinary cut. The monster’s flesh dematerializes the moment it makes contact with the pink aura around Nessa’s blade.

I use appraisal on her to fully examine what’s going on with that skill.

[Mimic]: Combat Magic [Mana Manipulation]

I raise an eyebrow as she turns back around with her head held high.

“So, what do you think? Mana Manipulation is pretty neat isn’t it?”

I nod as she walks back over to us.

“It is.... What exactly can it do? More importantly, where’d you get it?”

She chuckles.

“It’s our Guild Master’s skill, he let me mimic it before we left. It basically creates a field of mana to use against enemies that are weak to magic attacks. Slimes, for example, I can use this skill to defeat them. Also, it lets me absorb 25% of the MP from an enemy target, pretty neat huh?”

I nod slowly. Honestly, I was hoping for her to name a random monster so I could have that skill for myself. The Tara Guild Master on the other hand, I don't think I'll be attempting to kill him any time soon...

Maria looks around cluelessly trying to grasp the situation at hand. Nessa laughs for a moment, then fills her in on the details while the white light transports us to the next floor. I guess she isn't secretive about her ability at all, good for her.

The next floor feels like a mix between that desert dungeon, and the one we just left. It's dry and arid, but there are still occasional trees and patches of shrubbery. Some hills rise up in the distance, but it's mostly a wide-open plane. The artificial sun beats down on us and I turn to Nessa.

"Hey, do you still have my water on you?"

She looks back at me with a guilty thin smile while reaching into her item box and pulling out a water bottle with a few drops left in it at best.

"Y-Yeah, here ya go. I owe you one, sorry."

She throws it back to me. I look at her with an annoyed stare, but can't really blame her. If I traveled this far without any water I'd do the same thing. I just nod and throw it into my item storage, it's not a big deal.

While activating enemy detection and inspect I lead the way into this new dungeon environment. There are 21 teams ahead of us now. It's less than the last floor, but I can't tell if that's a good thing or not. After our little nap, it seems we've fallen back into the middle of the pack. I was unconscious for about 2 hours, I have no idea how many teams passed us. The fact that we could be running out of time to reach the top 200 is a worry in the back of my mind.

"Come on, let's pick up the pace!"

I begin running and Maria follows without hesitation. Nessa and Bruce follow soon after. We never formally agreed on it, but it seems like they've joined our party for now after the extermination of their two teammates. I'm not opposed to it, I just have to keep my skill use to a minimum in front of new people. They can handle the monsters for now. I already saved their lives, there isn't much more for me to prove. We continue running for about 15 minutes before approaching our first group of monsters. Once we get close enough I take a step back and yell out.

"We have some company, take care of them."

As I step back, a pack of 6 lizardmen approaches with long spears and shiny silver armor. They're all about our height, around 2m tall, not including their tails. I use inspect and watch Nessa and Bruce prepare to take them on.

[Lv. 217]

[Lv. 209]

[Lv. 209]

[Lv. 208]

[Lv. 208]

[Lv. 206]

One of them stands about half a meter taller than the other, it seems to be the one calling the shots.

Nessa's blade begins to glow pink, and Bruce readies his shield charging forward. She follows close behind using the tank as a distraction to cleanly slice the heads off of every lizardman one by one with ease. They squeal in agony and we continue our trek without waiting for the beasts to dissolve.

Bruce and Nessa have a battle strategy down to a science. This must be how they normally fight monsters. As we continue, they clear out mobs while Maria and I navigate through the dungeon. After 6 more encounters and 2 hours of slow jogging, we make it to the boss room without a problem. Bruce speaks up before we enter.

"We didn't see a single team throughout this entire dungeon, are we really that far ahead? Or.. behind...?"

I smile.

"Let's just call it good luck. I think we're right on schedule."

He nods with a happy grin of ignorance.

We actually managed to pass 8 whole teams on our way to the boss room. Using enemy detection let us avoid 3 large battles that were breaking out in the central part of the dungeon, I thought it'd be better not to mention this at all.

We all enter the boss room moments later.

Again, I let Nessa and Bruce handle the boss. We're in a small cave with a sandy floor, the boss is a level 226 lizardman with a large spear, beady red eyes, and dark green scaly skin. The beast stands over 3.5m tall, but before I could get a good look at it Nessa already finished it off....

We transport to floor 9 a few minutes later.

Once the white transfer light dissipates, my vision seems to still be foggy....

I look around, but everything is still white, and I'm freezing cold. I yell out.

"Hey, get back!"

Then ignite myself into a ball of fire.

The visibility is a little better, I can see my three teammates beside me trying to get as close to my flickering flames as possible without getting burned. The cold dungeon ground in front of us is lit up for about 30m, but anything further ahead just disappears into a white void.

"So this is real snow...."

I turn to Maria and we both grin a little.

This is a winter dungeon. There's heavy snow covering the hard rocky ground, and it seems to be pouring down even more of it.

I use inspect and enemy detection, then my eyes open wide. There's 43 teams in this dungeon, and a lot of them are standing still. The monsters here travel solo, and they're all pretty high levels.

“Let’s move, and fast. I don’t like this dungeon one bit, stay alert.”

We all moved forward at a steady walking pace. My flames last about 30 minutes at this low rate of use, so I don’t mind being a walking space heater for the group. After the first half an hour passes I reach into my item storage to pull out a hand full of mana crystals from the Rat Dungeon. I use plunderer on them, and it takes about 3 of them to restore my MP to full. No one seemed to notice, or care.

After another 15 minutes pass I can’t avoid one of the moving targets unless we start to run. I yell out.

“There’s a monster coming our way, get ready!”

Bruce and Nessa get ready for battle, and I sit back enjoying my new unofficial party leader position. It’s nice being in charge of a group.

THUDDDD

THUDDDD

THUDDDD

THUDDDD

Out from the icy white void in front of us, an enormous mammoth appears. It stands over 5m tall, and easily 8m long. It’s massive white tusks blend in with the snow, but its long dark brown fur sticks out clear as day.

The best bellows and lets out a ferocious roar as it stares down at our team with dark black eyes.

I use inspect.

[Lv. 231]

Nessa is the first to attack. Her sword glows pink and lunges at the beast.

CLANGGGGG

I raise an eyebrow as her reinforced mana sword bounces off the mammoth’s tusk with an eerie metal clanging sound. At the same moment, the tank charges at the beast’s feet and plows through its right front leg. I hear a crack as the Monmouth roars and falls to its knees. In frustration, Nessa yells and charges back in at the beast creating a large gash along in its side with a swing of her blade.

Moments later, she cuts it to pieces avoiding the tusks at all costs.

The team of 2 come back shivering, but satisfied with their work. Nessa speaks up.

“Those tusks must have some kind of magic resistance. My sword bounced right off!”

I nod as we continue forward.

“Yeah, I was surprised. It looks like we’re actually making it to a portion of this labyrinth where monsters will be a real threat.”

As we continued further in, I plundered the MP from 3 more mana crystals and we faced off against 2 more mammoths over the next half an hour. The teams in the area were thinning out and I could even sense some of them heading back in the opposite direction... but not many.

Our 4th mammoth drops a tusk along with a large mana crystal after Nessa defeats it. She drags it over to me.

“Hey Jay! Look at this!”

I use appraisal on the tusk.

[Mammoth Tusk] +50% Magic Resistance

“Hey, if you kill it, ya keep it. Those are the unspoken rules... but I’ll trade you something for it.”

I start sifting through my item box, but Nessa speaks up.

“First one’s on me, you’ve been burning through MP to keep us warm, that’s more than enough.”

I nod thankfully and place the tusk into my item box. I’m sure it’ll fetch a high price, or come in handy at some point.

We continue forward.

After another hour and a half of trekking through snow and ice, we finally make it to the back of the dungeon. I used up 9 more mana crystals and we face 5 more mammoths, none of which dropped any more tusks. We enter the boss room together.

I can’t see the outer edges of the room, but I assume they’re present. A wild blizzard is roaring, and the snow is deep up to our knees. I let my flames burn brighter to melt away as much as possible in our general vicinity.

A level 239 mammoth appears a few seconds later. It takes 5 hits, but Nessa subjugates the beast without much of a problem. I let my flames die down and the white light appears, it transports us to floor 10.

Bruce speaks up as we all materialize into a rocky grassland with red-orange dirt.

“Anther dungeon without facing a single team, you two really are a lucky charm!”

I grin thinly as I look up into the deep blue sky and use enemy detection on our surroundings. There are a few trees and large boulders every 50m or so, but other than that, it’s flat ground with a few patches of short green grass. There are 14 teams here, and a lot of them are clumped together at the back half of this dungeon. We passed over 30 teams on floor 9, so I’m a lot less worried about getting there on time. We’re in a good position now. The only problem is the large group of monsters running towards us. I count over a dozen, and they’re all over level 240... I reply to Bruce.

“Yeah, this is our last one. So stay sharp.”

I look out into the distance as the ground begins to rumble lightly beneath our feet.

Chapter 86

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 22 Hours]

Nessa and Bruce step out in front of me. I can see them visibly panting, their eyes have heavy bags under them, and Nessa's legs are shaking a bit.

I turn to see Maria, then see her join them in formation. I sigh and step forward to join as well. I guess it's about time we get serious.

"Hey, you two. I appreciate the help, but come on... I can tell you're exhausted. I don't mind taking this dungeon on with Maria. By all means, rest up."

Nessa smiles thinly and looks at Bruce, she nods to him. He won't admit it, but I can tell the tank is nearing his limit as well. They both step back and let Maria and me handle this one.

A small cloud of red dust begins to form in the distance. We slowly approach it, and finally, after a few minutes, the pack of monsters comes into view. I use inspect.

[Lv. 249]

[Lv. 243]

[Lv. 243]

[Lv. 243]

[Lv. 243]

[Lv. 242]

[Lv. 242]

[Lv. 241]

[Lv. 241]

[Lv. 241]

[Lv. 240]

[Lv. 240]

[Lv. 240]

I grin as I see a group of wild hounds charging toward us. They all have dark red fur, laser-focused eyes, and sharp-looking teeth. They're 1.5m tall at most, and 3m long from head to tail. Their muscles are compact and ripple between long graceful strides. Some of them seem to be giving off a nasty dark red aura...

The pack growls and each one of them lock their eyes onto different targets. These are some real wild beasts.

I use appraisal on their leader.

[Lv. 249]

Active Items:

[NONE]

Active Skills:

Intimidation

Bloodlust

Bufs:

[+50% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength]

I turn to Mara while bursting into flames and she begins to glow bright blue matching my display. We run at the ravenous hounds with our blades held at the ready.

Once In range, I can feel the stares of intimidation from the pack making the hairs on my neck stand up. I activate berserker and continue forward without hesitating. In a battle of wills, whichever opponent has the higher Mental Strength stat will prevail using the intimidation skill. Maria and I are well above the necessary threshold.

We make contact, and let loose! Maria freezes 5 hounds solid in a matter of seconds. I slice the heads of 3 clean off in a single focused blow while looking up with a satisfied smirk. My speed and agility are just fast enough to weave in and out of the monsters. Maria, on the other hand, is a bit slower. She's using walls of ice to keep them occupied. On contact, she can freeze them solid.

The dogs that glow red are significantly faster and exceptionally agile. It seems like they act much more recklessly, and jump straight into danger without thinking. This must be a side effect of their "Bloodlust" skill. I turn to Maria.

"Keep the rest of them busy, I want their leader."

She nods and turns to the 4 remaining underlings growling at her with murderous glares. I face the leader. It has a powerful red aura around it, similar to my berserker skill, but with a slightly darker... more ominous crimson tint.

I can feel the waves of energy coming off this beast. It's attempting to intimidate me with all its might. I point my sword forward and activate my own intimidation skill.

The moment my wave of energy hits the beast, I see the mutt's eyes open wide as it attempts to growl and put on a final menacing glare. A few seconds later, it begins to whimper and falls to the floor with its head bowed down.

I happily bow my head slightly as well, just to show the creature a bit of respect before slicing it into fiery pieces moments later.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Bloodlust

[YES][NO]

I choose yes and turn around while deactivating all my active skills. Maria has finished her work as well, we stroll over to Bruce and Nessa. They stare at us wide-eyed in awe. Nessa speaks up.

"Wasn't that.... A bit overkill?"

I turn to Maria, then we both chuckle.

“Was it?”

We turn to walk away from the piles of frozen and burning corpses without talking about it any further.

“Come on let’s keep moving.”

We continue at a pretty steady pace through the rest of this dungeon. A total of 4 more wolf packs attack, they range from 8 to 15 members each. The strongest leader so far has been level 252. Even with their bloodlust skill, none of them are much of a match for Maria and me. Nessa and Bruce joined in once just to see how they’d fare. Surprisingly, it was a pretty tough fight.... They worked well together and used Bruce’s shield to block and land cheap shots, but they were surprisingly slower than the hounds. Luckily, Nessa’s glowing sword made quick work of them and the intimidation skill only slowed them down slightly. She still got bitten a few times but used an HP potion after the battle finished. It was a good reality check for me. Monsters are still our enemies. It’s only a matter of time until one may be stronger than me....

We continue to weave through teams and fight off wolves until facing off with other humans becomes unavoidable. It’s been just over 2 hours and I can tell Nessa and Bruce are on their last straw. They can perk up for battle, but that’s just life-or-death adrenaline they’ve been running off of for the last couple of hours. One more big battle is their limit, I can tell. At the back of the dungeon, I can sense a team of 6 that hasn’t moved for well over half an hour. We’ve been slowly approaching, but I’ve been hesitant to make contact. One of them has a higher level than me....

Eventually, I let out a sigh and decide it’s time to see what’s happening over there. We make the trek over a few small hills and the boss room portal finally comes into view. The 6 people I sensed earlier are crowded around it. Their voices ring out from over 50m away...

A big man with bright orange hair wearing heavy armor and carrying a dark black sword is facing 5 other men. He’s yelling and pointing his sword at them angrily.

“OH YEAH? If you don’t want to pay, then I guess you’re not getting through!!”

A thin, tall dark-haired group member stands up to the armored tank with his own sword pointed straight back at him.

“It’s 5 against 1 buddy. We’re not paying you a single bronze piece. Get out of our way!”

The big orange-haired tank lets out a sigh.

“Too bad. I was really going to let you through.”

He begins glowing bright white, then lunges forward grabbing the man by the left shoulder. There’s a flash of white light and he’s gone in seconds... The tank grabs some kind of potion from his item box and proceeds to drink it while running to his next target.

The massive man is moving at rapid speeds... He may even be faster than me, my eyes can barely track him.

The group of men begin yelling and attempt to attack the speeding tank, but their attacks miss as he weaves through the bunch of them in silence drinking potions and making them disappear instantly with a touch on the shoulder.... one by one....

Seconds later, the massive tank looks around at an empty field, satisfied with his work. Soon after, he makes his way back to the boss room portal. Once 3m in front of it, he stops, turns around, sinks his sword into the ground, crosses his arms, looks directly at us, then yells.

“Come on over! I just cleared a path for ya!”

We all gulp simultaneously and don’t move a muscle. He puts on a friendly smile and keeps waving.

“I won’t bite, just do as I say! Come on over.”

I look over at the others. Nessa and Bruce are nervously staring at the man, Maria is glowing bright blue with her sword drawn.

This man’s skill is not ordinary.... I’ve never seen anything quite like it. The group of 6 were standing together for a long time, and he gave them a few warnings before attacking. I’m not exactly sure what for, but at least he was a bit civilized about it. I speak up.

“We’ll come down. I’d like to avoid fighting though.”

The large man nods slowly.

“So you’re the smart one of the group aren’t ya?”

I don’t reply, but motion my team member to do as he says. Nessa and Bruce reluctantly agree. They’re the first ones to approach. Maria and I follow close behind. It just feels a bit more natural to have our shield wielder up front for now.

As we make it to the bottom of the hill the orange-haired tank speaks up again.

“Congrats win making it to the last floor. If you all want to make it past, you’re going to have to pay the tax! Line up, one at a time and I’ll be taking one item off of each of you! Then be my guest, enter the boss room!”

He lifted his jet-black sword up and smirked while eyeing all of us head to toe.

I use inspect and appraisal on him.

[Lv. 311]

Active Items:

[Enchanted High Ogre’s Sword] +50% Strength

[Heavy Steel Armor Set] +600 Defense

[Enchanted Leather Boots] +300 Speed +300 Agility

[High Ogre’s Pendant] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Silver Ring] +30% Speed

[Ring of Protection] +25% Defense

[Lizard King's Scale] +45% Mental Strength

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

Active Skills:

Equivalent Exchange

I stare forward with a blank look reading all of his stats while he waves the sword around waiting for our response. The tank yells at us again.

"So come on! What's it gonna be? Pay the tax or pay the price!"

Chapter 87

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 19 Hours]

The large man keeps pointing his sword forward with a menacing presence insisting we do as he says, or we'll "pay the price".

Bruce is the first to step forward. He's roughly the same size as the orange-haired man, but we all witnessed him effortlessly take out a team of 5 moments ago.... The unknown tank has some mysterious power, and we'd be better off not finding out how it works. Bruce speaks up.

"W-What do you want?"

The man standing in front of the portal grins and lets his sword come down to rest by his side.

"Good, you guys won't be as difficult as that last team. Hand over your shield and I'll let you pass."

Bruce looks back at us with tired eyes, then back at the large man. The brute starts glowing white... just like he did when he made that entire team disappear in seconds.

"What's with the hesitation???"

Bruce gulps.

"Here! Take it, it's all yours!"

I didn't expect him to crack that quickly.... But I guess he's had a long day. Bruce has been awake and fighting for 30 hours straight, I guess I can't blame him.

His shield falls to the floor by the orange-haired man's feet. The man motions for him to pass and for Nessa to step up to him.

Bruce walks over to the swirling portal and Nessa does as the man wants, he looks her up and down then speaks up.

"Hmmm, you have nothing of value. I want all your potions. Everything! Hand them over!"

Nessa's eyes widen as she begins sifting through her item box with the massive man towering over her. She dumps half a dozen random potions onto the hard dungeon floor without hesitating.

"Good. Now you two get lost. Next!"

Nessa quickly runs over to Bruce and they wait with wide eyes as Maria steps up to the man. She doesn't say a word, just looks at him with a serious concentrated stare.

The large man turns his head to face the portal and yells.

"I SAID GET LOST. YOU'RE DISMISSED!"

Maria draws her sword out of reflex and the man turns back around and laughs at the sight.

"Now isn't that cute. You're up blondy."

He looks Maria up and down and shakes his head.

"Aghhh, another hunter with worthless gear. Come on!"

The brute looks around and swings his sword up in the air with frustration, then sees Nessa and Bruce still waiting by the grey twisting portal.

"I SAID GET LOST YOU TWO!"

He begins glowing bright white and slowly makes his way toward them. I quickly nod, yell out.

"Go! We'll meet you on the next floor."

With confirmation, the two of them jump through moments later without a second thought. The brute turns back with a moderately angry expression. He makes eye contact with me, glances down at my sword, then a wide grin appears on his face.

"Hohooo, now would you look at that beauty!"

I proceed to point this "beauty" directly at his face.

"Not gonna happen."

The orange-haired thug lets out a bellowing laugh.

"Oh trust me it is, drop the sword. Then for you miss, leave all your potions with me. Every last one of them."

Maria starts glowing bright blue and looks over at me. I stare back at her.

"Don't take him lightly. I'd give him your potions and leave if I were you. Seriously."

Maria shook her head and looks back at the man angrily.

"I won't let you take anything from me. Not a single potion! And stay away from Jay's sword!"

I can't help but smile a little bit. She's definitely not looking to get rid of her potions, but Maira is much more defensive about my sword. How cute.

I burst into flames and activate Berserker.

"I guess we're doing this the hard way."

The tank laughs out loud again pointing his sword at both of us enveloping his body in that blinding white light again.

“I gave the two of you a fair chance to make it through. How unfortunate.”

He runs forward at Maria with incredible speed. Seeing him move up close is even more frightening than from a distance. Immediately, Maria creates an Ice wall and deflects the beast of a man’s frontal attack. Ice shards fly everywhere as Maria darts away and the brute destroys her defenses in an instant.

I attempt to run in, but the man has his sights focused on Maria. He lets out a yell and I see him smile from ear to ear. His eyes open wide and he throws the long blade at the back of Maria’s head. I yell out.

“Behind you-“

Before I can finish my sentence, Maria has already created another wall of Ice, trapping the flying projectile inside while twisting her body around with her own sword at the ready. The tank doesn’t change his trajectory in the slightest. He runs full force at the wall of Ice crashing through and narrowly avoiding Maria’s incoming blade.

She plants her left hand on the ground and begins to freeze the man’s feet in a layer of solid light blue magic, but he breaks free with ease.

The two of them stand 5m apart. I’m less than 20m away sprinting at them with all my might. Maria lunges forward and lets out a yell, the tall orange-haired man does the same.

There’s an explosion of ice and snow, then the two of them are on opposite sides of each other 5m apart once again. The man’s sword is stuck in a pillar of Ice, and Maria is grinning with her sword pointed at the man’s head.

At this point, I’ve begun my own attack.

I jump in at the unguarded man and swing my sword with a vale of fire surrounding my entire body.

SHINGGGGG

I land a cheap shot on the man’s abdomen under his heavy chest plate and fly by getting out of the way. I turn around to see the blood-dripping wound and smirk. To my surprise, he’s grinning as well....

Maria jumps forward and attacks the wide-open man as well. He stays still and doesn’t move a muscle, welcoming her attack with open arms.

SHINGGGGG

A direct hit!

Maria’s blade penetrates the mans abdomen right below the wound my sword created. It’s a deep shot but doesn’t quite make it through to the other side.

He looks down at her with a menacing glare and grabs her right shoulder while still skewered by the long silver sword.

The dim white glow all around him begins to shine brightly again.

Maria cries out in pain and I see the man drinking an HP potion through the blinding white light as Maria falls to the ground beneath his feet.

Once the brightness dissipates....

Maria... is gone....

The grunt lets out another bellowing laugh and stands before me drinking yet another HP potion. With his other hand, he pulls his sword from the large pillar of Ice by his side. He yells over to me as I stare at him wide-eyed.

“You’re up next kid. Hand over the blade, or you’re going back to floor 1 with your girlfriend.”

I look around to see Ice shattering and falling all around us, but Maria is nowhere to be found. I look at the man with a confused look.

“H-How? What just happened?”

He smirks and sticks his sword into the ground and leans on it.

“You won’t make it to the next round anyways, you don’t have to know! With an attack like this... you’re no match for me!”

He laughs and points to the area on his abdomen that I’d cut earlier, it’s been healed with an HP potion since.

“I’ve faced 46 of you shrimps so far. Only 11 have dropped their loot, the rest have been sent back to floor 1 or an early grave. Not a single hunter has bested me today.”

He eyes my burning blade.

“So be a good little hunter and hand it over. You can’t beat me. I’ll kill you on contact! Fighting me is pointless!”

I scoff at the man and don’t bat an eye.

“On contact huh?”

“...”

“Bring it on.”

He smirks.

“Your loss kid.”

Then he lunges forward with his sword straight ahead and his left hand outreached.

I dart away as fast as I can leaving a trail of fire behind me. The orange-haired tank is close behind and gaining on me. He’s even faster than before... this man was holding back....

I let out a yell and try to move my legs faster than they’ll possibly move. His voice rings out from behind.

“Come on boy! Give up the sword and you’ll pass this exam.”

I turn my head to see him less than 3 meters away glowing white and reaching his hand out to grab me. With a yell, I activate one of my new skills in desperation.

“Bloodlust.”

I feel a powerful surge of energy enter my bloodstream flowing from my heart to my stomach, then all the way down my legs, deep into the vines in my toes.... My right foot grips the hard ground and I’m propelled forward with a burst of new speed and power. My flames glow brighter and the aura of my berserker skill mixes with the dreadful new aura of this bloodlust skill.

The grunt on my tail is lost in an instant. My new increase in speed and agility boost me forward saving my life at the last possible moment. I create a 10m gap, then turn around to face the man with a brand new murderous stare in my eyes. This new power feels incredible... all I want to do is... kill.

He stops in his tracks as well and looks me up and down.

“So you’re quick aren’t ya?”

I run at my prey without a second thought.

The exchange is quick... but doesn’t go as well as expected. We both lock eyes and run at each other. The man in front of me drops his sword. With both hands in the air... He’s just running at me like a maniac with wild bloodshot eyes.

“Come hereeeee!”

I grit my teeth and focus on my target with tunnel vision. I need to hit him, but I can’t get hit. All of his past victims flash before my eyes...

They only die on physical contact when he touches them.

SHINGGGGG

A direct hit! Well, kind of.

I manage to leave a small gash on his right arm. He bleeds a bit, grunts, then turns to face me with an insane smile across his face.

I charge at him again.

SHINGGGGG

Another hit! On his left arm this time. A small gash, but I just need to keep him occupied for now and drain his HP.

We turn to face one another and complete the exchange again.

SHINGGGGG

Another gash appears on his right arm dripping blood until the small amount of flame residue left behind burns the wound shut.

Then we run at each other again.... And again.... And again....

I've landed 6 hits in a row on this beast and he's showing no signs of slowing down. I can't hit any vital spots because getting too close to the body will leave me wide open for his attack. I need to stay a full sword distance away at all times to be safe.

I run at the man again. He runs at me.

I focus on making a small wound on his right arm, then darting out of the way as fast as possible just like my last half a dozen attacks, but at the worst possible moment... 5m away from the glowing man...

I begin to slow down.

The flames on my blade begin to flicker, and the aura around my body starts to glow dimmer. I've run out of MP... In the chaos of battle, and adrenaline rush of my new bloodlust skill, I've completely neglected to conserve my energy...

The tank in front of me begins laughing maniacally and yells as he grabs my left shoulder.

"YOU'RE DONE KIDDO!"

My vision goes white and I feel a searing pain flow through my entire body. It's like a thousand tiny swords are stabbing me all over... and all at once. It's hot, then cold, then super hot again, then finally freezing cold.... It's one of the oddest sensations I've ever felt. I yell out in pain as I fall forward, attempting to catch myself with my sword on the hard ground.

With blurry vision, I look up to read my status at 35/1490 HP and 0/1490 MP. The orange-haired tank is towering over me while drinking an HP potion and grinning ear to ear.

"Looks like I've gotcha now. Any last words?"

Chapter 88

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 19 Hours]

I let out a yell and push myself backward using my sword as a propellant. The massive man glows brightly with his hands outreached toward me.

I throw myself back about 5m in the air with all my strength while digging through my item box vigorously. A handful of HP potions fall onto the floor before an MP potion finally pops out. I lock eyes with the man as I rip the cork off it with my teeth and chug it down as fast as humanly possible.

All of a sudden, he stops running at me and places his hands on his hips.

"That's all I needed kid, this could have been over a lot sooner!"

With this brief moment of rest, I keep my eyes locked on the brute and aimlessly grab at the floor around me until I make contact with an HP potion. I gulp down its contents without hesitation as the man just stands in silence grinning...

The orange-haired tank eyes me up and down while standing in front of the sword I left stuck in the ground before him. His smirk widens and he grabs it tightly attempting to pull it from the hard dirt.

"ARRRGHH DAMN YOU LITTLE S-"

The grunt's hand bursts into flames as the sword begins to glow bright red. My eyes widen as I remember it's bonded to my blood. No other person can possibly wield it without being burned...

The man begins to glow white with an anger-filled expression across his face and runs at me.

I activate bloodlust, then turn to run... There's no way I can get hit by an attack like that again. It decimated all of my HP in less than a second last time, it was nothing more than pure luck I made it out of that exchange. He won't get distracted by my sword next time either.

Oh right... my sword.

After launching myself away from the brute with all my might, I turn my head to look over my shoulder and see him chasing close behind. My mind is spinning and my heart is pounding out of my chest! I take a deep breath in, then let it all out as my mind calms down and a plan begins to formulate.

"Stealth."

Just like that, I disappear mid-step. Well, I disappear from my assailant's perception at least. I make a hard left turn, but the tank continues running straight ahead. He lets out an angry yell as I lock eyes on my glowing red blade. The grunt stops in his tracks and curses me out as I simply dart over to the battle-yearning sword with silent graceful steps.

I reappear moments later with my blade in hand while activating my fire magic and berserker skills. Then with a friendly wave, I call out.

"Hey, big guy! Over here!"

He turns and charges at me like a bull. With rage in his eyes, I can see his ego won't let him admit I managed to slither away from him in his moment of assumed victory.

I take a slow step back activating my stealth skill once again, disappearing from his field of vision. He stops in his tracks wildly swinging his head around in confusion.

"Come on out!! Stop hiding you lit-"

SHINGGGG

I land a critical hit.

With berserker skill, bloodlust, fire magic, and my half-sentient pissed-off sword along for the ride, I leave a deep fiery gash in the thug's midsection below his steel chest plate.

He lets out a yell of frustration while glowing brightly.

"I SAID COME OUT YOU-"

SHINGGGG

I land another hit across his backside this time leaving a trail of fire in my wake. He lets out a scream as I dart around in silence. My stealth skill along with the recent intense mental strength boosts are much too high for him to overcome. The tank is a sitting duck, at my mercy.

With a devious grin, I go in for a final strike.

SHINGGGG

My glowing fiery blade sinks deep into the brute's neck. He lets out a gargled cry while boiling blood explodes in a fiery display. He falls to his knees. I rip the item box from his waist and place my left foot on his chest to rip the sword from his body as he falls to his back moments later.

I reappear to watch the look on his face as I send him off to the labyrinth's starting point. The moment I do.... I feel a hand wrap around my left foot as it hits the ground.

A white light appears and the pain of a thousand knives returns...

But... It's not as bad as before....

Instinctively I let out a yell, but to my surprise when I check my status moments later, I only dropped 50 HP in total...

The man's grip un-tightens and he murmurs a few words.

"I-I shoulda killed- a- a runt like you when I had the chance."

My blade is still glowing bright red begging me to finish off the man before me.

I look down at him.

"How many hunters have you killed today because they wouldn't give up their prized possessions? I don't mean sent back to the start... I mean killed..."

The man coughs up more blood and starts laughing while struggling to reply.

"Oh more than you could count ki-"

SHINGGGGG

Without warning, I cut off the man's left hand.

His eyes open wide as the silver bracelet that was once attached to his wrist rolls past his head.

Before the grunt can let out another word I reduce him to a pile of burning ash.

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Equivalent Exchange

[YES][NO]

I choose yes and turn to walk away without another thought.

"Equivalent Exchange huh? Now I'll get to figure out how this skill actually works."

I pick up his item box and sift through it as well. There are 11 HP potions and 4 MP. I help myself to one of each, restoring my stats to full and throwing the rest in my own item box. I turn to look at the gear left behind by his burning corpse but scoff at the thought of it. I'll let that stolen gear Rest In Peace, along with its past owners.

"Dungeon Walker."

A dark swirling portal appears in front of me and I step in to take a look around. In my mind's eye, I can see every floor below me in this labyrinth with crystal-clear precision when I focus hard enough.

“Where are you...?”

I sift through every lower layer but there's no sign of Maria. I know we agreed not to wait for each other, but I only said that because of Bruce and Nessa's company.

I let out a sigh and step into the floor 1 dungeon. She must have not re-entered...

I step into the familiar horned rabbit dungeon and look around activating enemy detection just to make sure Maria is definitely not here. Either way, It's pretty peaceful on this floor, I'll have to come back sometime.

After a short 200m walk, I exit the labyrinth making my way back to the outside world. The sight before me was not expected...

There must be at least 50 hunters all standing around with their heads hanging low talking and trading magic items. The scent of despair fills the air, as all of the men and women here have certainly given up on passing the exam this time around. They all look up at me with awkward stares. It must be an odd sight for someone to step out of the labyrinth after all... with their bracelet still intact too...

I gulp lightly and scan the group of people while activating enemy detection to try and lock onto Maria's unique level signature. Before I can even do a deep search I hear my name being called out from behind the crowd.

“Jay? Y-You came back? H-How?”

Maria runs out from behind the closely gathered hunters while wiping tears from her face and attempting to smile.

“I-uh I did, of course, I did.”

She jumps at me with her arms stretched out wide and a face filled with hope again. I catch Maria mid-arm and chuckle a little while comforting her the best I can. After a few seconds, she drops back down to the ground and we lock eyes with a more serious expression. I nod with a smile.

“Come on, we have an exam to pass.”

I turn my head motioning for us to re-enter the labyrinth. Many hunters in the crowd start laughing and whispering various inaudible words of doubt to their fellow hunters while we walk off toward the floating green portal.

Both of us pay them no mind and step through with grins across our faces. The second we enter the first floor away from prying eyes, I create a new mode of transport.

“Dungeon Walker.”

Maria immediately realizes this dark portal of mine can teleport us much further than the small trip she experienced earlier.

Moments later, we step through and arrive directly in front of the floor 10 boss room.

I smirk as Maria takes out her sword.

“Ready?”

She nods.

“Ready.”

We both jump through. It’s time to challenge the final boss.

Chapter 89

[Test 1][Time Remaining: 18 Hours]

The boss room is darker than I expected it to be. The hard soil remains the same, but the artificial sunlight has left the sky. In the distance, I can see the familiar large cave-like walls wrapping upwards to create a closed-off arena for this boss battle.

Maria and I stand side by side with our swords at the ready. She begins to glow blue as my flames begin to flicker to life. Silence fills the room as we wait in anticipation.

I scan my surroundings with inspect, enemy detection, and appraisal. Seconds later, six red glowing eyes emerge from the darkness before us. The sound of heavy chains clanging together rings throughout the cave and a burst of flames lights up the enemy that walks out from the darkness.

[Lv. 261]

Active Items:

Cursed Shackles[Fire Aspect]

Active Skills:

Intimidation

Bloodlust

Bufs:

[+50% Speed + Agility + Mental Strength]

THUDD

THUDD

THUDD

A vicious three-headed dog stomps into view with heavy metal collars around each of its necks. Long broken metal chains hang from each of them, just barely swinging above the ground. The beast stands over 3m tall. From head to toe, it’s at least 8m long... Well, from its middle head at least.

The monster’s eyes stare us down, and saliva drips from its three mouths as the white jagged teeth reflect off of the fiery display permeating off of each of its limbs... A dark red aura covers its entire body as well. This is one horrific-looking monster.

It lets out a series of growls as the flames on its legs burst into even larger flames. I feel a wave of intimidation hit me, then the beast runs forward.

Our battle has begun.

Without another word, Maria darts off to the left and I take the right. The enormous hound moves its heads on either side to track us both as we run off in opposite directions. I activate bloodlust, berserker, and my own intimidation skill to match its energy as I run closer and closer to the beast. The hound winces, then its collars glow red. The glowing chains are visibly burning the dark fur around its neck, moments later it charges forward breaking free of my mental trap.

With incredible speed and accuracy, the monster launches an attack straight at Maria. It definitely is not fond of my intimidation skill. The beast is trying to take out easier prey first, then it'll deal with me.

A loud collision occurs as Maria summons a wall of Ice and the flaming hound throws itself head-first into it. Ice shards fly everywhere as she narrowly escapes in the confusion. I follow close behind now covered head to toe in flames of my own.

As the beast emerges from the cloud of ice and snow, I launch my first attack.

SHINGGGG

My sword lands a deep slash through the left head's neck, following through to leave additional damage across its backside. It lets out a murderous roar as the chains glow red again, creating plumes of smoke from the burning fur and flesh. This only makes the beast more angry.

Its eyes glow red as it stomps its feet. The left head eyes me up and down, while its right side watches Maria ready herself.

We lock eyes momentarily, then I run at the beast again. The monster erupts into flames and shakes its heads in frustration.

Maria places her left hand on the hard ground and lets out an immense wave of Ice Magic. The hound runs toward her but is stopped in its tracks by the cold white crystals creeping up its legs.

CRACKKK

The monster breaks through, but Maria releases another wave. Every step the hound takes is slowed down by Maria's ever-regenerating Ice trap. It growls staring her down as she chugs an MP potion and lets out more intense waves of magic.

I take this opportunity to commence my second attack. I sprint at the monster with a wide grin across my face. With another graceful lunge and jump, I land on the three-headed dog's back as it struggles to move forward through the Ice in front of it. The heat radiating from its chains is almost unbearable, but it's nothing I can't handle.

Without hesitation, I lift my sword and pierce it deep into the monster's spine right below its middle neck. While using Plunderer to take in its mana, I release a steady flow of fire residue into the creature's body. It flails its heads and roars in pain as Maria keeps it bound in place.

An intense wave of intimidation hit me as the monster tries helplessly to break free. I watch the red glowing collars burn deep into the beast's neck... They begin glowing brighter and brighter as I continue to burn this beast to a crisp.

Something about this doesn't feel right....

My eyes open wide as I realize what's happening, just a few seconds too late...

“Maria! Run No-“

KABOOM!

The chains on the monster’s neck hit their limit. The glowing becomes unbelievably bright... then it explodes into a highly destructive ball of flames.

I use my body hardening and brace for impact as the fiery shock wave hits me. I watch Maria create a dome of Ice as I’m thrown backward 20m in the air.

On the bright side, the hound we were previously facing, has three fewer heads.... I watch the fiery bloody mess explode before my eyes and can help but let out a bit of a chuckle as I hit the hard boss room floor.

The fire clears and the dust settles.

I pick myself up and regenerate the minor broken bones from my fall. Maria emerges from her dome of Ice and we take in the view.

A headless charred corpse lies lifeless with its legs frozen solid and its backside still ablaze.

We walk over to it slowly with our swords out in front of us with curious looks on our faces. Less than a minute later, the corpse begins to disappear.

CLANGGG

A large pink mana crystal falls to the floor along with a pile of dark silver chains attached to a circular shackle that looks about human neck sized...

I use Appraisal.

Cursed Shackles[Fire Aspect]

Then turn to Maria with a grin.

“Well, I did say the next rare item is mine.”

She looks at me wide-eyed.

“Uh- yeah you did. They’re all yours...”

I nod slowly and place the chains in my item storage, then throw Maria the mana crystal.

“That was a good fight, right?”

She catches the stone, places it in her item box, then nods in agreement.

“Yeah, definitely our toughest one yet. It had to go and blow itself up though....”

We laugh together as the white transfer magic brings us up to the next floor.

A familiar voice rings out as floor 11 materializes in front of me.

“Congratulations. You’re number 83.”

I see Rodrigo standing less than 3m from us with a calm emotionless look on his face. He walks over slowly and hands me a small white coin with the number 83 printed on it in black text, then he turns to Maria.

“Congratulations. You’re number 84.”

She accepts the coin as well and we both look at him with puzzled stares. His red suit pops out in front of the bright green dungeon grassland before us. It’s oddly similar to the slime floor from earlier with rolling hills and a bright blue sky, but I doubt there would be another slime dungeon on floor 11... right...?

Rodrigo stares blankly at both of us with his pair of nearly white eyes, then speaks up again.

“Well, it seems you two still have 17 hours or so remaining until the next test. So far, you have proven to show your proficiency in basic combat, simple teamwork, energy conservation, and of course, a little bit of luck. Your next test will be a bit more personal. It will be testing your individuality, perseverance, and ability to grow and adapt to your environment. Please join the others. You may trade, eat, sleep, exercise, and do as you wish until the next test begins. The only rules are you may not enter floor 12, and you may not fight other exam members until the start of our next test. Do I make myself clear?”

We both nod our heads up and down without saying a word.

Rodrigo looks us both up and down one last time. His eyes stop momentarily at the sight of Maria’s left wrist.

“Well, very good. Please do join the rest of your exam mates.”

He glows white and steps to the side. I can’t believe my eyes...

Seemingly out of nowhere, the air begins to ripple in front of us to reveal a massive white fair tent. Underneath it, there are well over 50 large wooden tables and 30 or so smaller private sections along the tent’s outer edges that have multiple beds inside them. The other 82 hunters are all crowded around the center area of tables trading gear, gambling with potions, talking with each other, and relaxing in a casual manner.

I see teams from the association, small guilds, some elite guilds, rogues, and even a few noble-looking squads. These are the best of the best here... well, at least the fastest of the fast... I take a closer look to see if I recognize anyone in particular as we begin to walk over.

That one team in shiny gold armor with the barrier summoning skill is here, and also that duo with the lightning skill and defense buffs. I recognize one team of rogues from outside the labyrinth too, they’re a team of 3 with high levels and unusual gear. The man with the speed cloak and snake tattoo on his hand stands out the most to me.

I continue scanning the crowd, attempting not to make eye contact with any of the yellow armband-wearing guards surrounding the tent. Then I see a familiar face staring at me waving happily.

“YOU GUYS MADE IT!”

Nessa smiles and motions for us to come over to the table she and Bruce managed to get for themselves.

I wave back and we begin to walk over toward them, Maria follows.

What a bizarre sight to see in a dungeon. I guess now all we can do is socialize and wait for the next test to begin...

Chapter 90

[Time Remaining Until Test 2: 17 Hours]

We walk over to sit across from Bruce and Nessa at a long wooden table. I scan the area to see more and more unfamiliar faces. Some smile while others glare. A few seem to be in the private closed-off areas resting as well. Maria keeps her left arm under the table.

Nessa speaks up first.

“So what happened? You took so long we thought- “

I smile and interrupt.

“We came to an agreement with that stubborn orange-haired brute. It just took a while, long story.”

I turn to Maria and sigh. She nods and blinks a few times, then we both turn our heads forward again. Nessa just smiles.

“Well, that’s a relief. Maybe I can manage to get some sleep after all.”

She turns to one of the open curtains of a private resting area, then looks back at me.

“Say, uh, Jay. Could I take a peek at your Fire Magic before the start of the next test?”

I nod while scoping out the resting areas for myself. We have plenty of time before our next test, a nice long sleep would be nice.

“Sure, just remind me.”

She smiles as Bruce interjects.

“Yeah, I’ll be getting some rest too. I need a shield for the next phase of this exam though, hopefully, I’ll be able to make a trade. I’m sure some of the less skilled hunters will be arriving as time ticks down. They’ll surely need a leftover potion or two for a sword right?.”

He scans the crowds looking for anyone willing to give up their shield. I can see a bit of fear in his eyes.

Most of the items being traded are just potions and dropped loot from the floors below. Not many people are giving up their weapons. I do feel kind of bad.... I completely forgot about his shield. With the adrenaline from battle, and the mission to get Maria back, retrieving their lost gear totally slipped my mind. I speak up and look Bruce in the eyes.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find the right person willing to trade eventually.

He nods slowly.

“Thanks.”

I survey the crowd one last time and decide there's not much else I want to do right now but sleep. It would be the most productive thing right now.... Unless.... I turn to Maria.

"Hey, I'm going to get some rest. Could you come with me real quick?"

Her eyes perk up as I point to an open curtain of a resting room nearby. She quickly agrees and we both stand up. Nessa speaks.

"Well, that was fast. See you in a bit I guess, rest up."

We leave moments later with a wave.

Upon entering the small curtained-off room, I look around. There are 3 small cushioned beds on all of the walls not counting the entrance. The room is about 3m long and 3m wide. As I shut the white curtain, the room stays softly lit with a white glow. I turn to Maria.

"Do you need anything? I'll be out for a while?"

She stares at me with a confused look.

"You'll be... out for a while?"

I grin and turn to the back wall of the room.

"Dungeon Walker."

A large black swirling portal appears in front of us and Maria's eyes open wide.

"Oh-Oh. You can... leave?"

I nod with a slight grin.

"The only rules were no fighting, and no entering floor 12. He never said we can't leave the exam site and come back later."

She shakes her head.

"No! I meant you can physically leave a dungeon with that transport magic?? C-Can I come with you?"

"Oh- uh- You can also come, sure."

I pause, then continue.

"We'll just need to be back before anyone notices, I guess with the curtains closed no one will enter for a while....."

Maria smiles wide.

"All right! Let's go!"

Without another thought, I take Maria by the hand and step through the black swirling portal moments later letting the multitude of past dungeon images fly through my mind until I find the one I'm looking for.

The oh-so-familiar starter dungeon back in our hometown is our destination.

We step out moments later and I feel a wave of mana leave my body. I open my status instantly to see what just happened.

[Status Open]

Name: Jay Soju

Level: 299

Hp: 1245/1500

Mp: 360/1500

Strength: 724 [+630]

Speed: 862 [+517][+259]

Agility: 892

Defense: 646 [+258][+226][+162]

Mental Strength: 724 [+145][+333][+290]

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

Dagger Mastery

Stealth

Bloodlust

Equivalent Exchange

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][+87% Strength][+46% Mental Strength]

Ring of Protection [+35% Defense]

Griffin's Talon [+40% Mental Strength]

Enchanted Silver Ring [+30% Speed]

Ring of Protection [+25% Defense]

[Rodrigo's Silver Bracelet]

My MP dropped around 1000 points... I guess long-distance travel carrying another person is even more costly than I predicted it'd be. Noted.

I take a few mana crystals from my item storage and use plunderer to bring my mana back up to full.

As I do so, Maria looks around the grassland dungeon in awe.

"T-This is..."

I interject.

"Yup. We're back home."

Her eyes open wide.

I just nod and start walking toward the dungeon exit. She takes in the view for a few more seconds, then runs after me as we jump out into Alpine Park.

The trees are swaying in the breeze and the lake in the distance shimmers reflecting yellow light from the low evening sun.

A few minutes later we walk into the village market without saying another word. This isn't exactly what I thought we'd be doing today, but I'm not complaining.

I grab a handful of silver and a few gold from my item storage and throw them in my item box on the way over.

We walk through the middle of the market and I hear an old familiar voice.

"Hey, hey! If it isn't Jay! How ya doing kid!"

My old merchant friend greets me with a smile.

I look through all of his gear, but nothing special stands out. The only thing worth buying here is every last one of his MP and HP potions. The merchant only has up to D class in stock.

Unfortunately, they only heal 1250 points each. I'll have to keep that in mind.

Maria takes the MP potions along with a few HP. I hoard the rest of the glowing green bottles for myself.

With a pair of friendly waves, we leave the town center and sit down at a local family restaurant. Our food comes soon after. We feast as the sun begins to set slowly below the horizon.

Once we finish with the well-deserved meals a wave of exhaustion hits both of us, but Maria especially. I can see her eyes struggling to stay open as we wait for the bill.

I chuckle a little, then leave a silver coin at our table. We set off before the waiter comes back, hope he enjoys the tip.

With tired eyes and heavy limbs, the 30 hours of dungeon diving finally catches up to us as we walk up our long apartment building steps. I speak up while my door clicks open.

“10 hours. Then we go back.”

Maria nods, then tries to open her door. She’s sifting around in her item box for a little longer than normal... then I remember her key must be in her old pouch back in the capital.

Maria squats down and reaches under her doormat to pick up a spare, then clicks the door open moments later.

“Night Jay. 10 hours, got it.”

I let out a long quiet sigh as she closes her door, then turn around and walk back down the apartment stairs. There are a few more things to do tonight... sleep can wait.

I stop by the corner store and buy a large case of water, some fruits, and dried meats. Anything that looks similar to the items in our “gift box” from earlier. I put them all in my item storage and make my way back to the dungeon as the sun fully sets.

“Dungeon Walker.”

I walk through my swirling black portal to a dungeon I know very well. The Minotaur dungeon in the capital.

While plundering MP from another mana crystal I walk out and take the underground train back to the main Dungeon Hub. There are huge crowds of hunters out today just like any other. It’s rush hour in the city.

I walk to the market and hear the voice of my other old merchant friend. This is the first time I’ve seen both of them in such a short amount of time... they do seem oddly similar. I wave as I approach.

“How are ya old man?”

“Not too bad, what can I do for ya today kid?”

I look around his shop for a moment eyeing the swords, shields, and various magic items hanging on the walls.

“Show me all your best items. Let’s just say, I’m getting ready for a big battle.”

He grins and looks me up and down, then starts sifting through the hidden underside of his counter.

“Oh yeah? You’ve already got a lot of items on ya there. Make sure you don’t hit the limit!”

I raise an eyebrow and look at him with a bit of confusion.

“The limit? What do you mean?”

The old man places two gold rings on the table, one of them has a small blue gem on the face of it, the other one is solid gold. After that, he places a heavy steel shield, a silver long sword, and a pair of black daggers on the counter as well. He grins.

“Unless you’ve ranked up or have a special skill, most hunters can only handle stacking 10 magic items at once.”

Again, I look at him with a confused stare.

“Ranked up?”

He nods, then points at the items on the counter.

“Yeah, mostly nobles and high-ranking government types go through the rank-up process eventually. I’m not exactly sure how they do it, I just know it’s possible. Anyways, take your pick, this is the cream of the crop!”

I just nod and use appraisal.

[Ring of Protection] +30% Defense

[Enchanted Gold Ring] +30% Mental Strength

[Enchanted Steel Shield] +300 Defense

[High Ogre’s Sword] +300 Strength

[Enchanted Dagger Set] +300 Strength +300 Agility

I examine the items while thinking quietly to myself for a while, then speak up.

“How much for the shield and daggers?”

The merchant looks at me curiously.

“Really? I never would have guessed you’d jump on those two.”

I nod slowly, then place 2 gold coins on the counter.

“Will that do the trick?”

The merchant’s eyes light up.

“Most definitely.”

I push the coins forward and throw the shield and daggers into my item box.

“Appreciate it. I’ll be back soon with some items to sell, so get ready to give me a good selling price on those too.”

The merchant takes the coins and smiles.

“Of course, I’ll be waiting. Have a good rest of your night Jay!”

With a wave, I leave.

Sure, the price could have been haggled down a little. Well, more like a lot... I’m just not in the mood, he can keep the change.

The city’s night sky is beautifully clear tonight. I stroll around admiring the world, enjoying my taboo freedom as I should still be in the labyrinth. With a grin, I eventually make my way back to the Dungeon Hub. The early stars shine white in the slowly darkening sky. There are even more hunters lined up outside the closer I get. It’s usually pretty crowded around this time, but this is crazy....

A loud voice calls out from the crowd.

“All high-level D Class teams and C Class Hunters! Calling all high-level D Class teams and C Class Hunters! There’s been a break in the Lizardman Dungeon. We need immediate help eradicating the monsters! I repeat!”

A blond-haired young man in a Hunters Association uniform stands in front of the gates yelling over and over about a dungeon break. The closer I get, the more and more it makes sense. The association must be understaffed because of the exams....

Most hunters are avoiding eye contact with him, but a few stand by his side.

I approach with a curious grin.