

## **D. Diver 401**

### Chapter 401

After a long rest, my eyes finally open.

The white void of the isolation pod that surrounds me fills my vision, and I take in a deep breath of mana-infused air.

I'm unsure how much time exactly has passed, but I do know there can't be more than 24 hours remaining.

Based on how my joints, muscles, and bones feel, I assume I just slept for roughly 10 to 12 hours. With the massive influx of mana, it's almost like I've used my hibernation skill to heal all my fatigue and injuries.

I take off the remains of my salamander's cloak and sigh, placing it into my item storage and freeing up a new slot in my gear possibilities.

Considering the fact that I usually only use one weapon per fight, and I hold my wind daggers and midnight dagger on me as backup to switch out. I could technically add on gear in these areas too. So, I could add two new items, possibly just leaving one slot open in case I want to wield two blades at once.

I take out my sword and examine my armor as well, making sure my blood-bonded weapons have all properly healed and let out a sigh of relief once they do. I murmur under my breath.

"Looks like I just need a new cloak... and maybe something to protect my hands."

I don't want to go through that horrific pain again. I need to get stronger gear to prepare for a fight with a being with those heightened Soul Energy capabilities.

Most importantly, I need to raise my Qi Capacity, and fast...

With a sigh, I sit down in the lotus position inside the pod, and begin to tap into the same feeling Monk showed me when I practiced Qi gathering in the monastery.

There is far less Qi in the air here, but I can still sense an unusually high amount.

It's actually much more than the open air outside, and as my mind slips away to a calm state of being, my subconscious gets to work.

I took a Qi pill before entering the pod, and a rush of energy filled my core to the brim. All of the excess energy slowly seeped out of my body because I can't hold anything above my natural saturation point.

However, this is a closed-door pod, almost like a miniature pocket world.

I can faintly sense traces of Qi leaving through the borders of the containment casing, but a majority of it is staying inside.

It circulates around the small white room, and continuously lands on the outer layer of my body.

I'm only capable of naturally gathering Qi so fast. The absorption rate is more instinctual like breathing rather than an active action.

While my eyes are closed, and I concentrate on the circulation of Qi throughout my body, the Qi in the atmosphere naturally gravitates toward me at a faster rate. The difference between sitting and cultivating and walking through an area high in Qi density is not astronomical, but it is noticeable.

My only drawback is time.

After another few hours of gentle gathering and relaxation pass, my mind gradually falls back into the confusing spiral of replaying the fight with the Wraith over and over in my head.

I need a major power-up, and I need it now.

I fall in and out of a restless Qi gathering cycle for the remainder of the time in this pod, but for some reason, everything clicks the moment the metal door of the pod opens on its own in front of me.

Mana and Qi are released from the small containment pod, and I whisper under my breath.

"I need to go back to the Titan's Domain."

Feeling like I just had an epiphany, I step out of the pod and look around like this is a whole new world...

I always kept the thought at the back of my mind that The titan's domain could be used to train my mana control up in an emergency situation. But, ever since Ember's warning about scaring them away and their decreasing numbers the last time I used them to train and defeat the Behemoth on the 20th Floor of the Labyrinth, I've been hesitant to go back.

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On top of all of that, the act of sitting in a blank white room for days and weeks on end is a mind-numbing experience.

Last time I left that white-walled prison I was not the same since.

I let out a long sigh, pacing back and forth in the small room for a few minutes, thinking about preparing better. If I buy enough food, water, comfort items, and entertainment; I could stay in there much longer with less of a problem.

I have 10 Qi pills left in my silver case... If I were to use all of them, flooding the Titan's domain with Qi just like I did an Isolation pod, I wonder how well it would act as an insulator, and how fast I could grow without the burden of a time constraint?

These isolation pods slow down time, but as far as I know, the titan's domain brings time to a halt... Or at least the dilation is so large, it seems that way.

The grin across my face widens as a plan begins to come together, but my train of thought is momentarily broken when the blue light above the other pod at the back of the room opens and Lith walks out with his hands clasped and a very relaxed look on his face.

I turn to see him, and his gaze becomes sharper and his relaxed face turns to a thin smile.

"Fancy seeing you here so bright and early."

His eyes shift to the other pod on the side of the room that is still open, slowly leaking some mana from my session.

"Looks like you had a nice session as well."

I nod, facing him with a more professional look, trying my best to keep my excitement of my recent potential discovery under control.

He continues, walking over to the back of the room nearing the elevator.

"Well, I do have a meeting to attend to, but I have come up with a reasonable counteroffer to your demands last night if you'd like to hear."

He turns to face me, and I give him a motion to carry on.

"Sure, lay it on me."

He smiles.

"Well, I think giving you authority to fire or hire new craftsmen from the team I provide is reasonable. If by chance you have the connections to form your own team capable of doing the volume necessary, that is fine by me."

I cross my arms and grin back slightly as he carries on.

"The guards on the other hand, I'll have to push back on this point. I'd like some of my men stationed in Sector 2 permanently. I run a business of trade and information, it's in my best interest to know what's going on everywhere at all times."

My expression changes to one of distaste, but Lith explains further.

"We're still waiting on the details of the current Sector 2, but if you end up forming a place of operations there, I will promise to give you full privacy for you and your teammates. My men won't go near it, just like this tower is in Valor City, a safe and private state of operations."

I nod and relax more as he goes on.

"Then lastly the trade profits. Although it is a bit of a stretch, me giving you so much help to establish this business and you taking all the profits in return; I'll accept this portion of your initial ask."

My eyebrow raises, as this was one of the points I was sure I'd get kickback from.

"But, in return I'd like to place orders for Sector 1 and only pay the amount that it costs for you to farm the materials and pay your workers. Every other deal you manage to land, you'll get to keep 100% of the profits."

I pause and think about it for a moment, but I'm unsure how to counter everything he's said in a quick manner. He's respecting my privacy, promising full autonomy and no prying eyes, but wants rights to place guards and eyes around the territory itself. On top of that, he's willing to give up a percent of global trade profits in order to get his own products at a highly reduced cost.

"Interesting... I'll have to think on that too. I think we're getting much closer to a middle ground."

Lith smiles again and turns to open the elevator door.

"I think you're right, we are. Take your time. We still need intel from Fisher and Lydia before we can fully consolidate a deal anyway. I'll be back in the tower in a few hours, just ask my lobby men to ring me if you'd like to continue negotiations."

"Sounds good."

He leaves through the white doors, and I'm left in silence as more mana pours out from the isolation pod I left open.

I walk over and close it with a click, and the sound brings me right back to the state of mind I had before my surprise interaction with Lith.

"Even better. I'll have more time than I know what to do with to think about his offer later. For now, I have some tests to run."

I enter the elevator, put on my ring of concealment and activate my skill, then use the Red Ogre Dungeon Access to teleport myself back to Vice City.

I walk out in full disguise and make my way to the commerce section of the city. It's barely 6 in the morning, and the sun isn't even fully up yet, so not many merchants are active at this time of the day.

All of the outside shops are closed up, waiting for the morning rush of trains full of hunters to come in, but there are a few large shopping marts with tired-looking workers manning the registers.

I walk through a couple, stocking up on gallons of water and piles of food.

Most of the night shift workers give me side eyes and odd looks, but none of them say a word as I leave them a full gold coin as payment and leave with 4 shopping carts full of food and water only to place them all into my item storage the moment I leave the store and get out of their sight.

Next, I go to another 24-hour store filled with miscellaneous items. I manage to pick up a few sleeping bags, a blow-up mattress, pillows, some casual changes of clothes, and a few additions of the newest comics and novels I've yet to catch up on while traveling around the Dark Continent.

Lastly, I find a camping section of the store with a portable bathroom and shower set. My eyes light up at the sight of these, and don't even mind the 2 gold price tag.

Again, when leaving this store I get a few odd looks, and I even buy a premium C-grade item box from their magic items section to allow me to take the large overweight items with me. I doubt any of them would overthink it much if I just left without one, but it doesn't hurt to be extra careful. Once finally leaving the store, I just place the entire item box full of materials into my storage system for convenience.

As the sun begins to come up, I activate my stealth skill and walk right past the E-Class guards in the dungeon hub.

I enter one of the low grade dungeons moments later and Dungeon Walk directly to The Great Plains.

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Activating my enemy detection skill, I scan the entire dungeon in search of the odd readings Titans give off.

With my more recent mana control and skill upgrades, my skills nearly spread across the entire dungeon as I teleport around from all the old points I used to hunt here.

Finally, a familiar 500-meter radius blank blotch of high-density mana comes into my mind's eye. There are only two of these blotches in the entire dungeon. Fewer than I hoped for, but one more than I need.

Even with my legendary skill upgrade, for some reason, it still doesn't show me a clear image of these creatures. However, I teleport to the closest one nearby, and the sight of a 30-meter tall black outline of a Titan comes into view.

They look exactly how I remember. A jet-black void of darkness with no defining features in the form of a massive long-limbed human. They walk slowly around these great plains looking for weaker beings to suck into their domains and steal their mana.

Even portions of the dungeon landscape are sucked away.

Staring up at it now, hearing the ominous buzz of mana, and watching it take slow footsteps toward me is not nearly as frightening as they used to be.

It approaches me from across the rolling hills of a grassland plain, and I wait for a few seconds inspecting and appraising it but gather no new insight. It really is just a massive blob of walking mana.

"Well... it's now or never..."

I run forward and air-step closer to the creature.

Without a hint of hesitation, I plunge headfirst into the dark void and the familiar sensation of falling takes over. I manage to bring myself upright and activate my wind magic before hitting the white floor of the rectangular white walled trap set beneath me.

Its ceiling closes the moment my feet touch the floor, and the low buzz of natural mana shielding fills my ears as I find myself back in the Titan's Domain. It's a fairly large rectangle, big enough for me to run back and forth in like a small sports field.

The ceiling is high enough to jump around a bit, and the four walls are far enough apart it isn't too cramped... but it's definitely a tight fit in here especially if I'm going to be doing primarily training.

I let out a sigh with my hands on my waist, then get to work.

I have three major goals for this session.

The first and most important one is increasing my Qi Capacity.

Even now, I can sense very small trace amounts of Qi in the air. Even in this very unique space, there's about 1/10 of the natural Qi in the air that there is in the outside world.

It makes me really wonder where Qi comes from. It seems to be everywhere in trace amounts, no matter where I am, but doesn't interact with anything unless a user can guide it. This energy is very different than Mana or Demonic Energy...

The second thing on my list to do is raising my Mana Control. While I'm here, I'll have an unlimited amount of mana to plunder and train with. Focusing on my Qi comes first, but I believe I can do both at once.

Then lastly, the third goal for this training session is figuring out how to get out of the Titan's Domain without the help of Ember's Mythic Grade Plunderer skill. I can always ask him for help,

but I want this to be a replicable process that I can do in front of my teammates without revealing my last and most important secret.

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I smile, reaching into my storage and pulling out my sword getting ready to face the back wall of the Domain.

"Alright, this is a trial run. Let's see how much I have to grow before I can get out of here by myself."

I charge up my blade to maximum strength, activate my buffs, get in a sturdy stance, and swing my blade with all my power to release a dense black wave of flames at the white wall.

Unlike the times I previously tried cutting this wall down, my attack doesn't make much sound or give any reaction at all.

It just slices through like butter.

A massive gaping hole in the shielding before me is ripped open, and the black void is visible to all my senses. My attack makes it out the other side of the nearly endless void, and I watch an explosion of light as it bursts back into the outside world.

"It doesn't even seem that far..."

If my energy attack can burst through like that, why wouldn't I just be able to make it out if I tried?

The thought of activating my extreme speed buff along with a few gusts of wind magic behind me to try following the path of my attack outside into the void crosses my mind, but I decide not to test this plan. I can think of more ways than one that theory would not work out well.

"Though, I do have one way back that's easier than all the rest."

I pull out a transport crystal from my item storage and hold it in my open palm.

If this works, I can bring Maria and Abby here right away and we can all start training.

I concentrate, and destroy the glistening stone in my left hand.

The fragments of crystal rock fall to the white domain's floor, and I don't budge. Teleport magic activates, covering my full body, but as soon as the flash of light covers my vision it dissipates just as quickly.

I'm still standing in the titan's domain with shattered crystal by my feet.

"Interesting..."

I remember my Dungeon Walker skill not working correctly in here either the last time I was trapped, and now this teleport crystal too.

"Well, the easy way out isn't going to work. I'll focus on goals 1 and 2 for now."

Pulling everything non-perishable out of my item storage, I set up a nice living area on one side of the room, and decide to do all of my training on the other.

The slice in the walls mends itself in a matter of minutes while I sort through my gear.

In my miscellaneous items pile with my comics and clothes, I bought a mana-imbued digital clock.

I take a look at it before I focus on my Qi control. This time around in the Titan's domain, I'm going to keep close track of the time that goes by.

Sitting at the far side of the room in the lotus position on a red-colored blanket with nothing but water bottles and a clock by my side, I take out one Qi pill and swallow it whole, oversaturating my body's already full core.

Closing my eyes and focusing only on the energy circulating through me, I constantly push waves of energy in a calming motion through my arms, legs, and torso. The excess Qi from the pills leaks out and begins to fill the room.

In just a few hours, I've completely expelled the excess Qi and come back to my natural maximum saturation point.

The excess energy in the air slowly flows around the contained room, and starts to gather on my body at a much faster rate than it does outside.

However, this is not enough.

I swallow another pill and wait a few hours for its energy to flow through me fully too. The excess Qi fills the room, making the air much denser with energy.

Then, again.

After the third pill, I look at the clock and over 8 hours have passed.

However, the entire room is filled with a much denser mist of Qi. Every time the waves of it pass through me, more and more

sticks to my skin in trace amounts and is absorbed into my capacity.

The density of Qi in the Domain is nearing what it feels like to gather energy inside Monk's Monastery.

I continue to take the pills, oversaturating my core for 20 more hours straight until the room is completely full and I'm entirely out of pills.

The amount of Qi that escapes through the micro tears in the walls is so minuscule, I can't even sense any leaving.

By the time I'm finished, the density in here is almost 3 times as much as it is in the monastery, and I can feel my rate of absorption increase just slightly as the density in the room increases. It's not exactly 3 times as fast, but the difference is noticeable.

Now that everything is contained inside, I won't be attempting to break through the walls again anytime soon for fear that the energy may seep out. However, I do test plundering mana from the floor below me and activating all my buffs to burn through MP while simultaneously cultivating Qi.

It doesn't affect the absorption rate at all, and allows me to comfortably burn through 5 to 6 thousand MP per minute at a fairly constant rate. I could do more, but this is the perfect rate to use my self-regeneration ability to heal my fatigue just as fast as it naturally builds up.

I let my mind wander, and enjoy the peace and quiet.

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I don't get hungry or tired for another full day. Not doing overly strenuous activity along with my increased mana control base has made it much easier to go long stretches without these necessities. Other than a few small breaks to get up and stretch or drink water, I gather Qi and train my mana control for an additional 24 hours.

Over 15 million MP is absorbed over the 2 total days, and a good amount of Qi has entered my core, raising my capacity. It's not visibly noticeable, but I feel as if I'm filled with slightly more energy.

It may be just a placebo affect for the time being, but I'm excited to push the limits.

With my stomach rumbling and a few yawns coming out of my mouth, I walk over to the opposite side of the Domain and take a nice hot shower in the portable camper set using ice and fire magic summoning as to not waste too many resources.

Once changed into a fresh pair of clothes, I reach into my storage to make myself a large meal. On top of that, I crack open a new edition of one of my favorite comics and sit back on an air mattress covered in blankets and pillows up against the mana shielding's white wall.

I fall asleep and have a long and rejuvenating rest, then relax in the morning for a few hours as well before venturing back over to my cultivation area.

Just existing in the dense energy-filled environment naturally gathers Qi, but when I sit down and concentrate, the absorption rate increases much faster.

I get in the cycle of training 2 days on, 1 day off.

The relaxation state of Qi gathering puts me in a flow state, making time feel as though it doesn't go by. All I have to do is focus on naturally moving my Qi around in a constant pattern around my body while letting my perception and stat-boosting skills activate at a low rate while my plunderer skill replenishes my MP.

I get into the rhythm of a zombie-like trance where the only time I need to stop is for water breaks and, of course, food and sleep once roughly 48 hours is up.

On my 24-hour off cycles, I read, sleep, and journal. Using a few notepads, I meticulously write down what I was doing last in the world outside over and over. I repeat a few conversations and actions that have occurred over the last few weeks in a notebook just to make sure the memory of these events doesn't slip too far into the back of my mind.

This is the error I made last time I used this Domain to train. I didn't take into account that reality has come to a halt outside and wasn't well prepared to re-enter society. This time around, I'm covering all my bases.

My schedule is very relaxed, and I grow more every day, making a tally on another separate page every time the clock hits [00:00], signifying another day has passed.

Ten cycles go by, meaning a full month passes, and a few huge changes start to occur.

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The Qi in the air noticeably lessens.



Not because it's leaving the Walls at a rapid rate, but because it's staying contained in my body.

Before, I thought it might just be my mind playing tricks, but now, I'm certain that I feel at least a 10% increase in my Qi capacity.

My mana control increase is much more trackable. I've processed over 150 million MP, and I'm practically glowing with extra power. It's not as fast as just killing high-level monsters and using my MCP absorption skill on them for maximum percent gains, but it is fairly efficient, and my control is raising without having to level up.

As another 2 months pass, I get in the routine of doing pushups, sprints, squats, and pullups with heavy stone manifested weights and equipment. I'd like to keep my body in the state of being active even if I don't technically need it. This doesn't cut into much of my gathering time; I just add it into a few hours of my 24 hours off-time routine.

More and more of the Qi in the air begins to fade away during this time too. It's about half as dense in the air as when I started. My base raises from what I can tell, another 25% or so, making an educated assumption that I've gained over 1/3 of my initial base since I entered. My mana control, on the other hand, has raised by an even higher amount, roughly 500 million MP.

The rate at which I'm fatigued lessens, and the efficiency that I can heal my fatigue increases. Since entering this session, my mana control has raised over double what it was when I began.

I continue to train.

All the stress and worry that has built up over the last few weeks and months in the outside world starts to dissipate too.

The stronger I get, and the more time I have to formulate a plan for when I get out, the more relaxed, calm, and calculated my overall demeanor and outlook on my situation comes to be.

Another 3 months in the Domain pass before the Qi circulating in the air has either been fully absorbed by me, or it seeps out through the walls of the domain very slowly. I gain roughly another 1/3 of my initial base. If the Qi in the air stayed as dense as it did at the start, I would have been able to most likely absorb more in the time I was sitting in here.

However, my mana control only continues to rise at a slow and steady exponential rate. I manage to burn through nearly 1 billion more MP. This over doubles my mana control base again, bringing me to a much higher level than when I entered, almost a 2.5x increase.

Although I'm brimming with power, I haven't gotten to truly test things out.

I stop gathering Qi in the middle of my session today and stand to my feet. The Qi around me is less dense than the natural air in the outside world.

"I've hit the limit. It's time to break out of this place."

I put the comics and novels I completed into my storage and let out a sigh looking at the ones I still have yet to catch up on. Most of the good food and miscellaneous items stay in my storage, but I decide to leave all the dirty laundry and used camping gear sets behind. It'll be easier to just buy these again rather than try to salvage them of any usable materials.

Once holding everything I care to keep with me, I reach into my item storage and pull out my sword.

"Let's see how much I've grown."

I charge up my blade with as much mana as possible, activate my skills, and get into the same powerful stance I did before entering this domain. Then, let a wave of dense black flames erupt from my sword.

It's impressively larger, hotter, and denser than last time; tearing an enormous hole in the shielding wall that wraps upward to break part of the ceiling and downward breaking the floor in sections too.

It hits the back of the void in mere seconds and a huge flash of white light shows that it's made it to the outside world. The rectangular room I stand in shakes, and my theory that Qi would escape through the open hole comes true as I watch some denser pockets drift out into the less dense atmosphere in the void.

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Even with this powerful attack, in a matter of minutes, the massive tear in the shielded walls heals back to as good as new.

I try using the same attack a few more times, tearing massive cracks in the rectangular prison that open the floor and ceiling up to the black void surrounding me. Each time it soars through the darkness and makes it out, but nothing changes.

The walls continuously heal on their own, and I'm left alone in the blank white room.

Letting out a sigh, I whisper to myself.

"Well, there's still one thing I can try."

Facing the back wall of the room, I charge up my sword with mana and fire magic just like before, but before releasing the attack, I activate my Red Hydra's Buff.

A dense crimson aura forms around my mana blade and once I release my attack from my sword, the impact makes the entire structure of the room I'm in shake multiple times more violently than before.

It slices through, and the red aura that remains begins to eat away at the mana-imbued wall that it comes in contact with very quickly. Burning it away like tissue paper to a hot flame.

A flash of light tells me the brunt of the attack has hit the outside world through the void, but what fascinates me even more is the sight of the entire back wall of the room being completely destroyed.

The red aura exhausts itself eventually, but it does some serious damage. I can't even see the corners of the room; it looks as if it was sliced off completely with a jagged blade.

However, soon enough, the white mana-shielded wall begins to heal itself up.

I let out a sigh, realizing the more I throw attacks at that wall, the more useless things may become. The only thing it will do is increase my fatigue from using the buff over and over, and possibly just destroy the entire room I'm standing in and leave me floating in the dark black void of energy all around me.

I open my item storage and let Ember come out. If anyone has insight on my situation, it'd be him.

As he flaps his wings once, then lands on the ground with a thud, he almost instantly curls into a comfortable-looking ball and looks at me with interested eyes.

"So you took my advice? I can tell you're a lot stronger..."

He looks around, pausing his gaze on the open wall that's slowly closing up still, then back to me holding a flaming sword.

"You need help getting out of here, don't you?"

He starts to chuckle as I nod and reply.

"Well, yes. But I'd rather find a way to get out of here myself. I'd like to train with my teammates here, but don't want to expose you to any prying eyes. I have a feeling that would be problematic."

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Ember nods, returning his gaze to the wall as it fully heals up.

"Yes, anyone that has knowledge of the last war knowing of my existence may bring more problems than good for you if they knew of me. Even if you trust your teammates, I advise you to follow your gut and not tell a soul until you're much stronger."

I raise an eyebrow at his mention of a war, but reply with a much more important series of questions.

"So, is there any way for me to break out of this Domain myself? My attacks are much stronger than before, and my Hydra's Buff increases that attack power by a considerable amount too. But, that doesn't account for the void around us. It doesn't seem to have any effect on it, and I'm hesitant to dive into it without knowing the dangers."

Ember smiles.

"Well, to put it bluntly, you're too weak. The Titan's domain is a pocket world formed by magic far greater than your own. It is supposed to be a trap impossible to escape. The only reason we can is because of my skill that retained its Mythic grade status. Time dilated pockets of space can only exist when immensely high density amounts of mana are stored in a small place."

I nod, crossing my arms trying to follow along as Ember continues.

"We're just packets of information stored inside a small domain deep within a titan. Think of this Domain as its own Dungeon. Can you throw energy attacks at a dungeon floor enough times and break out?"

"No..."

"A Titan's domain acts no different, it's just a much smaller version, with more mana. This leads to very odd space and time-bending properties. The only way to weaken its defenses is to turn off its energy sources entirely. It's similar to collapsing a dungeon and forcing a dungeon break. However,, we're the only monsters inside this pocket world trying to get out."

I respond in a disappointed tone.

"So there's no other ways to get out? What about jumping in the void? My energy attacks can make their way through, why can't I?"

Ember replies.

"Are you sure they leave the void? My theory is energy distorts more and more the closer it gets to the outer edge. The flashes of light and disappearance may just be the attack dispersing into the darkness."

Then he sighs.

"Though I could be wrong, I haven't studied these Domains very much. The Void Creeper's Rifts are rare to come by, even more so than Demonic ones in recent times."

I reply.

"So it's just not worth the risk. What if I increase my mana control high enough to the point where my legendary plunderer skill has enough power. Or.. maybe if I just upgrade-"

The idea comes to mind and I immediately open my status with my all-seeing eye activated to check how many PP it would take to upgrade my skill further. I had planned to save up all of these points to use on Absorption, but if this is an easy fix to my issue it would be worth a shot.

My eyes widen at the sight of glowing blue text before me displaying the details of my plunderer skill. Below it is a greyed-out text box showing how much an upgrade would be.

[Upgrade]

[Legendary Grade]->[Mythic Grade]

[1,000PP]

[YES][NO]

Even at the increased rate I'm gaining PP with the help of my absorption skill, this option is far out of my grasp.

I look back to Ember with a hopeful gaze.

"What about Qi? My Red Hydra's buff did a lot more damage than my base level mana attacks. What if I just continue to raise my Qi Capacity and tear it open with pure power?"

Ember thinks for a moment, then responds again.

"It's possible, but highly unlikely. You'd need to awaken a very specific Soul Energy designed to drain energy. On top of that, you would need to be much stronger as well. My Soul Energy with the unique trait to cleanse may be able to deteriorate this realm if I tried, but it may be detrimental to my growth if I used that much of my inherited power from a past life in this weak of a form. Plundering the mana is our safest bet."

I think to myself for a few seconds too, but Ember interjects again before I think of a response.

"Speaking of Soul Energy, how far have you come along? I can tell you've improved a lot. Are you able to manifest Qi outside your body yet?"

I turn to Ember with wide eyes.

"No. I don't think so. Well- I haven't tried."

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"Well then, try it. Let's see. You might as well give it a test run in here while I start the collapse and get us out."

I look down at my sword, then back up to Ember.

"How?"

The dragon starts to pulse red, signifying the mythic grade Plunderer skill is activating, but he responds.

"You either know how to do it, or you need to continue working on raising your capacity. There's no special technique or secret. It just takes time to build upon your base. If you don't have control, you won't be able to manifest it outside your body."

Ember closes his eyes and his body becomes completely engulfed in the red aura of his mythic grade Plunderer skill.

His words echo through my mind before he closes his eyes and begins.

"Try it with your sword. It should feel like you're throwing a punch, but allowing the Qi to flow out similar to how you release mana from your weapon. I've gotten a lot stronger since our last time collapsing a domain like this, it shouldn't take more than a few hours. So practice all you want, I'm sure that will be enough time to understand your natural limit."

The floor beneath Ember begins to rattle slightly and a deep red colored aura seeps out of him at a fairly quick rate.

"Looks like you really have gotten a lot stronger..."

I give a light smile, then turn to walk over to the opposite side of the room holding my sword.

While Ember starts to take in all of the mana in the atmosphere, I concentrate hard on only my Qi and let it flow through my sword just like I would in a normal fight.

I haven't tried this in quite a while, and the nearly 70% increase in my capacity and the constant state of control I've been practicing while meditating over the last few months, it comes as second nature.

Saturating my blade with Qi up to its optimized potential is as easy as raising a hand to get ready to punch.

I swing it through the air a few times, activating my swordsmanship skill to help practice a few foot movement patterns I learned from Monk, then stop with my blade pointed at the wall.

"I do feel quicker... and this is all much more crisp and natural, but manifesting Qi outside my body? Where do I even start...?"

I close my eyes and try to focus on the waves of white-hot energy circulating through the blood-bonded sword in my hands. In the same moment, I repeat the swings and foot patterns I used before, and increase the rate at which Qi flows from my core into my sword.

The speed and force of the flow begins to create a strong sensation like an ocean wave's current coming from deep within my body. The waves of Qi clash against the outer edges of the blade as I continue to practice the movements and become more in touch with this increased power.

As the crashing waves collide with the edges of my blade, particles splash out into the open room, and every strike slices through the air with increased vigor. My attacks seem more deadly than ever, but I can't seem to get more than just a few microscopic particles of Qi to drip out like condensation on a glass.

It's progress, but I still need something to test it on to know what its true capabilities are.

My eyes open, and I see Ember's cloud of red aura has expanded even further, and the portal of Domain he sits on is beginning to fall away already.

"I don't have much time."

I smile and my focus shifts to the nearest white wall to my left side.

Using the same technique as my test run, I begin slicing through the mana-shielded wall as if it's made of styrofoam.

I'm not using any mana at all in my strikes. The only thing I'm doing is oversaturating my sword and allowing Qi particles to be released at an even more rapid rate on impact.

For the next hour or so, I slice holes in the back wall of the Domain over and over getting better and better at releasing trace amounts of Qi through the edge of my blade. The hundreds of cuts in the wall heal up almost as fast as I make them, and the small amounts of Qi that escape from my blade float off into the endless void around me.

Once the red aura from Ember's skill fills the entire room, I simultaneously come to a halt in my training.

"Ember was right... There is a limit."

For the first few dozen strikes on a real target, it felt as if I was improving each time, releasing more and more Qi in each attack. However, once I got used to the feeling, and even releasing energy became almost second nature, the natural limit to my attack is met.

What started as just a few tiny particles is now a faint mist.

After all of this, about 30% of my Qi base has been depleted. A single Qi pill will bring me back to full without a problem. The depletion rate is slightly faster than normal training with my fists. It is still sustainable for long battles, but I can tell if I raise my capacity and control, I'll have the ability to release attacks that use up higher percentages of my entire base.

While pondering this, content with my progress so far, I let all the Qi in my body and sword trickle back into my core and prepare to meet the outside world again.

Ember's Mythic Grade Plunderer skill begins to take up more and more of the area and the white-walled structure around us begins to crumble. It's just like the time before. Once it starts, the reaction won't stop, and I let out a wave of fire magic nearing the end of his plunder to help break down the dwindling outer edges of the domain.

A multicolored flare of light leaves us both on the grassy Dungeon Floor of the Great Plains moments later.

Ember wakes up from his slumber-like state and I point to the sky.

"Want to stretch your wings before I get back to work?"

I air-step onto Ember's back while he flaps his wings and flies high up into the sky into the artificial dungeon clouds and away from anyone's sight.

As we soar through the air, I fill him in on the progress of my Qi and he explains that this is a very good start. The gathering and meditative state has brought my control up considerably, so practicing more won't do much more to raise my ability. More time and more Qi will.

Aside from that, as I look out at the open dungeon, my mind feels crystal clear.

I read through my journal to make sure I know exactly what I have to do next. Abby and Maria are still in their training session high up in the Vice City Labyrinth. This was all 6 months ago in my time, but merely 4 hours ago in the real world before I entered the isolation pod in the Galeheart Tower.

After their farming is done, I have to meet with Monk for a training session. I'm going to make sure to load up on Qi pills when I do.

Then lastly, I have a counteroffer for Lith that I'm sure he won't refuse.

With sharp eyes, and a barely visible grin creeping across my lips, I speak out into the open air.

"I have some work to do. This will be quite fun."

Usually, after a great awakening or rise in power, I see the world in a whole new light.

The sun looks brighter, the trees look greener, people's smiles even seem wider, and it feels as though whispers of the universe have entered my mind.

This time... it feels different. The world around me has not changed at all. It feels as if I'm looking out at a puzzle that is already solved.

My mindset is exactly the same as it was when I entered the Titan's Domain, the only difference is I know exactly what I have to do next. The situations I put myself in are very complicated. However, now that I've had enough time to think things through, it has all become very simple.

## Chapter 406

After about 30 minutes of soaring through the sky, we finally decide to come to the ground.

I activate my Enemy Detection skill to scope out the dungeon and thankfully pick up on the other Titan's reading at the far back point of the Great Plains. I think to myself it would probably be best not to mess with it. Destroying the one I just left is enough to frighten them already.

I Dungeon Walk to a lower level E Class dungeon and use the exit portal while putting my ring of concealment on and activating my own conceal skill.

I step out and make my way through the underground dungeon hub's pathways before making my way to the surface and taking in a few deep breaths of fresh air, along with letting the morning sun hit my skin.

However, the sun is higher up from the horizon than I remember leaving it.

I specifically wrote down in a journal that the starting time of my training session was [06:11].

As I walk by a clock on a nearby shop, I see [07:17] in bold black digital lettering.

I'm positive I spent no more than half an hour in the sky with Ember, and hardly wasted any time getting up to the surface. If my guess is correct, it seems another 30 minutes went by in the world outside... Time doesn't come to a full halt; it's just incredibly slow.

I nod, coming to terms with it and ducking into an alley before activating stealth and walk even further away before crushing one of the transport crystals in my hand.

Once I make it to the Galeheart Tower, a glint of fear shows in the two lobby men's eyes as I appear, but thanks to my new increase in mana control it's become even easier to suppress my intimidation skill's passive trait.

The veil of mana shielding I keep around my body at all times is thinner and denser than the one I used before, allowing even level 1 hunters to walk by me as if I'm a normal person. This comes as natural to me as walking, and is just a perk I picked up while using my buffs at a constant rate for so long.

I walk up to the two men with a smile.

"I'll be out for a while. If the two women I usually come with teleport in before I leave, could you please tell them I'll meet them at our usual training spot? I have a few errands to run."

They both nod willingly, and I waste no time in using the teleport platform to take the usual route back to town to re-enter the city walls like a normal citizen would. Once I re-enter, I load up my wristband with 40 Platinum bars. This leaves 350 remaining in my item storage.

Even this early in the morning, there are some wandering eyes, and even the two guards outside are pretty surprised at such a high balance for a random visitor they have never seen before, but they don't bother to ask questions.

This is one of my favorite things about Valor City.

Once I make it inside, I immediately make my way to the Gold District and start window shopping.

With golden entrances to dozens of shops, all sporting high ceilings and display cases full of glimmering gems and hunter's gear, this portion of the city certainly knows how to put on a show. Every wall is decked with paintings and hand-sculpted artwork, setting the tone for a specific type of customer.

The top items on the main display cases were far too pricey when I first entered this city, but now seem like they're almost free with the budget I'm working with. However, I'm not here to clear out every store. The real reason I'm shopping right now is to buy two items good enough to fill up my free slots. Along with that, any stones or gear that look like interesting crafting materials will be perfect.

I walk around for about 3 hours, ducking in and out of shops. The streets aren't too crowded to begin with, but by the time the sun comes fully up overhead, and the time passes about 11am, the shops become overly crowded with people.

However, I get exactly what I need from two of the highest-end shops in the city.

[Cloak of Total Darkness][+120% Mental Strength][+105% Agility][+50% Perception]

[Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets][+125% Defense][+90% Strength]



I put both items on immediately, and their effects take place instantly. I even take off my ring of concealment to see how they both look in a mirror on a shop's wall. However, I still keep my face disguised.

The Cloak was 3 Platinum after haggling down the shopkeeper because it was their most expensive item in the shop. Along with it, I spent an extra 1.5 Platinum on dozens of stones, gems, and miscellaneous items with buffs ranging from 30-80% in all categories.

Nothing stood out extraordinarily, but they'll be interesting things I can test out using my crafting skill in the future.

The cloak makes me feel lighter on my feet and more nimble, and its jet-black sleekness matches my other gear very well. The perception increase is a very interesting unique stat boost. It feels similar to adding an additional greater demon's core to just my perception. Or, in simpler terms, activating my all-seeing eye at a very low frequency at all times without using any excess mana.

I purchased the gauntlets from another shop.

They were just under 2 platinum in total, and have pretty basic high-level defense and strength-boosting stats, but they are made of a lightweight shiny silver metal that fits over my hands and forearms so smoothly it feels like I'm wearing silk gloves.

It even has a form-fitting hidden ability that avoids my rings and allows the gauntlets to fit skin tight, making the jewelry sit outside of the shimmering metal.

The urge to blood bond and craft unique attributes into these two extremely unique high-grade items is very strong, but if the last 6 months taught me anything; patience is key. I smile at the final shopkeeper after cleaning out his entire miscellaneous section of gems and interesting-looking crafting materials for another 2 full platinum before walking out the door.

Buying some of the highest-grade items in the city available for public purchase was actually much easier and far cheaper than I imagined they'd be. I'm sure if I used Lith's name, or visited the auction at the right time I could find different items at better prices to suit my taste. But, for what I'm looking for right now, I got exactly what I needed.

I leave the gold district and make my way into the platinum walls.

In a matter of minutes, I made my way through the towering skyscrapers and finally find myself near the black stone pyramid.

With a smile, I enter, walking past the two robed men in the dark entrance hallway without them even batting an eye. Surprisingly, Monk didn't immediately come out to greet me this time. However, he did say to come by the monastery anytime I'd like. I place my hand on the back wall and channel a small amount of Qi into my palm without thinking much of it.

The door glows much brighter white than it ever did previously, but opens in the same manner. I walk through and make my way down the spiral steps to the main dining hall.

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Once I make my way down the steps of the monastery into the main hall, it seems very quiet, and much more empty than usual.

There are a few people dressed in the familiar orange robes walking around, and some eating meals at the tables, but very few.

I make my way toward the usual training room, and press my hand on the door to open it. To my surprise, I see Monk with both of his hands raised in the center of the room as I enter.

The Qi within his body is glowing hotter and flowing faster than I've ever seen it before. Small particles even drip out like a light mist from his fists and create a visible white glow around his forearms and fingers.

The moment our eyes make contact, however, the glow ceases and he drops his battle stance while greeting me with a sigh of relief.

"I didn't recognize your aura. You've... changed a lot."

As the door closes behind me, I cross my arms and walk over to the table at the back of the room. I reply in a nonchalant manner.

"Well, nice to see you too. I tried out some unorthodox training methods."

While taking off my useless gear in this mana-negating room, Monk continues to stare at me and responds.

"H-How? You raised your cultivation base this drastically in just 24 hours..."

I turn, once taking off the final gauntlet, facing him in just my casual workout wear.

"If you have more of those Qi pills I can use, I may be able to tell you. I need to do some tests. Until they're done, unfortunately, I need to keep my method a secret."

He walks over to the opposite side of the table at the back of the room, then turns and starts sifting through one of the crates with gear in it before taking out a small black box.

Once opened up, the bright glow of Qi pours out, and he tosses me another pill.

"That is fine. I'll fund your research if you really believe my disciples and I can replicate it too. Let's spar and see what you can do before I give you any more of these. We may have a lot stocked up, but it is still a finite resource."

I catch it and swallow it instantly, bringing my base back up to full, and Monk's eyes widen even more when he sees my true capacity. I respond while raising my hands and channeling Qi into them.

"Sure, let's spar."

For the next few minutes, Monk and I increase our ability level bit by bit as we normally do in sparring sessions. Starting off slow, then continuously testing each other's strengths.

My movements flow much quicker, and I'm more graceful on my feet, having to use less Qi to get the same effect as our previous sessions. My eyes are more focused on his footwork and Qi flow, rather than just blocking punches and sending my own back.

I match Monk's speed and power to perfection the faster-paced the mock battle becomes. Eventually, we surpass the skill level point at which our last spar took place, but neither of us slows down at all.

Our punches become more full with Qi, and it even gets to the point where on impact, small particles come flowing out creating the sensation of two tsunamis crashing against each other and spraying hot energy around the room.

Loud cracks echo through the training room, and I even begin to see sweat droplets form on Monk's forehead.

Another 15 minutes pass as I begin to near my full strength, and by the looks of it, Monk is nearing his too.

Both of our breathing begins to get heavier, and we both become covered in sweat. We both burn through over 10% of our energy stores in just a half-hour session. Excess Qi fills the room, much denser than it was when we started and Monk's usual serious straight face shows signs of a joyful smile.

Eventually, we stop and step back from each other, and Monk is the first to bow. I return the gesture out of respect as he begins to speak.

"You've really managed to start summoning Visual Qi... In just a few days... I thought at your growth rate it'd still take at least a year, or maybe a few months if you spent some time in our most Qi dense gathering room, but-"

He pauses, and looks at me again with a curious gaze.

"Somehow you've managed to defeat the most powerful opponent in the world, time."

At the same moment, the door at the side of the room glows white and opens as Abby and Maria walk in with smiles wide as can be. As I turn my head, Abby is the first to speak up,

"You missed out on one of the best farming sessions ever! We got all the materials we needed, and even some extras on a higher floor!"

They both chuckle and begin to take off their gear on the table next to mine, and Maria speaks next,

"But it's okay that you didn't come along, it seems like your rest healed you up more than fine."

They both walk over in more casual clothing, and Abby questions me with a tighter gaze than usual.

"Now that I have a better view, you look a little different than before... stronger..."

I reply, choosing my words carefully, and remembering what I wrote down in my journal about where my conversation with Abby and Maria left off last 6 months ago in my perception of time.

"Yes. That matchup in the 8th Stage gave me some new insight into how strong we're going to need to be. Let's just say, I've begun experimenting."

Maria jumps in.

"Oh yeah? You said you'd explain what happened in your match. Let's hear it!"

With everyone's interest in the room piqued, I shift the conversation toward the matchup last night in the real world's time and recount the events as best I can.

From the force field-like energy balls, to the flesh melting soul energy of the wraith, and some energy from the Red Hydra's buff permanently disintegrating from my stores; I tell them

everything. The shocked look on all their faces only grows once I describe the encounter with the Royal Guards and the fact that the Dark One knows exactly what is going on and doesn't even care.

After these bombshells are out of the way, I mention the fact that I'm working on a new training method to increase our Qi capacities, but still need a bit of time to perfect it. With their attention so focused on the mind-blowing story of the 8th Stage, this unfinished method of Qi gathering isn't the main attraction.

Less questions the better, but I still need support from Monk, so my plan to bring it up again interlocked with a more serious matter worked out very well.

To process this information, we all begin sparring again.

Maria and Abby start off facing Monk, then both of them face me as well. I keep my Qi control much lower and now I can really understand how much I progressed. What felt like actual dangerous punches from Maria and crafty moves from Abby last time now seem like slow-moving objects and not even a real threat if I were to be hit.

I allow some punches and kicks to get through my defenses to simulate a very close battle, making their training to seem more realistic. But the full powered attacks that hit me don't hurt at all. They're easily negated by increasing the density and rate of Qi naturally flowing through my body in the areas of impact.

After this light session, Maria and Abby spar with each other and Monk and I have another session of very intense fighting on the opposite side of the training room.

We all get a very good workout in for the next 4 hours or so, draining our Qi stores to low, and showering before making our way up to the dining hall to eat and refresh our energy bases.

Monk raises the question across from me at the table once we all sit down.

"So, how many pills are you going to need for your next trial of testing?"

I reply after taking a bite of food,

"Well, how many do you have to offer?"

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"Considering we're in the 10-week training season of the year, the monastery allows each individual a maximum of 3 Qi Pills per week. There are over 30 members just working here, helping with cooking, cleaning, and maintenance; consuming an average of 1 pill every 2 weeks. On top of that, roughly 20 of us do extensive training, using the full 3-pill max; we run through about 75 Pills a week in total. However, in the off-season, we consume little to none, only taking in Qi from the gathering rooms."

I respond with an eyebrow raised.

"Oh, so you go through hundreds without much issue on draining your supply?"

"Yes, and no. This is only in response to the Dark One's recent changes to the city. There are some exceptions like me; I bring in most of our income, so I'm allowed to restore my Qi before tournament battles. Plus, some of us sent out on missions away from the city take larger portions of pills along. And of course, I've made an exception for you three."

Monk bows his head at each of us before continuing.

"We would be rationing our supply much more heavily if there was no immediate threat. There is only so much stored up in the supply chamber, and we run through them faster than they can be created. We have to think of our future at all times."

I nod slowly.

"But if I helped rid you of this impending threat, cutting into a chunk of your supply wouldn't be the end of the world. Let me do a test with a two-week supply, 150 pills. It won't go to waste."

Staring forward with a confident expression, I eagerly await Monk's response. Considering his explanation of their pill usage, this whole monastery uses up 750 total pills in their training season, and most likely not much more than 1000 in a given year. I know 150 may be a lot to gift to a random person who showed up this week, but going back into that Titan's domain just to raise my base by 10 pills worth of Qi doesn't seem worth another 6 months of perceived time.

Monk responds with little to no hesitation in his voice.

"This is fine. It seems like a good investment. I'll retrieve them after our meal."

Then, he takes another bite as I grin.

"Excellent. That was easy."

Our meal finishes, and the conversation is mostly a few questions about what my Qi gathering technique is, but I deflect it multiple times to say it's a work in progress before the topic switches to the items Maria and Abby farmed and both of their advancements to level 645.

Once Monk gets up to retrieve the pills, Maria turns to me and speaks in a low tone so no one can hear.

"We should stop by the restaurant in the gold district before we go to the fighting ring tonight. I want to craft some new items with our loot."

I agree to the idea, but break the news that I'd like to go experiment more with Qi gathering while they fight in the arena. Monk overhears the end of our conversation as he returns with a large metallic rectangular box in hand.

"Well, we have about an hour and a half until the matches begin. If you don't show tonight, it may build your fighter hype even further. Just leaving without a word of goodbye after a record-breaking match like that is a good marketing stunt. Higher-ups in the platinum district will surely be curious where you've gone, and many fans will be waiting for your return."

I shrug.

"I'll be back to give them a real show once I'm ready."

After I accept the large metallic box and place it under my robe, Maria, Abby, and I head out of the monastery as Monk waves us goodbye.

"Update me on your process as soon as possible, I'd like to see those pills go to good use."

He turns to the girls.

"And I'll see you in the ring tonight."

In full disguise, we walk through the platinum district together and into the gold to greet Elen in the empty restaurant. The young white-haired woman greets us with a smile.

"A fully sealed room for just an hour? Right this way, we have the same one from last time ready for you."

After transferring 5 gold credits through my wristband, we're brought upstairs and down the hall, to walk through 2 heavy-duty mana shielded doors before all sprawling out on the large comfortable couch in the middle of the suite.

We all take off our concealment items and disguises, then Abby is the first to speak.

"So, I was thinking a new pair of boots, a dagger set, and maybe a ring too. I'm looking to upgrade my speed and agility stats even further."

Over a dozen crimson speed crystals come pouring out of her item box as her eyes sparkle with possibilities.

I activate my Rising Emperor's Domain to share my craftsmanship skill with both my teammates while Maria reaches into her item box too.

Once she opens the concealment case, the gems that glow bright before my eyes aren't exactly what I was expecting. There are 10 royal blue ice stones pouring light white and blue mist from them, but next to these, I see 4 clear-colored stones that push wisps of air in miniature tornadoes.

"Wind Stones too? Is this what you meant by the extra item drops on the 29th floor?"

They both let out a chuckle, while Maria responds, confirming my suspicions.

"Yeah! These are for you. I know your dagger set could use them. There are these giant white bird creatures with intense wind magic on the 29th floor. They're really strong... But Abby and I managed to kill a few. Their element stone drop rate is very high, close to 20%."

My eyes widen as I accept the 4 stones, then her the leftover ice stones in my item storage I was holding prior and think of the possibilities of a drop rate that high with these new wind stones. While I do, each of their blue status windows pop up as they scroll through the crafting options on their new borrowed Mythic Grade Skill.

I begin taking out some of the items from my storage and look at what new upgrades I can do to my gear too.

I tell Abby and Maria to feel free to use any of the miscellaneous items I purchased from the shops if it helps with their crafts.

We get to work.

I merge 3 of the element stones into my dagger set, and their buffs raise drastically.

---

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

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Advanced Wind Aspect][+159% Strength][+141% Agility][+140% Mental Strength][+120% Speed][+120% Defense]

---

Seeing the new [Advanced Wind Aspect] perk on my set makes my anticipation to check out this 29th floor for myself grow. I'll finally be able to upgrade my own wind summoning skill.

After admiring my dagger set for a moment, I move on and begin to upgrade some of my lower-rated gear items. Their stats can easily rival my newer gear by imbuing them with the buffing stones I bought in the market earlier along with attempting to imbue skills into gear too.

I imbue a few defense items into [The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet] as well as my Berserker skill.

---

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

The Behemoth's Platinum Amulet [+141% Defense][+125% Strength][+125% Mental Strength]

---

I imbue a few defense items into the [Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King] as well as my Bloodlust skill.

---

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

Platinum Ring of The Blue Ogre King [+131% Mental Strength][+125% Speed][+125% Agility]  
[+110% Defense]

---

Next, I turn to my new pair of gauntlets and decide not to imbue any items into them just yet. However, I do imbue my body hardening skill into them, and there is a drastic change. They become much shinier and harder to the touch. Some stats boost as well.

---

[Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets][+125% Defense][+90% Strength]

[Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets][+165% Defense][+120% Strength][Hardening Attribute]

---

Then lastly, I look down at my cloak and take out the item I've been most curious about since I got it; [Wraith's Essence Stone][+155% Mental Strength][Hidden Passive Ability].

I merge this clear marble with swirling black energy inside it with: [Cloak of Total Darkness]  
[+120% Mental Strength][+105% Agility][+50% Perception]

Then, imbue my conceal skill.

The result looks and feels eerily familiar to the Veil of manifested darkness that was around the Wraith I fought in my 8th Stage Match. However, I'm in full control, and it feels like pure power is swirling around me. My cloak is made of dark black, dense energy that flutters in the wind, but there isn't even a breeze in the room.

---

[Cloak of Total Darkness][+179% Mental Strength][+155% Agility][+75% Perception][Hidden Passive Ability][Concealment Attribute]

---

At just the thought of it, I activate the Concealment Attribute, and the cloak shifts into the form it was before I merged it with the Wraith's Essence stone. Then, I think of a different outfit, and it switches instantly, looking just like the red cloak that burned up in my match. Finally, my cloak engulfs my whole body and shapeshifts into the suit and business wear that my concealment ring used to create.

I release the skill and let it fall back to its original dark black flowing form and can't help but grin.

"Now that's a serious piece of gear..."

Abby and Maria stopped what they were doing moments ago and already watched my entire shape-shifting performance, but I was too mesmerized in my crafts to care that they were watching.

Maria walks over with a bright blue armor set in hand, also gripping a glistening white sword, and some blood dripping from her hands showing that she must have made some blood bonds with her gear.

"All set! My Ice Magic is going to be unstoppable with gear like this!"

I nod with a smile, seeing stats on some of her gear surpass +150% buffs.

"Very nice."

Abby has two black blood-bonded daggers of her own in her hands, imbued with her own earth magic skill. The boots she was already wearing now are maxed out with crimson speed crystal imbument, and sitting on a nearby table there are 3 HP potions that glow much brighter green than anything I've ever seen before.

While using my Appraisal Skill, I see what they say but do a double-take to make sure.

[Full Restore Potion]

[Full Restore Potion]

[Full Restore Potion]

She speaks up when she sees me looking at her creations.

"Oh yeah, I made those out of curiosity. I just imbued my Restore Skill into a normal HP potion. I'm not sure how well they actually work, or how potent they are. But... I can only assume it's nothing like normal healing potions."

I nod while walking closer, attempting to examine the items with my All-Seeing Eye. However, nothing other than "The [Restore] skill will be activated on the user if this potion is consumed" shows up.

Abby gives me two to test out in training, then hands the other to Maria to keep on hand in case of an emergency.

I thank her, placing it in my storage very eager to try it out too, but see a portion of my crafting skill's description while my all-seeing eye is still activated and can't help but continue to read it.



---

The fourth tier of Craftsmanship [Mythic Grade] allows the crafter to mend, adjust, and create magic items with additional stat points in ALL categories. It also grants the caster the ability to convert these stat point categories into percentage-based buffs. The caster is capable of bonding element stones to items making unique growth-type weapons to be solely paired with a user. In addition to outside materials, the caster is able to imbue copies of any skills or properties they own or make contact with.

---

I read the last three words of this description over and over to make sure I'm seeing things correctly. The potential to use another Mythic Grade skill in a very creative way crosses my mind.

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 [+141% Defense][+125% Strength][+125% Mental Strength]

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 [+131% Mental Strength] [+125% Speed][+125% Agility] [+110% Defense]

The Flame Emperor's Sword [Advanced Fire Aspect][+205% Strength][+166% Mental Strength] [+109% Defense][+110% Speed][+111% Agility]

Berserker King's Armor Set [Blood Bonded] [+148% Defense]

Cloak of Total Darkness[+179% Mental Strength][+155% Agility][+75% Perception][Hidden Passive Ability][Concealment Attribute]

[Enchanted Lightweight Gauntlets][+165% Defense][+120% Strength][Hardening Attribute]

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

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

Final Slot[12th]:[Interchangeable]

The Wind Tyrant's Dagger Set [Advanced Wind Aspect][+159% Strength][+141% Agility][+140% Mental Strength][+120% Speed][+120% Defense]

Midnight Dagger

Chapter 409

I turn to Abby.

"Hey, can I try something... I want to test one of the perks of my craftsmanship skill."

She nods as I reach into my item storage and pull out an old C-Grade HP potion of my own. I take off my gauntlets, then place a hand on her shoulder.

I scroll through my list of skills available to imbue into the HP potion with my mind, but nothing new shows up.

With a look of dissatisfaction on my face, I move my hand down and eventually hit her smooth skin right below her shirt line. The moment the warm sensation hits my fingertips, a new blue text box fills my vision.

[Restore][Legendary Grade]

I immediately choose it and a white light flashes in my opposite hand, transforming the HP potion into the same Full Restore Potion that Abby made moments ago.

I release contact and hold the glass bottle glowing with bright green liquid in both hands. My appraisal skill proves it worked.

[Full Restore Potion]

"Now I'm onto something..."

I toss the glass bottle up and down in my hand a few times before Abby replies.

"So it worked?"

I nod in response.

"Yeah, looks like it worked... I'll try out these potions if I get the chance, I'm curious what they can do too."

We relax and chill around the hotel suite for another 15 minutes or so. Abby and Maria upgrade and imbue some of their other gear and armor with my stat enhancing buffs like extreme speed, bloodlust, and berserker. Then, we all continue tinkering with the magic items remaining from my haul at the market today, and clear out all the complementary foods and drinks in the hotel room before finally leaving because it's getting late.

Maria and Abby head off to the fight arena while I leave town cashing out my remaining 31 platinum balance and some change before using the transport crystal to find myself back in the Galeheart tower lobby.

As I make my way to the elevator one of the lobby men speaks up.

"Sir, you just missed Mr. Galeheart on his way out. He should be back in by late tonight if you're available. We just got news that two of your teammates got back from sector 2 with information on its general state and functions."

I turn my head with both eyebrows raised at this news.

"They made it back? Can I see them?"

The lobby man points to the elevator with a nod.

"They got in just about an hour ago, breathing heavy and both of them were covered in dirt and grime from head to toe. It looked like they hadn't slept in days and just left a long battle..."

He pauses for a second, and I look at him with a confused gaze before he continues.

"Last I heard they went to clean up in the lounge area and use the isolation pods, I'm not sure how long they went in for. However, I do know Mr. Galeheart wanted them to attend whatever meeting you are having with him tonight."

I nod, thanking the man and pondering all the possibilities of what could really be in Sector 2, and how this could derail the conditions I already planned to lay out to Lith in our meeting. Fisher and Lydia were gone for well over a week, whatever they were doing must have been extensive.

Once I board the elevator and check on the isolation pod room to see two of the pods glowing bright with text above both of them.

[05:14:39]

[05:13:20]

I whisper under my breath, staring forward.

"Five more hours, huh? That should be more than enough time. I wonder what you two found in Sector 2..."

With a shrug, I turn back around and walk into the elevator, taking it down to the dungeon access room and hopping into the Red Ogre Dungeon.

I immediately Dungeon Walk back into The Vice City Labyrinth's 28th floor and defeat the crimson Speed Demon Boss without breaking a sweat.

Even the base level monsters in this dungeon were pretty quick the last time I fought them, but with all my new gear upgrades, and mana control far over double what it was the last time I faced this floor, these creatures are nowhere near my level.

They feel as if they're the same low-level mobs of non-ranked up creatures. It's hard to even tell the difference...

I'm spawned into the 29th floor and start exploring the mountainous forest region with thick dark green lush trees. Just as Maria said, a white bird with sharp focused eyes and a wingspan over 7 meters wide comes dive-bombing in to attack me.

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It looks like an overgrown hawk, bleached pearly white, blending in with the artificial sun's light rays as it comes closer to the ground where I stand.

Extremely visible wisps of advanced wind magic trail its flight path, but I swing my sword upward filled with Qi and easily slice it in two without activating any of my stat-enhancing buffs.

[Use Absorption]

Skill: Combat Magic [Wind Summoning]

Upgrade: Advanced Grade

[YES][NO]

I accept the skill upgrade and push myself off the ground into the sky using a massive gust of new and improved wind magic.

The ground below my feet is ripped to shreds by its powerful gusts, and I'm propelled into the air over 10 times faster and more efficiently than I did the last time I used my wind magic. It's hard to tell if it's mostly from my mana control increase, or my skill upgrade, but it's clear to say I've gotten immensely stronger.

With a single wind-powered kick, I change direction and start soaring through the dungeon's clear blue skies to slice through another dozen white-winged birds.

Just as my teammates said, 2 of them drop windstones, making me a tad unlucky for the 20% drop rate that was promised, but I did gain 1 level in the process.

[Level Up]

This brings me to level 645.

After the leveling notification rings in my head, and I throw the loot into my item storage, I stop and look around the 29th floor before letting out a sigh.

"Alright, that was fun, but staying here any longer is not a good use of my time."

I teleport back to the Great Plains Dungeon, high up above the cloud line to a teleport point I set while Ember was flying up in the sky.

Using a few air steps to hover in place, I open up my storage and let Ember fly out too.

He flaps his wings and begins to glide while looking around.

"Back so soon? What's on the agenda today? You don't seem any stronger... but I like the new cloak. It has an interesting aura."

"Thanks, I just made it. Today, we're going to run a few tests."

I do a scan of the dungeon with my perception skills to find only one blotch on my radar. I dungeon walk both of us closer, and point in the direction of the back of the dungeon as Ember flies us closer.

Once in range, the slowly moving mass of black energy wanders around the back of the dungeon, further than I've ever traveled in the Great Plains before. Ember speaks up as we approach.

"The rift is coming up, less than a kilometer in. We should probably get to work before it closes. I can sense it's a lot more unstable than the last time I checked on it."

I respond as we soar over the Titan so high in the air we're undetected.

"When was the last time you checked? How do you know the rift is unstable?"

With a flap of his wings, we begin to descend.

"Last time I checked was when you needed me to farm strengthening fragments for that Association Quest. So, before you even left for the dark continent."

I nod, thinking back to then as he continues.

"There were sometimes close to a Dozen Void Creepers wandering these Great Plains at a time back then. We really overhunted them, the fact that there's only 1 left in the entire dungeon means they'll surely be moving their rift point soon."

The Rift Ember was talking about comes into view.

It's eerily similar to the Demonic Rift I challenged not too long ago. A large tear in space, making an elongated diamond shape, raised a few centimeters off the ground. It's jet-black and stands over 20 meters tall, making it almost 5 times as large as the Demonic Rift I challenged before.

The aura it gives off is extremely dense with mana, similar to just staring into the Void of a Titan's Domain. However, it doesn't seep out, I can only sense that the energy is inside.

Ember speaks again.

"Believe it or not, Void Creeper's Rifts are usually even bigger than this. I can tell it's been shrinking slowly for weeks."

I turn around in the direction of the wandering Titan, then back to Ember.

"So, If we were to defeat that one, would that be it? The last one?"

Ember stares into the void for a moment before responding.

"Maybe. Another few may still spawn, but we're getting to the end of the rope here. It wouldn't hurt to treat that one as your last chance in this spot. Rifts are very different than dungeons, there's never a guarantee that they'll be where you left them if you don't have a rift key."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Like the one I got from the Demonic Rift? What do you mean? How are they different than dungeons?"

"Sure, similar to the Key you obtained from that Demonic Trial. Rifts are like stepping stones between worlds. Dungeons, on the other hand, are self-contained pocket worlds that have specific rules and need a predetermined amount of energy to maintain their form."

I nod, thinking to myself.

"So what you're saying is that Rift leads to another world...?"

"Of course, so did the Demonic Rift you traveled through last time. We were fighting a trial set up in the Demonic Realm, or better known as the World of Demons. Humans and Demons have similar anatomy and biological needs, so it is a happy coincidence our species can survive on each other's worlds. The Void Creepers' home world, on the other hand, is not inhabitable by humans, so I would not recommend we go through for any reason. If that rift closes, there may be no way to return."

There's a pause of silence as I take in and process the information Ember just dropped on me out of nowhere.

"Got it..."

Ember nods and goes back to looking around the dungeon like he didn't say anything too out of the ordinary, but my mind begins to do backflips.

If rifts are pathways to other worlds... and dungeons are just pocket realms, or predetermined constructs like Ember says, this puts everything into a different perspective for me.

I speak again after a few more seconds go by.

"So a dungeon can break when too much mana is present inside it, letting monsters out, right?"

Ember nods.

"Right."

"Then, could a dungeon break if there was too little mana in it as well? You often mention you could collapse a dungeon or entire labyrinths by plundering its mana, is that similar to what you do when collapsing a Titan's domain?"

Ember grins and nods again.

"Yes, very similar. Like I said before. Dungeons are just masses of highly condensed mana with predetermined rules, or settings. When portions of a dungeon are destroyed, they always heal back up if you give them enough time."

I remember all the tests I did in the Vice City Labyrinth dungeons when Fisher was training me, testing this theory for myself.

Ember continues.

"So, if the predetermined energy levels of a dungeon get too high, it will break and spill out monsters made of mana. If it gets too low, it may downgrade to a lower-level dungeon. However, if the mana content gets drained too quickly it may collapse and disperse into the atmosphere like it was never there to begin with."

I whisper under my breath.

"So a Dungeon and the Titan's Domain work in very similar ways."

Ember nods as he sees a spark of creativity flaring up in my eyes.

"Sure, they have similar structural qualities."

"Good."

I take off my right gauntlet and place my bare hand on Ember's smooth black scales while air stepping up to sit on his back.

"Let's move away from this rift."

He flaps his wings and we make our way up into the sky as I begin taking random items out from my item storage and activate my crafting skill.

At the bottom of my skill list, available to imbue, I see [Plunderer][Mythic Grade].

"It's time to do some testing."

Chapter 410

I begin holding random items in my storage with my left hand while keeping contact with my right hand on Ember's scales, attempting to imbue the Mythic Grade Plunderer skill into them, but I'm not getting the results I imagined I would.

Some of my failed crafts sit on my lap as I appraise them and use my all-seeing eye to check their abilities.

---

[High Orc Ring][+70% Mental Strength][Plunderer Attribute]

All enemies below the user's mana control rating will lose 5% of their MP every time the caster makes contact with the target. The caster will gain 100% of their lost MP.

---

Another one reads out a similar ability.

---

[Enchanted Dagger Set][+80% Agility][+65% Speed][Plunderer Attribute]

All enemies will lose 1% of their MP no matter the mana control difference each time they have blood drawn by this dagger. The caster will gain 100% of their lost MP.

---

Then lastly, I even try to imbue it into a random item that can't be worn, and it transforms into a wearable necklace.

---

[Enchanted Lizardman's Claw Pendant][+55% Mental Strength][Plunderer Attribute][Cursed]

[Cursed Item Created!] The holder of this item will lose 1% of their remaining MP every minute. If the item holder hits 10% of their original max MP with this cursed item still on their person, even if MP is restored and the item is removed, the item effects will not leave the user's status.

---

I hold the green claw in my hand, examining it closely and feel a trace amount of my mana seep through my fingertips into the item. A new text box shows up in my status, under a new section labeled [Debuffs] with a [-1% MP Per Minute] labeling.

My eyes widen, and I throw the item into my item storage.

The debuff disappears and no more mana drains from me. I let out a relieved sigh and can't help but to smile inwardly as I continue sifting through items to try. I murmur to myself as I imbue more miscellaneous gear with the Mythic Plunderer skill.

"A cursed item, huh?"

This is not what I initially thought the items created would be when I imagined imbuing a Mythic Grade skill into them.

They are very unique, and unlike any items I've ever seen before, but none of them allow me to use Plunderer at its full capacity like I imagined they would.

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"It must be the quality of the crafting items."

With a disappointed expression, I start placing every item back into my storage.

Upgrading from [No Grade] to [Special Grade] costs 50PP, and upgrading from [Special Grade] to [Legendary Grade] costs 250PP. The jump from [Legendary Grade] to [Mythic Grade] is another 1000PP.

With 1PP being distributed for every level up, this means a hunter would need to be level 1300 to obtain a Mythic Grade Skill naturally. This is a skill for A-Class hunters only.

Using high-grade D and C-Grade items as crafting materials will not bring out the skill's full potential. I need something extremely rare and High Grade to mix things up. Something equivalent to a B-Grade rating at minimum.

While sifting through my storage to try and find something worthy to interact with, my attention finally comes toward one of the element stones I recently harvested from the 29th floor.

I pull it out of my storage and use telekinesis to let it hover above my left hand. Violent waves of wind magic spiral out of it, but once my crafting skill activates, and the option to imbue it with plunderer is shown, I select yes with curiosity.

A bright white light flashes and the wisps of wind around the stone only grow larger.

In an instant, tornadoes of energy erupt from the stone and I feel my MP get drained down to under 50% almost instantly.

Out of pure instinctual reflexes, my left arm fills with Qi and I grab the stone out of the air, throwing it downward toward the dungeon floor. Even Ember reacts to the huge disturbance in energy, opening our telepathy link as I recharge my MP from the surrounding dungeon air while the tornado-filled stone plummets to the ground.

"That's a dangerous item you've created. I don't believe you want it touching the dungeon floor..."

I respond as Ember flaps his wings to bring us upward for a moment, then he dives downward to follow the falling stone.

My eyes sharpen on the stone, using Appraisal and my All-Seeing Eye.

---

[Advanced Wind Element Stone][Plunderer Attribute][Cursed]

[Cursed Item Created!] This element stone has the fighting spirit of its past life monster to guide its actions. It will Plunder Mana from its surroundings at an exponential rate. If the influx of mana from its environment ceases to please its needs, or the item's maximum storage capacity is met before all mana in the surrounding area is consumed, this item's structural integrity will collapse.

---

"You're right... not good."

In the blink of an eye, Ember soars through the air and gets us closer to the bright white stone. The closer I get to it, the faster I feel my mana being drained again. I activate my own plunderer skill to try and counteract its pull, but my MP bar barely manages to stay over 20% even while all my buffs are activated to help my skill's efficiency.

This is more than enough for me to open up an item storage portal underneath the falling stone and its volatile absorption mixed with swirling energy ceases once it falls inside.

I let out a sigh as Ember swoops upward and lets out a laugh.

"You made a cursed item with my Mythic Grade Plunderer skill, didn't you?"



I nod, thinking very deeply to myself about the item's description as he glides high into the sky again back to the cloud level we were at before.

"Yes. It seems I made exactly what I was trying to. Just, not in the form I thought it would take. This could be what is needed to collapse a Titan's domain... right?"

Ember replies.

"Maybe. By nature, cursed items are unpredictable. It's what occurs when powers that shouldn't be mixed are forced together. Whether the strength between an attribute and the material are unique and different, or possibly the quality gap between the material and skill being imbued are too far apart. Cursed, or uncontrollable items with minds of their own, will appear when an item that is not supposed to be crafted comes into this world."

The wind flies by us on both sides as Ember breaks through the cloud line again and continues.

"Some curses are more mild than others, but a cursed item is still a cursed item. It's no joke. I recommend you test that stone out on something before attempting to collapse a Titan's Domain. It'd be smart to test it and watch from afar to make sure there aren't any hidden traps."

I cross my arms and stay quiet for a moment, then finally reply.

"Alright then. What dungeon should we collapse as a trial run?"