

D. Diver 381

Chapter 381

I continue to stare down at the floor, pondering what to say back to Lith's offer.

Then, I turn to Maria, and she speaks in a soft tone while still holding onto my left arm from earlier in the meeting.

"Whatever your decision is, I'll follow it."

I nod in response.

"I know. I just need some more time to think about this...."

At all this news, and life-changing decisions that have been thrown at me all of a sudden, I almost feel sick to my stomach.

I turn back to Lith.

"I'd like to train in the high-grade dungeons you mentioned you had access to. A good workout and training session would be enough to clear my mind and think things through."

He smiles back at me and stands from his seat.

"Very well. Seems reasonable to me."

He turns to Maria.

"You can show him to the dungeon access portal; I'm sure both of you have a lot to talk about."

Ding

Before Maria can respond, the white wall behind us opens up, and an elevator door swings open to let out a green-haired woman emitting an impressive aura.

I turn my head at the sound and appraise a level 604 hunter with healing and earth magic, then see the much more matured face and athletic body of Abby, my other teammate.

As my eyes meet hers, the corner of her lips turns up into a smile.

"Look who decided to finally wake up out of their early grave."

She practically skips out from the elevator door and comes over to the couch, placing a hand on on both Maria's and my back, glowing with a faint green light.

Simultaneously, I feel all the leftover fatigue from my fight in the arena go away, and hear Abby speak again.

"I watched both your matches on the big screen downstairs, now I'm itching to try out my chances at fighting one of those monsters in the 7th stage too."

She laughs, then comes around to the other side of the couch to greet us.

Lith stands up from his desk and looks at me before walking toward the elevator himself.

"Well, enjoy. Jay, consider my offer and enjoy the amenities for the time being. I do hope we get the chance to work together soon. I have a busy day tomorrow, so I'm going to take a quick dip in the isolation pods before the sun comes up."

There's a click and a ding, followed by the elevator going down.

I wonder what he's talking about but assume it's just some more fancy tech. I'm more focused on the arrival of another one of my teammates.

After a short greeting, it's clear my mind is in turmoil, and Abby points to the door Lith just left through.

"I just finished up a training session, but I'd like to come and watch the two of you if you're planning on a late-night dungeon dive. Maybe I'll even go for round 2."

I nod.

"Yes. Bring me there."

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All 3 of us board the elevator, and it flies downward faster than it went up.

Any normal human would be scared out of their minds and most definitely break a few bones on impact when the floor stops. I brace myself and don't say anything, but Abby chuckles at my small facial reactions.

"You get used to it."

The door swings open, and we're brought into another blinding white room.

Inside, there are 3 stairways that lead downward with letters on the floor right in front of them.

[Lv.1-200][Lv.201-400][Lv.401-600]

The labeling is pretty self-explanatory, but Maria points to the large transport platform to their left side with a big bucket full of shimmering crystals next to it.

"Oh yeah, take 1, or even a few of these just in case we get in trouble. These are the transport crystals that will bring us right back to the lobby. This platform can bring us to the train station in the town below the mountain if you want to leave the city. I assume that's how you got to Sector 1, right?"

I nod, grabbing a handful of crystals and putting them into my item storage.

"Right, never know I guess..."

Abby and Maria both take one for themselves, then we all walk down the [Lv.401-600] Stairway.

It leads down almost 10 meters, and to my surprise, there's another small transport circle on the ground and a wall behind it.

We all hop on, and as the white light blinks and transports us away, I hear Maria's voice begin explaining.

"Where we're going can be considered the Valor City Dungeon Hub. Though, it's not really called that, that's just how I think of it."

The white flash ceases, and we're all standing in a very dimly lit underground cave.

There are faint glows of blue portals nearby, and the cave system itself is overflowing with mana.

I pull out my sword and light the tip with a bright flame to make it easier to see, and Abby begins to speak up as we walk over to one of the nearby dungeon portals.

"We're deep below the city right now. The corrupted Royal Guards sometimes come down here in the day, but as long as you don't antagonize them, they won't bother you much. This is shared territory by everyone within the inner city. If you have access to a portal that comes down here, you won't be interrogated. However, if you go missing, there won't be any questions asked either."

"Hmm."

I expand my All-Seeing Eye to study the entire cave system.

There seem to be over a dozen portals in various points, the ceiling is almost 20 meters high in certain areas and as low as 2 meters in others.

As we step up to one of the strongest mana-reading portals, I sense the abundance of a high Qi concentration deep down one of the cave's pathways as well. Nowhere near as much as Monk's fortress, but far more than anywhere else I've ventured since I've awakened this new sense.

Maria pulls out her sword and starts to glow light blue, almost matching the portal's hue.

"Alright, ready? It's pretty hot in here. This is the dungeon that holds one of the monsters you fought in the arena, the Red Ogres. The Boss monster can sometimes be very close to or just over level 600. This is where I've been doing most of my leveling, buff control practice, and mana control training over the last week."

Abby pulses green.

"Yeah, this is where I just finished up my solo session, let's head in!"

She jumps through, then Maria and I follow.

The landscape inside is not far from what I expected. A very rocky, mountainous region, with very few plants, and dark soil. It has unique bright red crystal-like rock structures that pop out of the ground in certain points.

These stones are much denser with mana than the surrounding terrain, but far from as pure as actual mana crystals.

The air is humid, and the temperature is hot like we're under the desert sun, but there's hardly any light source in the sky. It's mostly grey, giving off just enough light like a very foggy morning.

We begin to venture through for no more than 10 minutes, and almost immediately, one of the towering sword-wielding creatures at level 566 comes running at us. It stands tall with an impressive mana shielding and golden glow, showing off its extreme strength skill.

Abby and Maria step back to allow me the first kill of the hunt.

I take this opportunity to practice my Qi a bit more, along with getting used to my swordsmanship buff while I'm at it.

Before a second passes, the warm wave of Qi and the blood-colored thread connect on the Ogre's neck, granting me a small amount of MCP to absorb, followed by a large mana crystal after it dissolves onto the rocky floor being burned away by the residual black flames of my attack.

Abby claps slowly, and Maria comes walking over with a grin ear to ear.

The moment they do, another Ogre's roar rings out from not too far away.

Abby turns to it, summoning a spear of stone in her right hand.

"Another one so soon? Dibs! This one's mine! It looks like we're going to have a busy session today!"

She starts sprinting away as we agree. Once she's out of earshot, Maria asks me a question.

"Hey Jay, do you think I could try out more of your skills? Like you did back in the hotel suite with Self Regeneration, but with something combat-related. Do you have anything that might improve my current fighting style?"

I pick up the mana crystal from the ground that dropped from the fallen beast, then think about her question very carefully.

While throwing the stone up and down in my hand as I walk closer, an idea comes to mind. A skill that could potentially make her and every one of my teammates exponentially stronger if it works how I think it will.

"Maybe... I think I have just the one."

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I think about my Rising Emperor's domain buff and look at Maria to watch the blue text stats notification pop up the moment I summon them into my consciousness.

"Let's see what happens when I do this..."

I remove the self-regeneration skill from Maria's status, making all of its buffs and capabilities go away with it.

I stare at her for a moment then raise the question.

"How do you feel? It's only been a few hours since we were drinking... Is the alcohol in your system still negated?"

She looks around for a moment, then takes a few steps forward in a straight line, followed by a shrug.

"I think so, why?"

"I'm just trying to make sure whatever skill I give you, the effects will last."

I think to myself while scrolling through my list of skills, then finally land on Absorption.

If self-regeneration had long-lasting effects, it would make sense that Absorption would allow users to keep skills that they obtain while using it even after the skill is taken away.

"I'm going to let you in on a secret. It's even more important you never tell a soul this, even more than my ranked-up buff."

She nods without a hint of hesitation.

"Whatever it is, my mouth will always be shut."

She makes a cute motion of locking her mouth with her hand and throwing away an imaginary key while the plumes of green mist pour out around her from my lie detector skill, proving without a doubt she's giving the honest truth.

"Try this."

I press absorption on the long list of blue glowing available stats, and they all go grey once it's added. It seems like sharing one skill at a time is my limit.

I re-check the description of my ranked-up buff with my All-Seeing Eye because I don't remember any limitations like this.

Rising Emperor's Domain [Hidden Ability]

Info:

This is a hidden passive ability for a spell caster with the traits of an Emperor in the making. The Rising Emperor's Domain allows the caster to share skills in their status with any party member who has sworn their loyalty. A copy of the exact skill shared will appear in the party member's status. If this member betrays the caster or leaves the Domain's range, the skills will be deleted from their status.

Just like the size of the active radius circle, there's no mention of this limitation that can be seen. My only guess is it will grow in power in time. The name itself gives the notion that this is only the beginning of this skill's potential.

While reading the status, Maria speaks up when she sees a new skill on her status.

"Legendary Grade Absorption? Wait- What kind of skill is this?"

I sense another Red Ogre about 200 meters to our east, and point in that direction.

"I'll have to stay fairly close to you while you use it. It's not a combat skill, but it will be very valuable. We can't be more than 20 meters apart, but take out that monster like normal and you'll know exactly what the skill can do once the match is over."

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In a white and blue flash, the battle is over almost as quickly as it started. A massive ice sculpture covers the ogre and it shatters to pieces before it can even attack Maria back.

Once its remains begin to dissolve, she stares down at where the mana crystal spawns with her eyes open wide.

"Is this real...?"

I sense a flow of energy surging into her body, and note down that it must be the MCP absorption perk activating after killing an enemy. Next, Maria picks up the mana crystals and shimmers with a golden glow.

My appraisal skill picks up a legendary extreme strength skill on her status, the skill the red ogre was using just moments ago. The corner of my lip turns upward to unconsciously start grinning ear to ear.

This will be a way to raise our mana control exponentially quicker and cheaper than buying special stones or mana crystals on the open market. Each kill brings in tens to hundreds of thousands of MCP. Stronger monsters could even bring in millions per kill.

On top of that... if the skills gained during the buff stay on the user's status even after the buff is deactivated, this could be a truly overpowered perk.

"I'm going to deactivate it now, I need to test something."

Maria stares in awe at her status as I walk out of range, deactivating the Emperor's link.

Before my eyes, both Absorption and Extreme Strength disappear from her status on my appraisal skill.

My eyebrows scrunch, and I reactivate it walking closer again and giving her Absorption for a second time.

When it reappears on her status, Extreme Strength doesn't show up.

"How odd..."

Maria gazes up at me, stretching her arms and legs.

"I still kept the mana control, if that's what you were trying to test. It isn't much, but I feel slightly stronger like I just absorbed a dozen of those Blue Ogre Essence Crystals we all used a while back. At this rate, I could double my control after beating just a few hundred monsters of this level."

I nod, scratching my chin.

"Well, at least there are some perks that still stay."

My mind goes racing as I ponder the possibility that maybe it needs to be upgraded further to allow others to share the ability to permanently gain skills. Or maybe it will only work within my domain radius forever. Only time will tell.

I let out a sigh after not coming to a precise conclusion.

"I'd like to do some more tests. I need to make my way up past level 600 like you and Abby, then make it back to a meeting in the city before noon."

As we continue to talk, Abby approaches carrying a large mana crystal along with a sword dropped by the Red Ogre she just fought.

Both get placed in her item box before she waves and yells out from afar.

"Hey, we facing the boss? Or using your teleport skill to go farm in the Vice City Labyrinth?"

I cross my arms and can't help but to let out a laugh.

"I missed this. It's good to be back with both of you. I think both of those options are a great idea. We'll go and face the Red Ogre Boss, then climb the Labyrinth as far as we can go. However, I have to fill you in on a few things before we do."

I spend the next 10 minutes explaining and showing Abby how my ranked-up buff works too.

Her reaction is similar to Maria's, but a bit more eccentric.

"Finally! I've been wishing I could use that skill of yours since we met at the Association building back in your hometown. It's a shame the skills aren't permanent, but rapid mana control growth is probably even more powerful if you think about it..."

We spend the next hour making our way through the Red Ogre Dungeon taking out all of the monsters we see on our way to the boss portal. We take it moderately slow, and I tell a few stories about what kind of trouble I got into while trying to make my way to Valor City.

This includes the info about Monk, my run-in with Royal Guards in the Arena, and the training I've been going through to attempt to procure my own soul energy with a power source called Qi before the borrowed soul stone energy we're using runs out.

Neither of them has ever heard of anything like it, similar to the position I was in when I first met Monk; but they agree to come along with me to the meeting tomorrow to request that Monk teaches this power to them as well.

Though, we mostly focus on the time we have now in the dungeons and enjoy the moment. Each of us gains Millions of MCP, and Maria and Abby become overjoyed by the use of temporary legendary Extreme Strength buffs while we train.

I get to witness how far they've come, but also keep picturing a Ghoul glowing orange in place of the monsters in front of me every time I make a Qi-infused strike. I focus on making each attack denser than the last, and overflow with energy, but my attacks stay almost exactly the same. I'll need to face the real thing to make any substantial progress.

We make it to the boss room portal and Abby points to it with a raised glowing fist.

"Here we are, the strongest dungeon boss in the city. Once you max out your level gains here, we'll have to move to the labyrinth to continue progressing."

We all grip our weapons and jump through.

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[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1 PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1 PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+29,046,990 MCP]

After farming the Red Ogre King Boss over three dozen consecutive times along with its two mutant subordinates that spawn with it in the boss room, I raise my level to 599. While dungeon walking back to the portal to face it again after every victory, I realized that along with excessive MCP gains, I started to gain an additional Proficiency Point every few matches too.

The conditions of this perk are that every time I defeat an opponent of a higher level than my own, there's a 5% chance they will drop 1 PP. Considering the only other way I can gain these points is the standard +1 per level up; fighting monsters one level above me to get a maximum chance of extra points would be the optimal method of farming.

Sharing the EXP gain with Maria and Abby in the boss room after I surpass the boss' maximum level spawn rate of roughly 598 allows me to farm this stat for longer.

Once I pass this limit and tell my teammates, Abby is the first to speak up.

"Alright, let's go, let's go to the labyrinth!"

They both take my wrists, and we teleport to the highest floor I have access to. The gargoyle dungeon on the 21st floor.

After my first kill, the notification box for upgrading my skill pops up.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Lifesteal

Upgrade: Legendary Grade

[YES][NO]

After accepting and trying it out on my next opponent, I realize the range and strength of the skill have increased very drastically. As long as my base of mana control is much higher than my opponent, and they're within close range of my aura, their HP can be completely drained and added to mine in seconds.

Abby and Maria absorb the skill too and try it out on monsters that appear nearby as we make our way to the boss room that leads up to floor 22.

Before entering, I stop in place and voice a thought.

"Now wait for a moment, I need to check something."

I think to myself, activating my Dungeon Walker skill while opening my status and making a mental note of every available dungeon I still have on record and available for transport.

I look back at the swirling boss room portal, then to Abby and Maria.

"You climbed this dungeon before to rank up, right? If you were to estimate, how high up will we have to climb to reach the level 600 mobs?"

Maria scratches her head and ponders for a moment before responding.

"I think floor 27 or maybe 28. Around there is where we'll all start to level up again. Well- Assuming this Labyrinth goes that high."

I nod.

"It definitely should. I believe it's well over 40 floors if what Chester said about it a while back is true."

Abby interjects.

"So we're climbing? Or what?"

I nod.

"Yeah, but you two go on without me, I'll catch up before you make it to any of the exciting floors, I promise. I need to do a few errands and upgrade my skills while we have this leisure time."

"Sure, I guess we needed a head start anyway. Race you to floor 27."

Abby smirks and jumps through the boss portal.

Maria waves and jumps through too.

"Sounds good to me, Jay. See ya"

Then I'm left in the silence of the light green gargoyle dungeon all alone.

I take a deep breath, then start my hunt to upgrade every single skill on my status that still has a dungeon available to farm it.

Checking through all 20 floors below me, then each dungeon I managed to get into in the wilderness of Sector 4 and the Solaran Dungeon Hub. After all of these, obtaining legendary Dual-Wielding and Dagger arts allow me to do similar subconscious movements following an attack line with both smaller and multiple blades like my swordsmanship skill. One of the most notable skills I gain is the legendary version of [Final Breath]. The skill used by the 19th-floor Berserker King Boss. All of the buffs from previously are boosted by an additional 100%, but so are the side effects.

I plan on never trying this skill again... It was hardly worth using the last time. However, it can't hurt to have the option in case of emergency.

After this, I circle back to the Vice Region in full disguise and blip in and out of the Vice City's available farming Dungeons with impressive skills. The most notable finds here were the slime dungeon and troll dungeon. With an upgraded plunderer skill, my speed and rate of MP absorption nearly quadrupled.

With every new breath I take, even outside the dungeons, a passive feature of the skill now takes in mana from any environment I'm present in until my MP bar is full.

Self-regeneration now has an added HP recovery feature to it as well. It takes up a considerable amount of MP and adds mental and physical fatigue to the user after the HP is restored, but this may come in handy if I'm without HP potions or any nearby enemies to steal health from.

Lastly, I do a final sweep of the dungeons in my hometown. There isn't much here that I don't already have, but manage to upgrade one more from an old bat cave dungeon I farmed with Abby a long time ago. Legendary Enemy Detection is obtained.

Instead of just the depiction of small dots on a map in my mind's eye, a crystal clear image of my enemy is visible to me like video footage as long as there is enough mana present in their body to pinpoint them. In this moving image, their level and skills are visible too.

I'm easily able to see around dark corners, or even halfway across a dungeon, pinpointing enemies before they know I exist. It feels like an upgraded version of my All-Seeing Eye combined with a basic Appraisal and Inspect Skill. However, it only works on living beings and cannot see the mana flowing through them, only an external image.

Happy with my incredible progress in just 2 hours of farming, I take a look at my skills while Dungeon Walking back to the 21st Floor of the Labyrinth.

Skills:

Absorption [Legendary Grade]

Swordsmanship [Legendary Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Fire Summoning]

Inspect [Special Grade]

Enemy Detection [Legendary Grade][New!]

Body Hardening [Legendary Grade]

Self Regeneration [Legendary Grade][New!]

Spatial Magic [Item Storage]

Plunderer [Legendary Grade][New!]

Telekinesis

Appraisal [Special Grade]

Conceal [Special Grade]

Berserker [Legendary Grade]

Dungeon Walker [Special Grade]

Intimidation [Legendary Grade]

Dagger Mastery [Legendary Grade][New!]

Stealth [Legendary Grade]

Bloodlust [Legendary Grade]

Equivalent Exchange

Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

All-Seeing Eye

Extreme Strength [Legendary Grade]

Dual Wielding [Legendary Grade][New!]

Telepathy [Legendary Grade]

Final Breath [Legendary Grade][New!]

Combat Magic [Advanced Earth Summoning]

Combat Magic [Advanced Mana Manipulation]

Life Steal [Legendary Grade][New!]

Hibernation [Special Grade]

Combat Magic [Advanced Demonic Energy Manipulation]

Combat Magic [Advanced Ice Summoning]

Body Double [Special Grade]

Lie Detector [Legendary Grade]

Hush [Legendary Grade]

Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade]

There are still a few skills left on [Special Grade] and [No Grade],

but they're from very rare dungeons that have disappeared in break and labyrinths, while other skills were farmed directly from humans.

I'll have a hard time finding upgrade options for them, but now I'll be much more diligent and on the watch. If I'm completely out of luck, I can always upgrade them manually, but saving up proficiency points for a later date is a smarter decision for now. I don't desperately need anything to be upgraded for the time being.

I close my status and smile while opening up my item storage. Ember flaps his wings and flies up into the dungeon sky.

"Well, now that the hard part is all done, let's have some fun."

As I open our link, my fight companion responds.

"It seems you've been quite busy again. A solid amount of level ups... and..."

I see the black-scaled dragon's toothy grin from over 100 meters in the air as he raises a question, but clearly already knows the answer.

"Is that Qi in your body I sense?"

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"It is Qi."

I peer up at my partner in the sky and do a full-body scan, expecting to see a monstrous wave of Qi flowing through Ember as well.

Every time I get a new power-up, he seems to know something about it or straight up already have it himself and keep it a secret from me.

However, there's no such thing in his system. The core where Qi would be is empty. The only thing remotely close is a hint of energy with the same reading as my Red Hydra's buff circling around his eyes.

It's like a miniature pocket of Soul Energy, but just as fast as I see it, it dissipates like it was never even there.

Ember flaps his wings and comes down near me, then I notice his eyes flare up with the same crimson aura momentarily again while he touches the ground and looks me up and down.

"What did you manage to do? Find an Originator's tomb or something? I didn't even know natural sources of Qi were still around in this era."

We both stand on opposite sides of the tallest white marble pillar, raised high above the rest of the gargoyle dungeon. The slowly turning boss room portal lets off a light buzz behind me as I think of a response.

"No... I didn't find a tomb... I just met a friend who gave me this power."

Ember lets out a resounding laugh through our telepathy link.

"What friend? The Demon King? There hasn't been anyone in centuries in control of the Origin Particle other than him. Since that Demon took control of all the tombs, humans have been confusing legends of its power with Demonic Energy and trying to hoard those black stones like gold. Come to think of it, we're not even at level 600 yet... so I know he didn't grant you soul essence as he did me in a past life."

Ember pauses.

"So you really found someone that can wield Qi... I assume that's why we're back in this Labyrinth. We have some leveling work to do, don't we?"

I nod slowly at his last line, but so much of what Ember just said went right over my head.

"Well, yes. I'm in a hurry to get up to the 27th floor, but that can wait... This is more important. Explain everything you just said. In full detail. I've never gotten a clear answer about all of this. Let's back it up to when you first mentioned soul energy, like when I managed to absorb the Red Hydra's Soul Stone. This is Essence granted by some powerful Demon?"

Ember nods his head slowly, walking over very close to me.

"Yes, the most powerful Demon there is. I don't believe you could fathom his strength at your current level. There's a lot to get through, and if you're in a rush, maybe we should climb while I talk."

I take out my sword and air-step onto Ember's back.

"Fine, good idea. Let's go."

We blip through the boss room portal and face the Gargoyle Boss without breaking a sweat. I channel my Qi while Ember summons even more of the Crimson aura around his talons for a split second to attack one of the mutant spawns that tries to attack us.

While both lay on the ground motionless and we wait for them to dissolve, Ember continues his point.

"What you're using is a basic pure form of Qi. If it's in your system, I'd assume you can now sense my soul energy as well even when I don't make it fully visible to your mana senses."

My eyes dart from his eyes to his claws and I nod, giving him more than enough of an answer to continue.

"Well, the two are very similar, but not exactly the same."

We teleport to the next dungeon and begin flying through the air straight to the boss room once I do a scan and find that the monsters below have nothing but body-hardening skillst.

"Qi is the essence of a fundamental power known as soul energy. All basic Qi users have the same tricks in their arsenals; Block, Bash, Imbue. Although these attacks in their basic forms can trump Mana or Demonic energy even twice or three times their relative power, it is not the true peak evolutionary state. Once Qi rests in your body for long enough, and you begin to control it as instinctively as breathing, your being melds with the energy and you will awaken a unique form of Qi. A Soul Energy Awakening is what many of the Divine Beasts call it."

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As we approach

the next Boss room portal, Ember charges a claw with the crimson aura again and sends a dense ball of it down at a tree on a nearby mountaintop.

As it makes impact, the entire tree melts away, and the mountainside bursts with very lightly tinted red-orange flames.

From here, it looks like the flames are almost transparent, but they're destroying everything they touch.

"An attack like this is irreversible. My soul energy has the ability to cleanse with fire. Not even the dungeon's natural regeneration can heal something like this. As my strength grows greater back to my old form, its abilities will become stronger once again too."

My eyes widen as I watch the side of the mountain continue to melt away.

We take out the next boss together and continue soaring through the next floor before I get the mental clarity to ask another question.

"So... what are the odds that once I awaken my Soul Energy, I become immortal, like you?"

Ember laughs as we both burst into flames to negate the frosty blizzard winds of the floor 23 dungeon.

"Zero. It takes a bit more than just wielding Qi to negate the rules of death. That process was a lot more complicated... and I think a story better saved for another day."

"Hmm. Well, at least tell me how long it would take to awaken this Soul Energy if I already have Qi flowing through me? And if I can't do it very soon... how can I defeat a monster with Soul Energy

granted by one of these Divine beasts, similar to my Red Hydra's buff. I've been having trouble, just making my attacks denser or filled with more Qi isn't enough."

Ember turns his head while flying to look back at me for a moment.

"You're fighting someone now with the power of a soulstone too? What other Divine Beast died while I was asleep?"

He chuckles and turns back as we arrive at another Boss Room in mere minutes.

I respond while jumping through.

"Oh, they're not dead yet. And I don't know if they're one of these Divine Beasts you keep talking about; It's the Lich King if that makes it more clear. I've been battling its subordinates for a few days, but can't manage to defeat one without using my borrowed energy. I need to find a way to beat one only using Qi."

Once we appear on the other side of the portal, instantly melting the Ice Wielding monster to the floor, Ember responds in a surprised tone.

"The Lich King, huh? It hasn't come around to play in forever. This might actually be interesting."

We teleport to a new dungeon filled with sand. Enormous Golems erupt from the ground as Ember takes flight again, soaring over the 24th floor.

"However, you're nowhere near strong enough to face it. I recommend you don't go back to whatever Region you were fighting its subordinates in. Not even as a fun training exercise, if we both went all out right now, I doubt we'd even land a finger on that monster. I bet it's watching you fight with its underlings and laughing on its throne. If you've killed its mindless monster slaves and haven't received a response, it doesn't even consider you as a threat."

I gulp at the sound of this, remembering just moments ago when Ember literally disintegrated a mountain with a power I didn't know existed until today.

"Wouldn't stand a chance?"

He shakes his head and I don't push the point further. I just sit and think to myself as the artificial desert sun beats down on me from above.

We take out the golem boss without issue, then soar through the 25th floor full of fast-moving lizard creatures wielding blades and spears. Unfortunately, their speed only comes from a ranked-up buff, while most of them use dagger arts and dual wielding which is already fully upgraded for me.

We take out this level 556 boss without an issue and move onto the next dungeon.

"I'm going to train with the man that gave me Qi later today, but do you have any advice or training methods for me? How can I expedite the process of awakening my soul energy?"

The mountainous region of the 26th floor passes below us as Ember responds.

"There's really no secret. It just takes time, many years of growing and training with the Qi inside you. You'll have to step back from this one and take things slow."

"Not what I wanted to hear... there must be some way to expedite the process..."

After a ride of silence, we defeat the level 589 boss together, and the 27th Floor's transport magic is just waiting to be triggered.

"Alright, I'll be meeting back up with my teammates now to do some slow level grinding, but good talk. If there's an actual tough battle ahead, I'll summon you back out."

Ember nods as I open my Spatial magic.

"Again, this is a real warning. Wherever you are out in the world right now, I recommend you turn back until you've gotten much stronger. Don't go picking a fight with the Lich King unless you know what you're up against. I assure you, you don't."

Ember disappears into my item storage, and the White transfer magic of the boss room brings me up to the next floor.

A million things cross my mind, like all the reasons these countries and businesses are really after Demonic Energy because they mistake it for some old legends of a God Particle Ember mentioned. The potential that my new abilities have excites me, but the biggest looming thought of all is the constant warning Ember gives about the enemy that controls Valor City.

There seems to be very good reason people are calling it The Dark One.

Maybe leaving town while I'm still not a nuisance to get stronger out in Sector 2 wouldn't be such a bad idea...

My thoughts come to an abrupt halt as the transfer magic finishes.

The light dissipates and I take in my surroundings to see Maria standing proud with both hands on her hips and Abby letting out a laugh to herself in a joking tone.

"Haha! Beat ya! I knew we'd make it to this floor first!"

Chapter 385

The floor below my feet is glossy and clear with the faintest blue tint, as if I'm standing on a frozen lake.

Maria and Abby stand on a raised ice sculpture, a creation of the blond-haired hunter's magic. The entire dungeon around us doesn't look much different. As I activate my fire to counter the cold, plumes of steam start coming off my body, and each step I take sinks into the ground, lightly melting the icy floor.

After a quick scan of the area, I find dozens of level 600 to 608 mobs within 3 km of us. With the new high-definition senses of my enemy detection skill, I can see they are all frost blue serpents slithering over the ice.

Each has deep royal blue eyes and a change in scale pattern around their heads, tinted gold to resemble a small crown.

The moment my heat waves and the radiation from my passive intimidation skill enter the dungeon, many enemies turn our way. Some even shift colors to a metallic silver as they activate a body hardening skill and lock eyes in our general direction.

"Looks like we have company already."

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1 PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+44,120,650 MCP]

The monsters are incredibly quick and agile, but with my buffs on full blast and a dungeon full of mana to consume, my abilities match and surpass theirs with ease. I reach level 608 and gain an additional 1 PP from my absorption perk.

The three of us fight in a group, starting off by sprinting from monster to monster. Then, once points are set, I dungeon-walk us from opponent to opponent, taking turns on monsters so my teammates can stay within my domain and keep their skills and MCP absorption perks.

Farming alone might be a little faster, but it's not too much of a time suck. They can both take out their enemies in one to two hits, and the serpents travel in groups of one to three, so sometimes it's in our best interest to fight together.

I work on my Qi control a bit, but even my normal Qi-infused sword strikes are more than enough to obliterate the opponent. This session is more about raising my level and gaining more base stat points.

A few monsters drop an item called [Ice Serpent's Scale] with two stats on it [+80% Ice Magic Resistance][+50% All Magic Resistance].

I place 5 of them into my item storage to sell another time and don't think twice about the drops in this dungeon until I hear Maria scream in excitement after about an hour of farming.

"I got one! Look at this!"

A large serpent dissolves by Maria's feet, and what's left in its place is a dark royal blue stone pouring out heavy plumes of light blue mist.

As I approach and my footsteps melt the icy floor, the waves of energy coming off the crystal refreeze the puddles into their original solid form. I cross my arms and reply as Maria lifts it in the air with the tip of her sword.

"An Ice Element Stone. Pretty rare one, and extremely strong too, from a level 605 monster."

A case of theft: this story is not rightfully on Amazon; if you spot it, report the violation.

"Yeah! Maybe I could make a new weapon out of this, or some armor, or some interesting gear from one of the Craftsmen back in Valor City."

I nod but don't reply for a moment as I think.

My sword took in over half a dozen firestones, upgrading its power to a whole new level.

If the drop rate of these ice stones is close to 1% as it seems, Maria could farm a ton of these gems and make an overpowered set if she knew this was possible.

She turns to me while I ponder.

"Hey Jay, could you hold this for me in your storage system? I don't want it to lose its power...and I don't have a containment case on me."

I nod, opening up a small spatial magic portal and letting her drop it off her sword to fall inside.

After, there's another pause as it's clear I have something to say, but both Abby and Maria are waiting for me to say it.

"You know, I was the one that killed the Sector 2 leader... I absorbed his Craftsmanship skill."

I deactivate the Domain to cancel out their current shared skills and add the craftsmanship skill to their status to show them exactly what I'm talking about.

Abby's eyes go wide as she stares down at her status, and pulls a few dropped items out of her storage.

In a matter of seconds, and a small white flash of light, old useless dropped items in her inventory turn into high-quality black glossy daggers.

Maria looks through it too, pulling out a few items of her own to test out.

While they look down at their status screens in awe, I smile, pulling out the 5 serpent scales I farmed from the mobs in the dungeon earlier, and add them all together on a single craft selection to create a pendant. The option goes grey once I add my 3rd scale. So, it seems I either need to be of a higher level to merge more of these, or this is just the maximum I can craft for this specific item.

Slots to add a blood bond as well as imbuing skills and element stone still glow blue, ready for use, but I don't click any of them.

There's still a lot to learn about this craftsmanship skill.

The 3 scales all merge together in a flash of light and create a tiny white pendant with a silver string around it. After a quick appraisal, I see the vast improvement.

Enchanted Ice Serpent's Pendant [+110% Agility] [+75% Magic Resistance] [+95% Ice Magic Resistance]

I decide to swap out this item I made on a whim for my Serpent King's Scale [+45% Agility] [+45% Magic Resistance] that I received a long time ago, improving the optimization of my item slots. They basically give the same buffs, my new item is just much better.

After swapping pendants, and a few more flashes of light from Abby, Maria looks up at me and raises a question.

"Mythic Grade? This is the skill you got from the Sector 2 Leader...? Is that why he was said to be an irreplaceable genius craftsman? I've never heard of a skill rank like this...."

I nod.

"Yes, it has far more capabilities than any legendary grade skill. Merging items, adding multiple element stones to an already crafted item, and imbuing skills into gear and equipment are a few."

Abby looks up.

"So we wouldn't even need Lith's team of craftsmen then. This is why you're hesitant to take his help, isn't it? Because you could just do it all yourself?"

She lets out a laugh.

"Yes, that's part of it... However, I'm definitely considering his offer. There are just going to be some very drastic changes and counterpoints I need to make."

I pause.

"And- I think this goes without saying, but not a word of this Mythic Grade Skill to anyone."

Two nods and replies of agreement from Maria and Abby followed by the wisps of green magic from my Lie detector skill solidify the point. Then, I bring up why I showed them the skill in the first place.

"If you want to farm Ice Element Stones, I'm sure it could make an incredible sword. Maybe even an Ice Imbued armor set... Or something unique."

I let my blade flicker.

"Mine took in quite a few fire stones to get to this point. Hopefully, I find another dungeon with fire stone drops again soon, the one broke in Sector 4 so I have nowhere to farm them."

She looks around the Dungeon then replies.

"I think that's a good idea. How much time do we have until we need to meet with Monk?"

"Well, he's expecting me at around noon. That gives us just under 6 hours to farm, unless we want to try and get a few hours of sleep in between and pick up this session tomorrow."

I let out a light laugh, realizing we've pulled an all-nighter.

Abby interjects.

"We can always use the Isolation Pods before we leave. All of us have really high mana control bases, so it's not like we need as much sleep as lower level people. An hour or two in the pods should rejuvenate us just fine. My restoration magic can take care of the rest."

Maria agrees.

"True, so we have 4 hours to farm. Maybe at this rate without your dungeon walker skill, I can get 1 or 2 more stones. It's not much if you say each item can hold up to half a dozen. If that's not enough, it's not like this Labyrinth is going anywhere anytime soon, I can keep farming until I get what I need."

I turn to the direction of the Boss room at the back of the dungeon, then look at Abby.

"True. Alright, so in the meantime, we should venture up to the next floor and set a few Dungeon Walker points for ease of access in the future."

I turn to Maria.

"We'll come down to check on the farming every hour or so for updates."

She glows light blue in response.

"Sounds like a plan."

Chapter 386

I make sure to reactivate my Rising Emperor's domain buff and give Abby Absorption to aid her in farming MCP and more temporary skills as we travel higher up the Labyrinth.

The level 623 Ice wielding Serpent King Boss is taken out in a single blow.

[Level Up]

I gain a single level, bringing me to 609. The excited look on Abby's face shows she gained a level too.

We're teleported into the next dungeon, and the scenery isn't like anything I've ever seen before.

The ground is fairly even, but colored a pale red. There are some large structures in the distance that block off areas, making it seem as if there's only one path to travel in this dungeon. There are no trees or plants in sight, just the crimson-colored stone. It's almost pink, but is dark enough to contrast with the white sky and radiates just enough mana to give an eerie feeling.

As I take a step forward, I feel the grip on the bottom of my boots is more secure than ever. It feels like I'm on a track field, ready to sprint. The floor is covered in tiny little bumps, and the further we walk in, the more odd this place becomes.

Approaching the first large rock structure, I can see multiple pathways that go right through it, twisting and turning, but all making it to the same endpoint on the other side.

There's even the faint pathway of a trail going around the rocks, looking as if all of this is man-made.

I activate my enemy detection skill and get to the bottom of this mystery in an instant.

In the entire dungeon, there are no more than 10 monsters in total, and they seem to be traveling in groups, and at speeds faster than any creature I've detected before.

"Get ready to fight.... And go all out. These ones are fast..."

There's silence in the air, but Abby does as I say, getting her earth magic ready, glowing light green while looking around the dungeon with a curious gaze.

"Any second now... two of them are coming our way."

Another half a second passes, then the ground below our feet begins to vibrate and make a rumbling noise.

Then, from seemingly nowhere, two bright white flashes of light come from two separate paths in the rock structure ahead of us.

Abby's aura flashes from green to red as she immediately activates her red hydra's buff.

I erupt into flames, activating every single one of my stat-boosting buffs to get a similar effect. It's not until the two creatures are less than 20 meters away with their silver long swords drawn that I get a good look at them.

They're very humanoid-looking beasts with light red skin that is just a faint shade darker than the rocks and dungeon around us. Standing at roughly my height, but not wearing any clothes or armor. They have no eyes, no mouths, and no distinguishing body features. They're just a pair of arms, legs, and blank faces; carrying long swords. Both are level 630 with two skills, Legendary Grade Swordsmanship and Legendary Grade Extreme Speed.

They don't make a sound and sprint toward us without any warning or emotion in their steps.

As they get even closer, the white aura around them shifts to red, and I witness both of their ranked-up buffs [Crimson Speed] activate, doubling their momentum.

Both Abby and I run forward the instant they emerge from the rock formation and the clash of intense buffs, mana shielding, ranked-up skills, and my own wave of Qi imbued in my blade commences.

I feel my wave disintegrate the faceless monster before me, and feel Abby's Hydra buff do the same to the one she was facing to my side.

However, this doesn't stop the eruption of built-up power that follows. Fire, rock, mana, and blood from our enemies are released, blowing us backward in the blast.

Stolen novel; please report.

A warm green glow of energy from Abby heals my fatigue from the attack, and a dense layer of mana shielding around both of us easily protects us from the blast.

[Level Up]

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Extreme Speed [Legendary Grade]

[YES] [NO]

[Use Absorption]

MCP: 1,521,890

[YES] [NO]

I choose yes on both options, bringing my level to 611 and obtaining a new skill.

As the dust clears and Abby's restoration magic fades, I walk over to the place where the item drops will be.

"That was a bit overkill, don't you think?"

Abby follows and replies.

"Can never be too safe."

She pulls up her status, activating the copied extreme speed buff from the mobs we just defeated, and zips around the rock formation in a flash of white light. When she comes back, she deactivates it with an astonished look on her face.

"125% speed buff huh? It drained my MP dry in under 2 seconds, but still, that's a pretty neat skill."

She drinks an MP potion from her storage while the two monsters dissolve back into the dungeon at our feet, dropping two mana crystals along with one tiny red stone that's leaking a small amount of white energy.

My eyes narrow as I pick it up.

[Crimson Speed Shard][+80% Speed]

I toss it into my item storage. It has a similar buff percentage as my boots but isn't quite wearable.

"That was either a really lucky drop, or these red shards have a very high drop rate."

Abby shrugs, placing the mana crystal that dropped from her mob into her item box.

"Well, I guess we'll find out."

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[Level Up]

[+1PP]

[Level Up]

Over the next three and a half hours, we continue to roam around the red-tinted dungeon. I gain an additional 2 Proficiency Points, and my level rises to 622.

The lack of farming speed isn't because the monsters here are difficult to defeat; it's just that their spawn rate is very limited.

Once Abby and I have killed the first 10, it takes almost 45 minutes for them to spawn back in. They spawn sporadically and change positions quickly, so once one appears, it turns into a time-consuming hunt-and-kill mission.

On the bright side, the drop rate for the crimson speed fragments seems to be roughly 25%. After 40 total kills, 20 each, 10 fragments have dropped.

I turn to Abby once we clear the 4th wave, pulling out a few fragments from my storage.

"I think we're getting close to the time we have to leave. We can pick back up here tomorrow."

Simultaneously, I open my crafting status window to see what these fragments can be made into.

"Mind if I craft us some items from the loot drops? I think I can make some good speed gear with these stones."

"Go for it."

I immediately begin testing. It seems I can merge three of them together, just like the scales from the floor below.

In a flash of white light, a few of the tiny shards merge together to form a red ring.

[Enchanted Crimson Ring][+110% Speed]

"Hmm..."

I toss the ring up and down in my hand while continuing to scroll through the crafting menu and my status until I see the option to upgrade my boots.

With a grin on my face, I stack three fragments into my boots before the option goes grey. Then, another option pops up, asking which skill I'd like to imbue. I select my newest one: Extreme Speed. After choosing [YES] on all options, a flash of white light makes my whole body glow, and the fragments merge with my boots, creating a new item skill on my feet.

[Enchanted Boots of Extreme Speed] [+152% Speed]

With four fragments left in my hand, I decide to use three to make another Enchanted Crimson Ring.

"One for you."

I toss the newly crafted one to Abby, then hold the other in the air. "And one for Maria."

I throw the last leftover fragment into my item storage and do some sifting around to look for any old gear that I could swap out for better items while I'm at it. I switch out my old High Ogre King's Ring with a 60% Mental Strength Buff for the Amulet I received from the Solaran Labyrinth's Frost Dragon.

Its stats read [Platinum Amulet of Frost] [+137% Mental Strength] [+90% Ice Magic Strength].

I look down at my status, pulling out all my gear to simulate what I'd be wearing in a full-out battle, and nod with a satisfied stare.

Items Equipped: [12 Slots Available Post-Rank Up][Current Items Equipped]

Platinum Amulet of Frost [+137% Mental Strength] [+90% Ice Magic Strength]

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [+111% Defense]

Enchanted Boots of Extreme Speed [+152% Speed]

Enchanted Ice Serpent's Pendant [+110% Agility] [+75% Magic Resistance] [+95% Ice Magic Resistance]

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+100% Mental Strength]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Advanced Fire Aspect][+199% Strength][+162% Mental Strength][+104% Defense][+106% Speed][+105% Agility]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Wind Aspect][+137% Strength][+120% Agility][+118% Mental Strength]

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+144% Defense]

Salamander King's Cloak [+80% Mental Strength] [+80% Fire Magic Resistance]

Greater Demon's Core [+50% All Stats]

Arch Demon's Core [+100% All Stats]

Midnight Dagger

"That's as good as it's going to get for now."

Abby and I Dungeon Walk back to meet Maria for a final time, and come to see she's farmed one additional Ice Element Stone. I throw it into my storage to save with the other one, and show her the new ring I crafted in return. After she happily accepts it and tests out the speed buff for a few minutes on a nearby pair of serpents, we all take out our transport crystals and crush them in our palms.

The magic brings us back to the lobby of the white-walled building, and Abby leads us to the back elevator right away.

"Come on, this way. I'll show you where the Isolation Pods are."

Chapter 387

We board the elevator, and it brings us up a dozen floors in what feels like no more than half a second.

After a light ding and the door quickly opening, all three of us walk out following Abby's lead into an oval-shaped room with six cylindrical metal pods lining the back wall. There's nothing else in the room but these.

Five of them have green lights above them, while the pod all the way to my left side has a blue light above it and a timer counting down. It's currently at [1:51:44], the seconds continue to tick down as I watch, showing that there's just under 2 hours left on it.

Abby stops in front of the middle pod, glancing over to the blue-lit pod, then back to us.

"Looks like Lith is doing a long session. He must have a lot to think about if he's in here for so long. If he's been in isolation since we started farming, he must have been in there over a full day already."

I raise an eyebrow at her words, but Maria just nods and agrees, walking over to an isolation pod of her own.

"Yeah, I don't know about you guys but an hour will be more than enough for me."

Abby shrugs and nods.

"Yeah, an hour is fine with me."

They both press small buttons on the sides of the pods, and the cylinders split in half the long way, opening up and exposing a bright white glowing inside.

The intense mana radiation that pours out is overwhelming, giving me an eerily familiar feeling, but I can't quite put my finger on what.

Abby walks inside first, pressing a small number pad on the inside of the pod, then giving us a smile as she closes the heavy-looking door.

"See you all soon."

It clicks closed and all of the mana that was pouring out moments ago disappears from my senses.

The green light above the pod turns blue and a one-hour timer counts down right below it.

Maria looks at me next, typing on the small number pad just as Abby did.

"Just hop in and relax, time moves a bit slower inside, so in an hour outside, about 6 or 7 passes in the pod. Soak up all the mana you want too, it's really relaxing."

She smiles and the large metal casing clicks around her too, showing the same blue light and 1-hour countdown begin.

Curiously, I walk over to the next pod down the line and open up the door with a click. It swings open with little to no friction, and I step inside to be surrounded by warm mana tens of times more potent and dense than the mana in the restaurant in the gold district.

As I type in the code to begin a 1-hour session, the metal door clicks shut and my vision turns completely white.

Everything around me begins to hum and buzz, and I can't even sense the world around me.

I whisper to myself.

"This really is like I'm in total isolation..."

It gives me a really familiar feeling now that I'm inside.

The noise from my mouth doesn't bounce off the close walls as it should, it just fades off into the artificial domain that surrounds me.

As I take a deep breath in and out, starting to passively plunder MP, I reach into my item storage and pull out the small metal container containing Qi pills and the bar of Black stone.

I'm careful not to touch the stone, and just take a single pill from the casing before snapping it shut again and placing it into my storage.

With a gulp, I take the pill and feel a rush of energy restore my Qi.

After the fight with the Ghoul last night, I was drained down to about 40% capacity, losing 60% in minutes. From training all night with Maria and Abby, I only lost another 10% or so of my Qi in over 6 hours. Fighting monsters that don't have Qi is much easier than ones that drain me and evaporate my power after every hit.

I chuckle to myself as the warm sensation fills my body and brings me up to full again.

"Maybe that's how most monsters feel fighting me."

I let out a satisfying breath and close my eyes to let the domain around me fade away.

There are tiny particles of Qi within this chamber, but their concentration is no greater than it is outside or at any other place in the outside world.

I would take this moment to plunder as much MP and gather as much Qi as possible right now if it was worth my while, but the minuscule gains I could make in the next few hours compared to the trade-off that an actual good 7 hours of sleep would do me is not worth it.

Without thinking any further, I fall asleep standing up in the Isolation pod. As I drift off, my body feels weightless, and it's the most relaxing sleep I've gotten in ages.

Ding

A light dinging sound wakes me from my slumber and the metal door I forgot even existed swings open to reveal Abby and Maria both standing out in the open room stretching and looking around with relaxed expressions.

I feel equally refreshed, practically overflowing with Mana and Qi.

As I leave the pod and it clicks closed, Maria points to the elevator door.

"So, seems like it's finally time to go!"

The wall opens wide as we get close to its motion sensors, and while it closes I look at the numbers on the one pod left in the room still with a clock ticking down.

[0:50:09]

As the elevator door shuts, the familiar feeling of inside the pods washes over me again like dj vu.

"That's what it reminds me of..."

I remember being trapped inside the mana-powered time prison that was the Titan's domain. The blessing and curse that helped me bond with Ember, train my mana control up, but also scar me with some of the worst mind-bending torturous experiences of my life.

I reflexively shudder at the thought of going back to that Great Plains Dungeon, but as the elevator stops and we approach the teleport platform that leads away from the city, I think of the possible benefits of bringing my teammates there too.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if we planned everything out in advance.

Abby's voice breaks my train of thought.

"Here catch, we'll need these to get back here once we're done."

I catch the teleport crystal she throws to me, adding it to my handful of others in my storage that I took just in case earlier and nod.

I put my ring of concealment on and change my face with my skill, and I watch both Maria and Abby do the same with identical rings of alteration.

We all step onto the platform together and end up in the bustling train station down below the mountain right where I started my journey in Sector 1.

Not that much time has passed, really only a couple of days at most, but it feels like I was a much different man the last time I stepped off this platform.

The three of us step off and make our way through town and up the mountain in a rushed manner.

The breeze is cool and the weather gets chilly as we climb the mountain path back up to Valor City, but the sun above occasionally sends warm waves of light that make the constant breeze more refreshing.

The crowd outside the first Silver wall is fairly long, just like the first time I entered this city, but it moves fast and we each get registered with new wristbands, and I load 5 Platinum into my credit account. There's still over 60 Platinum profit in my storage from my last time through these outer walls.

My teammates load the same amount into their bands, and we all get a few jealous stares from a few passersby, but the guards don't bat an eye. They get rich folk coming in with much more than this all the time.

Once we step through the inner walls, it's a quick walk from here. After passing through the high-end shops and going through checkpoints at the gold and platinum wall, it only takes another few minutes before we finally make it to the Platinum District. The privately owned skyscrapers loom above us as we make our way past the large auction house and approach the black stone monastery.

Chapter 388

The two orange-robed figures stand in front of the same opening in the pyramid-shaped structure.

My initial plan was to walk in myself, and notify Monk that I'd be bringing company, but before I even get close enough to the fortress, a third head emerges from the dark hallway and the kind face motions for all of us to come in.

He holds up three fingers from deep inside the tunnel, then presses one to his lips.

I nod, understanding the message; all three of us approach without saying a word. I take the small silver container out of my item storage and into the inner part of my robe before we walk in, guessing the pills inside may be useful later.

Two light gasps escape from Maria and Abby's lips as they enter the mouth of the walkway. The absence of mana can be a surprise, and the disappearance of our concealment items is even more of a rush, even though I warned them and briefly described the experience back when we were training last night.

"Don't worry, it'll be fine."

Last time I entered here, I felt that abrupt drained feeling too, but this time walking in, I can feel the dense Qi stores seeping from the stone and floating in the air, already starting to gather into my body as I walk forward.

With an already full and nearly overflowing core of Qi, the high amounts in the air feel warm and soothing, like I'm walking around with an ultra lightweight heated feather blanket.

Monk leads us into the tunnel, still not saying a single word. He presses his hand against the back wall, and it glows white with Qi before all 4 of us walk through and it closes with a light click.

Monk turns to face me, nods, eyes Maria up and down, nods, then looks at Abby for longer than expected before turning back to me.

"I was expecting you to bring the ice user along, but who is this? Another soul energy user I suppose?"

I quickly respond.

"Yes, these are some of my teammates. Whoever my enemies may be, they will fight with me."

Monk doesn't speak for a few seconds but nods and continues down the spiraling staircase, motioning us to follow.

"This is good, I will teach them too. We've already been spotted together, so there's no turning back now. If they learn Qi control half as fast as you, they will be forces to be reckoned with in a matter of days."

I smirk inwardly and follow, hearing sighs of relief come from both Abby and Maria's mouths as they follow close behind me.

We walk through the cafeteria, and many younger men in robes greet Monk as we pass, but very quickly we make it to the same training room I practiced in last time I came.

Monk stands in the open black-tiled room, while the three of us stand near the table and gear station, listening to what he has to say.

"First of all, I'd like to congratulate you on your match against the Ghoul last night. I watched very closely. It seems you only need to roughly double your base of Qi stores to break through its soul energy."

He crosses his arms.

"At the normal rate of a natural cultivator's Qi gathering, if you sit down and start now, you'll achieve that in just 50 years."

My eyes widen as he starts to laugh.

"I'm messing with you. I can tell you've leveled up quite a bit even since the last time we met, and your mana control has increased drastically as well. This kind of progression is not normal."

I nod as he continues.

"Although it doesn't directly contribute to your Qi base, having a stronger body, and more experience controlling powerful energy allows the user to refine and gather their Qi faster."

I finally reply, looking at Abby and Maria.

"So that's why I progressed so fast when we first started? Meaning, these two will probably grow at a similar rate?"

"Yes, to a certain extent. Everyone has a natural talent and pace of growth, but if you're already strong, you will grow faster at the start. Making a stronger body and pathways is like you're expanding the potential for your core to store Qi. Not only in your physical capacity, but also in your mind. When there's more space for potential stores, the rate of growth tends to heighten as well."

I smile, thinking to myself that this MCP absorption perk is paying off in more ways than one. What would take most hunters days, weeks, or possibly months to absorb through potions or stones can be completed with a simple press of a status button using my skill. Also, with rare items that contain lots of MP, if there's any negative backlash on the body or mind, Abby's restore skill can heal anything almost instantly.

Monk responds, as if he knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"You can't just power level in dungeons to raise your Qi capacity. You still will need extensive Qi sparring training, real battles against monsters like the Ghouls to really go all out for the kill, and of course time spent gathering Qi can't be rushed."

The room is silent.

"Even though I raised my level to almost 700, pushing my natural body's limits and increasing my capacity to hold mana, it still took me over a decade to master Qi to the point at where I am now. That being said, my natural talent was one of the best in my generation. It is clear the 3 of you have some uniqueness to your natural talents too."

I think about his words and inwardly recognize they're correct. I awakened a unique skill, and so did Abby as far as I'm aware. There are many healers in this world, but I've never heard of anyone that can restore full body parts and training fatigue instantly.

Maria too, awakened with a base stat that raises her mana four times faster per level up than the average user. Maybe we do have the talent to refine our Qi fast like Monks. But still, 10 years is far too long to wait.

He speaks up.

"With that being said, you two come here if you'd like to be awakened."

We all nod and take off our useless heavy gear and place it on the table, leaving all three of us in light casual clothing. With a skip in their steps, both Abby and Maria come to the center of the training room.

Monk instructs them to sit on the floor in the lotus position, then motions for me to come closer.

"Would you like to do the awakening yourself?"

I raise an eyebrow.

"Is it safe for me to perform it with no practice?"

He smiles.

"Probably safer than if I were to perform it myself, actually. The more the person being awakened trusts the Qi user awakening them, the more efficient the process is. If you were paying attention when I awakened you, I only filled up your core to about 40% capacity, that was the maximum I was able to connect with. With training and Qi pills, you were able to bring it up to full yourself."

I nod, standing next to him, behind both Abby and Maria sitting on the floor.

"So how do I do it?"

"Remember how you imbued Qi into your blade like it was an extension of yourself?"

I picture the wave of energy that rushed through my body into my blade while fighting the monsters in the arena.

"Yeah."

"Well you'll have to make your friends here an extension of yourself as well. Imbuing them with Qi, then releasing the bond and allowing them to retain the energy you gift them. Your control is already far past the ability of many Inner high-ranking disciples here, I have no doubt you can manage a successful awakening. It's only up to them to accept it."

Maria's voice replies to this immediately.

"I'll accept it. I trust you, and wouldn't ask for any better person to awaken me."

I nod, walking closer as Abby speaks too.

"Me next, I trust you'll do a fine job."

"Understood."

I place my hand on Maria's back and we synchronize our breathing. I feel the air going in and out of her body, then match this rhythm to the flow of the Qi in my core.

Slowly, I begin to picture my hand connecting directly to her back and the warm trickling sensation of Qi rolling down my arm flows right through her. It's as if the thin shirt between my hand and her back is not even there.

Once the first trickle rolls through, I let a stream trickle in two, then a wave.

I can feel and control the energy now flowing into Maria's body. As easily as it flows in, it flows out as well. Waves of Qi circulate through her body, and back into mine.

After a few cycles through, small amounts of the warm energy find a resting point in her core right below her stomach.

She doesn't move a muscle, and I continue to fill her body with Qi until I hit a limit.

It feels similar to my sword, like the natural saturation point is met. It's possible for me to force more in, but I instinctively feel as if there's no reason to do so. It would just overflow and leak out without being used.

At this, I slowly take a step back, and release my hand away from her body.

A wave of exhaustion comes over me as I feel the connection sever, and I lose over 90% of my Qi in a single instant.

My body feels cold, and I shiver as the shock from breaking the link washes over me.

I feel a bit dizzy and light-headed but catch myself before falling as Maria rises from her sitting position practically glowing with power.

Her eyes are wide, and she can't stop staring at her open palms in front of her face.

In the same moment, it feels like the room is closing in on me, and a ringing sound gets louder and louder the longer I wait. It feels like my mouth is dry, but I'm not thirsty. My stomach wants to cave in on itself, but I'm not hungry. I'm in pain all over, but there are no injuries. Wincing, and not

wanting to deter from Maria's beautiful awakening moment, I slowly walk over to the table with all our gear and grab a Qi pill from the silver container.

I grit my teeth and gulp it down to feel a rush of warm energy fill my body again.

I take a gasp of fresh air, and the ringing stops while the room expands outward back to its original form in my perception.

I grab a second pill from the container and place it in my pants pocket, whispering under my breath.

"Note to self, never run out of Qi..."

I let out a nervous chuckle and walk back over to see Maria still in awe of the power system she can now see so clearly.

It wasn't my first time sensing new power when I awakened Qi. I already had a few eye-opening Demonic Energy experiences that showed me there's more than mana in this world. I guess if it was my first time seeing something like this, I'd be pretty lost in its glory too.

Monk steps closer to me as I get ready to awaken Abby next.

"I didn't realize you'd manage to let out so much Qi. Her natural capacity must be equal or even higher than yours. I would have warned you if I knew you'd sink so low."

I nod and reply.

"It's fine. I should have expected it anyway."

I place my hand on Abby's back and take a deep breath.

"Ready?"

I feel her breath rise up and down.

"Ready."

After synchronizing and allowing my Qi into Abby in the same manner, I connect with her and let my energy flow.

Upon our initial link, at the first trickle, I can already tell Abby has a smaller capacity than Maria's, but it's not by much. I'm still able to fill her core to the brim using up almost 80% of my power.

As I release my connection, the same severed link hits me like a wave, but I immediately take the Qi pill in my pocket to not let it take over.

I stand up straight as Abby gets to her feet as well, looking down at her hands, then looking at me, Maria, Monk, and the entire room with a dazed expression.

I smile at them, then turn to Monk.

"They're having a bit of a different reaction than me."

"Yes, the energy wasn't as foreign to them because it came from you. Your instant exposure was a bit more intense. Still, even if it was calmer they handled it well. We can spar while they get used to the new energy."

Chapter 389

"Sounds good to me."

While Maria and Abby come to their senses, I square up with Monk and we both pick up our sparring session where we left off.

With Qi powering every step I take, and hot waves of energy filling every punch; Monk and I go at it and spar harder than we ever have before.

Sweat drips down the sides of my forehead, and I even see a droplet or two on Monk's, with his breathing getting heavier too.

Loud echoing thuds and cracks vibrate through the room as our bodies and fists collide for a full 30 minutes straight before stopping.

"You're getting a lot quicker, and your natural Qi control has even risen a bit since the last time we sparred. That fight against the ghoul must have really pushed you to your limits. Facing it, and actually being able to incorporate your magic with your fighting style is the only way you'll truly get much stronger."

I nod slowly, understanding that he's basically telling me training and sparring with him has already reached its limit. He's right, I'm subconsciously holding back while sparring. With the match against the Ghoul last night, I used every drop of energy to try and go for the kill.

On top of that, I had my buffs, sword, and skills to boost my perception and abilities. The effort and power in a life or death battle can't be matched here.

"I understand. However, these two are still in their beginner stages. They need to be taught the basics as I did when I first came in here."

Monk smiles.

"My specialty."

After the half an hour session, both Maria and Abby have started to adapt to their new environments. They stopped staring at the walls with eyes filled with awe, and slowly began watching our match, concentrating on reality again.

Monk walks them through the basic information they need to know about Qi. Using it as a power source, showing them a Qi pill, and detailing the similarities that their Qi has with the borrowed power of the Red Hydra.

Hearing Monk's explanation of soul energy again makes me realize he understands exactly how it works down to its core. The old story of his past leader awakening soul energy of his own resurfaces in my mind. The fact that this leader of his was defeated by the Lich King when it decided to take over is a scary thought.

Pairing this with the explanation and warning from Ember, my wishes to stay in this city any longer are seriously starting to wane.

I zone out in my own thoughts, thinking of a new plan while Monk continues the basics of Qi and starts to make both Maria and Abby throw punches at him just like he did for me.

I look up and smile to myself as I've thought of what to do next. At the same moment, both of the newly awakened Qi users throw over half a dozen punches, but get no result yet. However, the determination on their face is just like mine when I started.

I speak up to Monk.

"This will take you all a few hours right? You'll bring them through all the basic steps."

He replies while blocking two fists from both girls flying at him.

"Yes, at least 4 to 6 hours. Just like you, I will get them ready to fight in the Arena tonight for more practice."

"Good. In that case, I'll be back soon. I have something important to do."

"Fine by me, I'll have my hands full here."

Two waves and goodbyes sound out from the two young fighters too.

I walk over to the table at the back of the room and start to put all my gear on. Then, as I turn to leave, I hear an excited yell from Maria.

"Ha! I felt it! I did it!"

Then a thud, followed by Monk's voice.

"Good, now try it again. Allow the Qi to flow more instinctually, like a wave of ocean water..."

I can't help but chuckle a bit, watching both of them struggle to lay a finger on the experienced Qi user as he uses a fraction of his power.

I move toward the exit and as I press on the Qi infused door, an excited yell from Abby rings out too.

"There we go, I got it to flow through my arm and into my fist that time!"

Another thud and calm explanation from Monk follows as I walk out the door and it clicks shut.

Stolen from Royal Road, this story should be reported if encountered on Amazon.

I make my way out of the fortress and make sure my disguise is fully present before walking out into the open air.

It takes a while, but I walk through every gate in the city before exiting through the silver walls and cashing out my 5 platinum.

I walk a ways down the mountain, then activate my stealth skill once I'm out of anyone's sight. Afterward, I crush a transport crystal in my palm and teleport into the Galeheart tower lobby.

I make sure to fully suppress my intimidation skill's passive ability this time, and the two lobby men that greet me nervously thank me for being considerate as they remember what happened the last time I showed up unannounced.

"Is Lith available? I have some questions for him."

There's a ding and a door opening in the lobby before the lobby men can even respond.

Lith walks out in a brand new jet black suit, making his piercing blue eyes pop. He stands out like a magazine cutout against the white walls.

"What can I help you with today? Have you come to a decision about my offer, or just want to chat."

I turn from the registration desk to look the powerful businessman in the eyes.

"A little of both, I suppose. I'd like to speak in private."

"Very well."

Without another word, we board the absurdly fast elevator and make it to the top floor before I can count to three.

Both of us stand next to the desk at the back of the room where we met last night, staring out at the hologram of the now daytime projection of the city below us on the mana-shielded walls. If I don't activate my perception skills, it almost looks like a real glass window.

Lith breaks the silence.

"So, it's not going to be a simple yes, I assume. Tell me your conditions, what do you want?"

I stare out the fake window a few seconds longer, then reply.

"First, I'd like a list of the old export volume from each region that Sector 2 used to provide materials to, as well as rough locations for the dungeons that have materials necessary to make the gear and their crafting recipes."

He nods with a thin smile as I continue.

"I want to know where this potential team of craftsmen is coming from, and information on the guards you say you would assign to help revamp the city and keep Sector 2 in line."

He nods again.

"And on top of that, I'd like the power to reject any workers you send my way. If I don't like the entire team of craftsmen and guards, I'd like to send them back and hire my own team. No surveillance of me or my team is allowed in Sector 2 and 100% of profits from the new trade business will be mine. I decide the pricing, and I decide who I do business with. If I take full responsibility for this land, I want to reap all the benefits. Your payment will be my team taking out The Dark One once we're strong enough."

On that note, we both stare out the fake window for a moment longer without saying a word.

Lith replies.

"That's quite the bold proposition there. Don't you think you're biting off a bit more than you can chew?"

I shrug.

"I'd say it's a good start to our negotiations. You gave me an offer, I've voiced my own. If you'd like to meet in the middle somewhere, how about you give me the lists of items needed to be sent to each region as a start, and you can think about my offer and give me a counter whenever you'd like."

He lets out a sigh while looking out at the view, then turns to walk over to his desk.

"That sounds reasonable enough. I'll be giving these to you to manage no matter the final agreement we come across, so this is fine."

He takes out 5 pieces of paper, with long lists on them. They're labeled [Sector 4], [Sector 3], [Sector 1], [Vice Region], and [Apex Region] at the top.

He hands them to me, and I give a quick glance at the top paper that's the Sector 4 list.

It has hundreds of armor and weapon set requests ranging from 1 silver per unit, up to 5 gold per unit. Magic items from low E grade to High C grade in the magnitudes of ten to a hundred units too, ranging in the same 1 silver to up to 5 gold range here.

There's nothing truly special or unique here, but with a total of almost 8 thousand units at an average sale price per unit of close to 1 gold. This order is not a cheap one.

Lith speaks as I glance at the paper.

"Exactly. It's a big business. That's the average monthly order from the Sector 4 Region. 80 platinum. That's not counting any customs or special orders, we don't have a hold of those contacts or exact items because it was handled directly by the Sector 2 leader."

I flip to the next page, seeing the Sector 3 region mostly only buying potions and buffing gear, but their order value is close to that of Sector 4, nearly 5 thousand units at an average of 25 silver per unit. Still, that's 10 platinum per month.

Next, I flip to the Sector 1 page and see its only half the size of the Sector 3 list, but my eyes widen at the pricing next to most of the items here. No gear under C Grade rating is on this order page, some of it even surpasses B grade rating, and there are item names I've never seen before. The average price per unit is over 10 gold. That adds up to roughly 250 platinum per order.

Lith peers over at the paper and nods.

"This is for Valor City only. High-Grade gear is the only acceptable option. Most of the Silver District and Commerce Town below the mountain rely on trade from outside sectors. The Gold District here buys from the Platinum District suppliers, who buy from me. And well, I used to buy from the Sector 2 leader, but there will be some changes,"

He pauses, pointing to the Vice Region and Apex Region papers that have similar orders as Valor City. The Vice Region is about 30% less, and the Apex Region is 200% more. Only high-grade gear that can't be crafted or farmed anywhere normally.

"Most of these deals, we'll be unable to maintain. Even a ranked-up legendary craftsman can't do some of the things that old leader could do. However, we'll get close. 100% of Sector 4, and 3, and maybe 20% of the other regions' deals can be saved. We'll have to start somewhere and build up from there."

I nod, accepting the papers and placing them under my cloak and into my item storage.

"Good. This is all I need for now, I'd like to study these numbers before I hear your counteroffer if that's alright."

"Fine by me. I assume you'll be heading out to the arena tonight and farming afterward, correct?"

"Yes, Maria and Abby too."

"Well, excellent. I'll come up with a few options for you by tomorrow morning then."

We both nod and shake hands.

He shows me to the elevator, and I press a small white button near the entrance that says [Dungeon Access].

With a wide grin across my face, I use the teleportation platform to make my way into the cave system below the city and jump into the Red Ogre dungeon. Seconds later, I dungeon walk to a random D Class dungeon in the Vice City dungeon hub and walk out with a full new concealed facial disguise.

The light breeze and fresh air of the city combined with the bustling crowd of chatter of hopeful hunters is nostalgic. I walk straight through it all on a mission, approaching the rougher part of town to find the black market. I'm on my way to see an old friend.

Chapter 390

The clean and shiny inner city is left behind as I walk into the much more dangerous and less regulated side of town.

Wearing my ring of concealment from Sector 1, the high quality black suit makes it look like I'm not from around these parts. However, as long as no one sees who I really am, I don't care if I stick out like a sore thumb.

The faint smell of garbage and the suspicious wandering eyes from everyone I pass aren't a sight I missed very much, but it feels nice to know I'm really back roaming the streets of the capital.

Less and less people line the roads, and the houses and shops become more dilapidated until the familiar 3-story brick building comes into my view. With my advanced perception, I can see the two large-bodied guards that stand outside the front entrance, and over a dozen workers inside are sensed by my enemy detection skill.

I slip into an alley without anyone nearby and activate my legendary stealth skill. It completely conceals my presence to anyone near me below my mana control base. The veil of energy around me acts as a skill imbued blanket and even fully suppresses my intimidation's passive outgoing energy. So, it's safe to say I'm completely invisible.

Stepping out from the shadows, I walk up to the guards and neither of them see or sense me from even 10 meters away.

If I just revealed who I was, they'd surely remember me, and I'm positive Bri, the legendary Craftswoman, would gladly take me as a guest.

However, I'm supposed to be dead. As far as the Association knows, and many people that follow the paper, every single one of my teammates was killed on a mission out of the continent.

This is far from the truth, and I don't plan on revealing this to anyone. On top of that, I'd like to give my new potential business partner a loyalty test.

With all this on my mind, I wait by a nearby building, keeping an eye on the two guards and the door behind them. They chat between themselves, and not much happens until the top of the hour when a short man in a grey suit walks up to them with a confident stride.

He shows them a piece of paper, and one of the guards nods while the other opens the door of the building.

At this, I jump forward and make my move.

With less than 5 seconds to act, I maneuver my way through the guards and into the building undetected while the businessman walks through the bottom floor over to a thin metal spiral staircase at the back of the room.

As he goes up, the door behind me clicks shut. I'm left with my stealth skill activated in a room full of workers sifting and sorting through random E and D class items.

There are rows of tables, and about 16 workers here all going about their daily tasks, placing groupings of items into boxes, taping them up, and writing shipping details and names on the front sides.

I watch a short brown-haired woman pack a 12-pack of [Temporary Strength Enhancement Potions] with a 3-minute 25% buff on them into what looks on the outside to be a children's toy box. In a matter of seconds, with a vacuum seal and an extra layer of lightly mana-imbued tape around the outside, my appraisal skill senses start to pick up its reading fainter and fainter.

By the time an extra box and packing peanuts are put around the mana-imbued tape, it's nearly invisible.

With my high level of mana control, and special grade appraisal skill, I'm still able to see through it faintly, but I wouldn't be surprised if anyone below a ranked-up level couldn't see through it. It's a smart way to transport and ship valuable materials far distances without the worry of them being detected and stolen.

I smirk inwardly while continuing to look around the room.

Some workers have basic non-combat-related skills like inspect, imbue, small mental strength buffs, and even a few with a basic no-grade craftsmanship skill.

Others are just weaker hunters, with common skills like swordsmanship or body hardening.

No one in this room is above level 200. Getting stronger and risking their lives in dungeons is not part of their daily lives. Some look like thugs and runaways, while others just look like simple family men and women that are bringing home money to raise their kids. These are all workers for Bri. Nothing more, nothing less.

I nod to myself while walking around the room for another minute or two, observing the work being done a bit longer. Then, I make my way up the stairs.

Even the sounds of my steps are drowned out by my stealth skill as I make it to the second floor and see the tall thin man in a suit and glasses reading a dark purple hardcover book at his desk at the back of the room. Bookcases line the walls behind him, and every book on the shelves look as if they've been thoroughly read many times over. His right leg is crossed over the other, and his chair is pushed back in a much more casual position than I remember him looking.

The two twin girls on the far right wall of the room sort and test higher grade magical items along with books and some potions. Some of the gear here reaches high grade D or low grade C gear at most.

I wait patiently, then hear a familiar voice echo through the staircase above me.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Garcia. Your new updated subscription will be processed today. I'm glad you decided to increase the volume, you're always welcome back."

A high-pitched and slightly nervous voice replies.

"Of course, Ms. Briana, the pleasure is mine. I'll be sure to come by again for any future changes."

Footsteps begin to come down the stairway, and the man passes right by me. Bernard looks up from his book with one raised eyebrow, but goes back to reading once the man starts walking down to the first floor.

On this cue, I walk up the stairs myself and enter the very dimly lit room on the top floor.

Walking back to her desk, I see the tight black clothing and curvy figure of the olive-skinned businesswoman who was my first reality check to the harsh world of hunters.

She crafted my Flame Emperor's sword and gave me a much-needed boost in gear, money, and underworld reputation back in the day. Along with that, she was the only one to warn me about joining the Association. Maybe that was just a personal grudge, or a one-time thing. Time has passed, and people change. I'd like to get some firsthand insight into her current style of business before asking for her help.

Revealing myself in front of her now could elicit a shock-driven or overly emotional response. I want to know her baseline morals and how she treats all clients, not just me.

The plan I have may be a bit harsh, but I'm sure she can handle it.

The moment Bri turns around and sits back at her desk, she completely turns off her light magic skill, and the room returns to total darkness.

To my surprise, she speaks in a calm and calculated tone.

"Whoever you are, show yourself and tell me what intentions you have spying on my operation. I thought we came to a clear agreement that the Association's hands do not belong in my business."