

## D. Diver 411

### Chapter 411

I lightly activate my Dungeon Walker skill to sift through all the possible warp points I have in mind, but none of them seem like good options.

The ones out in the desert of the Dark Continent are way too far away from civilization, and the ones near dungeon hubs are too close to towns and have too many people currently farming in them.

I want to test this cursed item out on an abandoned dungeon, and not unnecessarily hurt anyone or be seen by prying eyes in the process.

I search a little further, then decide there's probably a faster way to find an uninhabited dungeon around here. If anyone would know where to find one, it'd be Bri.

"Hey Ember, I think I know where I'll find a good dungeon to test it."

He responds as I open my item storage to let him fly inside.

"The stronger the dungeon, the better. Weak ones will not be comparable to the titan's domain in mana output in the slightest."

As he disappears, I nod, teleporting back to one of the dungeons in the underground dungeon hub Bri showed me in the black market.

Activating stealth, I hop out and make my way through the dark underground markets below Vice City. It only takes me a few minutes to speed walk through using enemy detection to pinpoint Bri's level 488 status with light magic and a crafting skill.

Dungeon Walking directly here from now on for future meetings with Bri will be a bit quicker than using the capital's dungeon hub, and probably a bit less risky too. If someone with high enough perception skills can see me through my stealth skill, it's better they see me down here than up walking through the city.

Another minute passes, and I make it to the set of heavy metal doors and stairs that lead up to the workshop. There's a tall blond-haired guard out front with lightweight armor and daggers on his waist. To make sure I don't make a fuss, I shift my face and appearance using my conceal skill and the concealment attribute of my new cloak to look just like a generic businessman in a black suit and tie before confronting him.

With a doctored status to look like a random level 440 hunter with a swordsmanship skill, I reach into my pocket and take out a few brightly glowing items from my storage along with a handful of platinum bars.

"I'm an old friend of Bri's. I have a few items I want her to look at, and I'm on quite the tight schedule."

The guard is over 200 levels lower than my own doctored status, and I made sure to show off enough riches that he wouldn't think twice about letting me through.

It's not like I couldn't force my way past, but I'd like to be civil this time around.

He opens the metal door and leads me up to the first floor of the brick building without questioning my actions. It's clear he knows I'm far stronger than him as well, but I made sure to make myself

look weaker than Bri to make him feel more comfortable with letting me up into her office. A few heads turn from the workers on the bottom floor, but once they see the guard escorting me up the stairs, they go right back to their usual tasks.

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Bernard on the middle floor looks up from a new book but goes back to reading when he sees the guard as well.

The large blond tank goes back down to continue his guard duty while I step into Bri's dark office on the top floor, knocking on the wall as I enter and deactivating my concealment skills.

The lighting in the room brightens and the curvy craftswoman stands from her desk in a brand new jet black skin tight outfit. Her gear today gives off a strong mana shielding glow and the two daggers on her waist hum lightly with energy as well.

I either caught her off guard last time I stopped by, or she got a major wardrobe upgrade.

As I approach, Bri's voice echoes through the room.

"Back so soon? I'm glad you decided to knock this time."

I activate my Hush skill before responding, encompassing her whole study just to make sure our words are confidential. Bri continues, asking another question once the grey dome surrounds us.

"Do you have more important information on our deal?"

I shake my head.

"No, I think it will be a bit longer before I have any information pertaining to the trade and crafting agreement. The reason I stopped by now is that I need a favor."

She smiles and steps around from the back of her desk to meet me eye to eye in the middle of the room.

With her high heels on, she's even taller than me by a few centimeters.

"Oh yeah? What kind of favor?"

I pause for a second before answering.

"I need access to an abandoned dungeon. Or at least one with no people allowed inside. Preferably high C Grade or even B Grade if possible, and it needs to be far away from the city with no humans nearby."

She looks at me curiously, then nods and turns around to walk back over to her desk and sift through a few papers.

Without turning around, she responds.

"I know of one just perfect for you, 20 kilometers or so outside the city. However, if you don't mind me asking, what's this for? You need to do some last-minute training?"

I shake my head and respond as she pulls a paper out of the pile.

"No, I have the Labyrinth for training if I need. I just need to test out a dangerous item I came across recently. It would be best if there aren't any witnesses or innocents nearby in case something goes wrong."

I see no point in hiding what I'm doing, we will be close business partners in the near future, so it's best to come clean if I'm already asking for favors.

As she turns with the paper in hand, I see the craftswoman's eyes light up. I can tell she's thinking of more than just my mention of a dangerous magic item. Bri raises a corner of her lip into a smirk, tightening her eyes on my own before responding.

"I'll show you exactly where you can find a dungeon to do whatever test you need to do. But, did you just say you have labyrinth access?"

My eyes leave hers and track to the paper in her hand. The edges of it flop over and I can see it's a map of a forest region.

"Great- and, yes, I can get into the Labyrinth undetected to train. This dungeon access is strictly to test the item out. It may actually collapse the entire dungeon... so make sure you're giving me a location that you won't miss."

I let out a chuckle, but Bri's eyes widen in response.

"An item that can collapse a high-grade dungeon...? And unregistered access into the Vice City labyrinth...?"

There's a moment of silence in the room as I nod and she walks closer with the paper outstretched in her hand. However, the moment I accept it, she doesn't let go immediately.

"In return, could I ask two favors of you? One to pay me back, and another so that I owe you one."

I nod with a thin smile still on my face.

"Depends what it is, but I don't see why not. I'm sure they will be reasonable."

She releases her grip of the map and continues.

"Firstly, I'd like to go with you to see you use this mystery item, and witness what you say it might do... and- Second, If you have access to the Labyrinth, could you get me inside? I've been dying for a chance to finally reach level 500 and rank up."

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I ponder the two favors Bri just asked me for, considering their true meaning.

Asking to see the mystery item I have seems like common sense for a legendary craftswoman. She's definitely curious about what kind of item is powerful enough to collapse a dungeon on its own.

Her request to enter the labyrinth and rank up, on the other hand, seems to have some hidden meaning behind it.

It isn't a mere coincidence Bri is wearing far superior gear today than at our last meeting, and the fact that her eyes immediately perked up the moment I said I had access to the Labyrinth adds to my curiosity.

Bri speaks up again before I have the chance to respond.

"If I'm going to be working in the big leagues of the international trade scene, I'm going to need to level up and pull my weight."

I smile as my suspicions were correct, and she continues.

"My mana control is on par with some of the Elites in the Association, and rivals many ranked-up hunters."

I nod, thinking back to our last meeting how she somehow sensed me using my legendary stealth skill while being ranked up and 150 levels above her.

Considering that ranking up over doubles a hunter's mana control in seconds, and usually grants them a unique buff; Bri could be an even more formidable opponent than I imagined.

"True, your mana control is impressive for not being over level 500."

"It's from the years of light magic usage and consumption of mana consumables whenever they come by in the local market. I have to stay on my toes to stay stronger than the other black market crooks in this city but have never had the chance to get much stronger. Considering my Black Market position and the Association's knowledge of it, I can't get clearance to enter the Labyrinth and rank up."

"So my little stunt before our last meeting gave you some perspective?"

She nods.

"I need to get stronger; it's about time."

I smile and reply.

"Sure, guide me to the dungeon so we can do my item test, then I'll bring you to the Labyrinth right after."

We shake hands and I turn to leave, but she stops me mid-stride.

"Hold on a minute, I have to get all my gear and supplies ready. It should take over 2 days to make it up to a floor with ranked-up monsters, right? And you're sure the 20th-floor boss room isn't in its 7-day cooldown period?"

I laugh and wave my hand for her to follow.

"Just grab whatever you'll need for a single short hunting session. I know a way to bypass the bottom floors and bring us directly to where you need to be, don't worry about it."

She looks shocked for a split second, but shrugs it off.

"The surprises never end when you're around, do they?"

I shake my head.

"Oh I'm sure they won't. I have a lot to fill you in on, and I'm hoping I could learn a thing or two from you about crafting in the near future as well."

"Of course, I'd be happy to answer any questions you have."

I turn to wait by the stairs while holding the map she gave me of a dense green forest, showing a small black X labeled "Green Ridge Lookout Dungeon". There are no other markings on the map, and a few trails that lead to it.

Bri gears up even more, throwing on a few extremely high-grade rings and necklaces, even putting on a matte black tight-fitting breastplate with an extremely high defense stat. More of her exposed skin is covered, and she even wears a pair of black combat boots for better agility and speed. She's fully decked out with 10 full slots of +100% multi-stat boosting items along with some element imbued gear as well.

One of the items is a pair of gold-colored contact lenses that once she places on her eyes, her entire face shifts to an unrelated person. However, using my extremely high mana control and perception on full blast, I'm able to see through it and she looks no different to me.

She walks across the room and passes right beside me down the stairs.

"Follow me, I'll lead the way."

I activate conceal and make my cloak shift back into its business attire form. Then, follow right after her, deactivating my hush skill.

As we pass Bernard on the 2nd floor, Bri speaks up.

"I'll be out on business for a while, close up the shop once it gets late if I'm not back in time."

He looks up from his book, stands from his chair, and bows slightly.

"Of course, Ms. Briana, have a good night."

Then, we leave through the front door moments later and walk to the outer edge of the city in the direction that I remember taking my C-Class Exams.

As we step onto the dirt trail out of the city into the forest, I ask a question.

"Are there a lot of dungeons like this out here? This forest is where that Labyrinth was in my last exams."

Bri nods while she picks up the pace.

"A lot of dungeons pop up all over the outer regions of the city. Of course, not as concentrated in areas of high population skill users, but there's always overflow."

I match her speed, and the lush green trees by our sides start to zip by in the blink of an eye.

"And no one guards or monitors them? They're just abandoned out here?"

The craftswoman reaches her top speed, and we stay at the same pace, zipping through the forest as the sun begins to set.

"Some lower-level ones are left unguarded, but they're always patrolled by the association. Some are even farmed exclusively for their rare materials. The one we're headed to is a high C Grade dungeon. Anything over a High D Grade rating always has armed guards watching in case of a break that needs to be dealt with or reported."

We run through the forest further until Bri points to a tall mountain in the distance. It reaches up into the sky almost 2km high and is fully covered in dark green trees. With my excellent eyesight

and increased perception, I can see a closer-up view even from far away. Near the top, there is a huge 100-meter stone cliff wall drop off with a natural flat overlook above it.

If one were to stand on top of that cliff, they'd get a view of the entire valley we're running through right now.

"That's it. The dungeon is right on top of that ridge."

I activate a gust of wind magic beneath my feet and turn to Bri.

"How about we take a shortcut?"

In the same moment I see the bottom of her boots light up with a white glow, and wisps of her own wind magic come out. We're both propelled into the air at the same moment and begin walking through the sky, and up toward the top of the mountain.

"Element imbued boots to fly? Interesting craft, I didn't know a hunter without the same skill as the element imbued item could wield it."

"Not usually, but if blood bonded and the user has high enough mana control to overpower the fighting spirit of the original slain monster it's possible. Even same element imbued items can be tricky. I'm sure you remember the deadly nature of your sword before you got strong enough to control it."

"Yes, I remember. That makes sense."

I activate my all-seeing eye as well as my enemy detection skill and sense the swirling blue dungeon portal right atop the ridge like Bri said. However, I sense two other readings up there as well...

I whisper under my breath as we fly through the sky at a constant rate.

"You were right, it is guarded. We have what seem to be two elites, or at least two guards that are nearing the Elite status. A level 424 and a level 439. They're strong, but sneaking past them shouldn't be an issue."

She agrees as we change trajectories and curve our upward motion around the mountain's backside. Bri activates her light magic in a shimmering wall in front of her, and I activate my stealth skill as we finally land on the opposite side of the mountain's ridge.

The wall of magic Bri conjures distorts the light in front of her, making anyone of lower mana control looking straight at her believe there is nothing there at all. She's able to make multiple light magic walls in a cube formation to be invisible from all angles. My stealth skill makes me completely undetectable too as we both slowly walk into the clearing that opens up to the view atop the valley.

The sun begins to fall below the horizon, and the lights of the city are visible in the distance as the entire valley below the mountain is covered in the remnants of the golden sun's glow.

On the other side of the clearing, the blue spinning mass of energy is visible with two armored guards standing on either side. They look tired and bored but don't move from their posts about 5 meters away from the dungeon portal.

One guard has a legendary grade extreme strength skill while the other has an advanced fire magic skill. They either got very lucky to awaken upgraded skills, or they're very well situated with the Association to the point where they would give them upgrade crystals. My money is on the latter.

It doesn't matter though, Bri and I slowly walk right past both of them, and neither bats an eye as we walk straight into the swirling portal.

The bright blue sky, beating hot sun, and yellow sandy desert floor hit my senses as we're spawned into the dungeon.

Bri lets out a laugh as our feet hit the sandy floor with a light thud.

"I haven't done anything like this in quite a while. It feels nice to get out of that workshop."

I nod, deactivating my stealth skill and replying with a chuckle of my own.

"Glad you're having fun already, but the real show is about to begin."

My gaze spreads across the rolling sandy hills, and in the distance, rock formations arise from the desert floor.

"What kind of dungeon is this?"

We walk further in, and Bri responds.

"A sand golem dungeon. If my memory is correct, they spawn in around level 360 to 380. The boss sometimes passes level 400. These monsters are great for training Association grunts that want to give their try at being elites one day, but it's hardly used anymore because most golems don't drop any loot other than mana crystals."

I nod, using enemy detection to see a few of the sand golems Bri was talking about in my mind's eye using the skill's new legendary grade perk.

"I see... this dungeon should be a great trial run. Let's get deeper inside; I don't want the exit portal to be harmed by my test."

We airstep upward and get much deeper into the dungeon, soaring high enough to avoid all pointless mob fights before I finally stop in mid-air. We hover about 30 meters off the ground with endless hills of sand and rock on all sides.

Bri speaks up.

"I've waited long enough, the anticipation is killing me. Let's see this magic item you claim can actually collapse a dungeon."

I do a final scan of the dungeon to make sure no humans are inside other than us, then activate my item storage skill.

"I think I've waited long enough too. I'll take it out right now."

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A large white portal of spatial magic opens up below me about 15 meters down. It's halfway between me and the ground.

Without waiting any longer, I let the Cursed Windstone fall from my storage and plummet toward the sandy floor.

The moment it emerges, the wind picks up and the mana manifested sand from the dungeon floor begins to float up into the air to meet the falling stone. In mere fractions of a second, a twisting sand tornado is created, and I turn to Bri and grab her wrist.

"To be safe, we'll need to put even more distance between us and this test."

The craftswoman's eyes are locked on the items below us as I Dungeon walk us over 200 meters away in the direction we just came from. Before blipping to safety, I could feel the mana seeping out of me already.

Once we re-materialize, a loud metallic twang like two mana shieldings colliding hits my ears. It's followed by thuds, cracks, and a massive explosion of sand.

The violent Windstone hits the dungeon's sandy surface and in turn, a rippling shockwave follows but weakens into a light breeze as it nears us over two sports fields in distance away. The impact makes a dome of swirling sand that expands outwards, then gets sucked back into the impact point like a dense center of gravity is pulling it in.

I let out a small sigh of relief seeing that the damage isn't instant, but also keep the thought at the back of my mind that this item's description said its mana plundering speed was exponential. Meaning, it's only going to get more powerful from here.

Bri speaks up as we both air step higher into the sky with a half frightened, half excited tone.

"What kind of item is that...? A special kind of wind element stone? Or-"

She thinks to herself, staring out at the item ripping through the dungeon floor like it's paper, wondering what exactly she's looking at. My eyes tighten on the dome of swirling sand in the distance as it slowly expands.

A deep-toned buzzing sound begins to fill the air.

My all-seeing eye picks up on the intricacies of what's actually happening.

Through the expanding dome of sand, a large hole in the dungeon floor is being created as the element stone sinks deeper into the desert.

Sand, which is really just pure mana manifesting as dungeon mass, twists around it like a whirlpool and disappears into a dense center point once it gets close enough to the stone. It expands quickly, and I respond to Bri's question as we both watch in awe.

"Yes, it's an element stone. Well- it used to be. Have you ever heard of cursed items?"

She nods and her eyes widen, focusing even more on the violently spinning rapidly expanding dome of sand.

"Yes, I've made some myself, but nothing of this magnitude... Where did you get it? Or- don't tell me you killed a craftsman and made this thing yourself...?"

She turns her head to look at me as she pieces everything together.

Bri is one of the only people that has ever seen my true status. It was a requirement for me to show it when I first got my blood bonded sword and entered the underground fight arena. Her memory is very good, I guess that's why she didn't question any of my other skills like stealth, wind magic, or dungeon walker when I used them in front of her.



She's aware I'm no normal hunter.

So, I respond in a sarcastic tone with a relaxed shrug.

"Yes, I killed a craftsman to get the skill. You're lucky I didn't set my sights on you earlier when I was spending time in Vice City."

She rolls her eyes and snaps back with her own joking remark.

"Yeah right, I doubt you could have laid a finger on me even if you found me sleeping back then."

We both chuckle, but stare back at the growing dust cloud as I explain how it was really triggered.

"I managed to get a crafting skill of my own in the Dark Continent and mixed two of the wrong ingredients together to create this... Or depending how you look at it, maybe two of the right ones. It's a long story, one I can tell you after we witness this creation's full power and get out of here."

The corner of my lip curls upward as the swirling dome of sand expands even further and the wind starts to pick up even 200 meters away from the eye of the storm. The deep low-toned buzzing gets louder and louder too, expanding throughout the entirety of the dungeon. I feel a small percent of my MP get drained with every gust.

In just about 60 seconds, the diameter of the cursed element stone's pull has increased over 10 times, and the gaping hole in the dungeon floor has become over 40 meters wide and deep.

Bri responds.

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"I think we should get back... Or possibly leave this dungeon for good."

She reaches for my hand and I grab on to teleport us backward again another few hundred meters.

The entire dungeon shudders as we do and the dome of destruction grows larger at a faster and faster rate. Massive hills of desert sand and rock formations begin to fall away into the growing mass of violent wind.

Just 30 seconds after, the stone has created a 100-meter deep hole in the desert floor, making a dome over twice that in diameter, and its mana draining winds reach us even half a kilometer away.

Sand golems are being sucked into the enormous wind-powered black hole, and everything made of mana does too. My rings, necklaces, and even the direction of my fluttering cloak have a slight pull toward the center of the mass. Trace amounts of mana are sucked from both mine and Bri's bodies.

However, the interesting part is we're not being pulled in ourselves, only mana. While the environment around us is getting sucked in and even the helpless dungeon mobs, our flesh bodies are not affected by the pull at all.

This doesn't mean I want to find out what would happen if we get any closer, but it is an interesting phenomenon.

I dungeon walk both of us backward again, over a kilometer away to find ourselves at the dungeon exit portal.

Far off in the distance, the dome of sand and energy continues to grow. Even here, the buzzing mana and MP draining winds reach us slightly. It's been just under 2 minutes since the stone was dropped, and it's already done this much damage.

The entire dungeon shudders again and the blue spinning portal near us shifts to a crimson tint. A grin crosses my face as I speak up.

"Let's let the guards report the break, then get them out of here before they get themselves killed."

Both Bri and I activate our light magic and stealth skills, then walk out of the red glowing portal back to the outside world.

The higher level guard with a fire magic skill awakened is staring straight in our direction, but can only see the spinning red mana glow as his partner speaks through a silver transmission tablet.

"Hello? Hello? Is anyone there? I'd like to report unusual activity at the Green Ridge Lookout Dungeon. The portal has turned from blue to red, this is a break. I repeat. The portal has turned from blue to red, this is a break."

His partner looks back at him as we walk past in full stealth mode.

"We should stand guard inside to make sure no mutants escape into the forest. We may be over 20 kilometers away from the city, but we wouldn't want to take the chance of any monsters slipping out and harming civilians."

The guard with the transmission tablet finishes up reporting the break to the Association and responds.

"You're right, we should."

Wisps of sand and wind magic start to flow outside of the portal now, pushing manifested dungeon mass into the outside world. The only other time I've seen anything like this was that one time I faced the Volcanic Salamander dungeon with Maria in the Dark Continent. The heat expelled from the dungeons out into the cave. This was only because the dungeon was on the verge of complete collapse.

The fire magic user points it out to his partner.

"Look at that.... We must be in the midst of another intense surge. This was a stable dungeon as far as I knew. I have no idea what could have caused it to act this way... Let's go--"

As soon as they both turn to enter the portal, I whisper under my breath to Bri by my side.

"Brace yourself for a high-powered mental attack. This might hurt a bit."

Fractions of a second later, I turn around and release my stealth skill and take down all my mana shielding barriers to activate my intimidation skill on full blast focused at the two men that are about to step through the red portal.

Their eyes roll into the back of their heads and they both fall to the forest floor knocked out from the burst of intense focused mana attacking their psyche.

"Body double."

Next, I create a body double and use it to run forward and plunge deep into the red portal to watch what is about to unfold inside with no risk to my real body.

It disappears into the crimson swirling mass of mana, and in my real body, I turn back to Bri.

"Help me carry these guys to a safe distance away. I have a feeling once this dungeon fully breaks and collapses, it isn't going to be pretty."

Bri deactivates her light magic while holding her head and shaking off the effects of getting caught in the crossfire of my intimidation skill.

"You weren't kidding. That's a pretty strong mental attack. I'm glad I'm not on the wrong side of it."

We take one guard each and sling them over our shoulders while air stepping away from the mountain off the cliffside. The sun has almost fully set over the horizon, but with my enhanced sense and eyesight specifically, it's basically as light as day even at night.

We make it to the ground in the valley just below the mountain and the memories from my double come flowing back into my mind.

"I already died..."

Inside the dungeon, the moment my double entered, the light swirling winds had already reached the exit point.

Considering my double is fully made of mana, it began getting sucked in toward the center of the swirling mass. Using plunderer and my other stat-boosting buffs, my double was able to resist the pull for about 30 seconds as Bri and I made our way down the mountain, but ultimately the dome expanded too far out to resist any further.

All of the sandy hills and rock formations have collapsed and been sucked into the windy mass, and dozens of sand golems have faced their demise all around the dungeon.

The hole in the dungeon floor reached a depth of over 400m and the diameter of the swirling dome hit over 1km as my body double got sucked in and broken down into pure mana to add to the central mass.

Once these images show up in my mind I imagine the possibilities of what will happen once it has no more energy to pull from.

My all-seeing eye can sense the red portal swirling more and more violently now, starting to spew larger amounts of wind magic and mana into the real world.

However, suddenly it stops.

The twisting wind and violently glowing crimson portal stops expanding with power and contracts on itself quickly and instantly.

Everything is calm and peaceful.

Bri and I don't stop moving forward toward the city, and the sun fully sets, leaving us in the dead of night for a full 20 seconds of silence.

Then, a glimmer of transport magic brings all foreign material out of the collapsed dungeon.

The foreign material being a highly concentrated, extremely volatile, unpredictable, cursed element stone imbued with a mythic grade skill holding billions of MP from a high C Grade Dungeon.

Once it spawns in, my All Seeing Eye picks up on it like a bright candle burning through paper on the radar in my mind's eye.

It gets hotter and hotter, reaching out for mana to drain, but out here in the plain old real world, there isn't much of that to go around.

It sucks up the trace amounts of mana in the atmosphere, but soon begins to crack and splinter as its needs are not satisfied.

The item description warning about its structural integrity collapsing repeats in my head as I watch the outer crystal walls of the stone break down in my mind's eye.

A few seconds later, and the eruption of power that is released is far greater than anything my imagination had in mind.

The dark night sky is lit up like its daytime as the element stone explodes.

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It looks as if a new sun has risen from the horizon as a flash of bright white light makes every rock and leaf in the forest visible as clear as day.

I turn my head back to watch the eruption of power unfold.

From a tiny point on the mountain's top, a sphere of energy expands to envelop the entire top half of the mountain in an instant. Massive skyscraper-sized blades of wind erupt from the ball of mass moments later, ripping through the earth all the way down the mountain, and for over a kilometer on every side in deep gashes, making instant valleys in the forest terrain.

Thousands of trees are disintegrated in an instant, and once the sphere of bright white light hits critical mass, it envelops over 3/4 of the mountain's top, leaving only the base visible when it finally explodes.

A second even brighter flash of light blinds me, and only my All-Seeing Eye can watch the damage unfold as the entire mountain is torn to bits and decimated like it was never even there.

More violent tendrils of wind magic erupt from the center point and carve deep gashes into the earth. A crater over 2 km in diameter is created, and the outward destruction of leftover wind spreads out even further

The eerie part of all this is the sight I'm witnessing is completely silent... that is, until the shock wave of leftover energy, wind, and sound finally hits me.

I place massive walls of mana shielding behind both Bri and me as we continue to airstep away, and the mountain we passed does create a bit of shielding from the blast, but despite that, a wave of horror hits our senses anyway.

It comes in two rounds, the initial detonation, and the eruption of power once the mountain breaks and all of the built-up mana is actually released into the forest.

It all blends together, sounding like thousands of boulders are falling on top of each other, while bendable metal sheets are simultaneously hit with large sledgehammers, and in the process, countless thick trees are being split in two with dull axes. The metallic clangs, splintering rock and tree sounds, and overwhelming gust of wind that follows shows me power beyond anything I've ever felt before. It's hard to conceptualize, especially this far away from the blast zone.

The shock wave ripples through us despite all the energy barriers in place, and lasts for almost a full minute. We don't look back anymore, just continue to airstep forward and allow the leftover energy of the explosion to add power to our steps.

The fact that a large portion of the blast dispersed into the air makes me think we were lucky to have it explode on top of the mountain, so high above ground level. Even so, its aftermath is no joke.

Trees are pushed down and earth is turned up by the wind for over 10 km in all directions. As we near the outer edge of destruction, about half way to Vice City, Bri speaks up in a stern tone.

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"Did you know that would happen...? That sure is a lot more than just a dungeon collapse. We could have been in deep trouble if we were any closer."

I take a moment to respond, wondering what emotion is building more inside me; excitement or dread.

"I had a feeling something like that would happen. But, wasn't expecting it to be that massive... However, I didn't count out the possibility. There's a reason I asked for a dungeon away from civilization."

Bri looks at Vice City's night lights getting near, then back in the direction of the blast.

It was pure mana and wind magic that erupted, so once dispersed, the light dissipated too. The darkness of the night sky has completely taken over again and the mountain that is missing from the horizon won't be noticeable until morning.

"There's going to be a lot of search teams out here tomorrow... or even tonight! I'm sure quite a few people in the city saw that flash of light. The Association isn't going to just let this off as a natural phenomenon."

I point to an open clearing on the direct path under a low-branched tree.

"Let's set down the guards here right outside the blast zone, I'm sure if the Association has any questions to ask, these two will be the ones closest to the cause."

We glide down and sit them up against the tree's trunk and I put my hands up in the air, replying in a carefree tone.

"They reported an unusual dungeon break in a stable dungeon, and minutes later this happens. If they happened to be passed out during the blast, but somehow survived it, seems like they're the ones to blame for any misinformation."

I activate my stealth skill, and Bri takes the cue to do the same.

Before we leave, I grab one of the full restore potions out of my item storage and crack it open out of curiosity. I use telekinesis to feed them both half the potion as we walk away and store the empty bottle into my item storage from afar with a spatial magic portal once I'm done.

As we walk out of sight, the two guards come to their senses and immediately start talking to each other, trying to figure out where they are and what happened.

Their confused voices are drowned out as we airstep away. I murmur under my breath once we approach the city's entrance and put on my concealment skill disguise.

"I still need to do some more tests."

If that was the result of a wind stone explosion, then what would the difference be with a fire stone or an ice stone, or something else? The fact that it only sucked up mana means I could probably just use Qi to get away from it while its still expanding in the initial stages even if I couldn't use my dungeon walker skill.

This means it is possibly a success. Maybe I could use it in the Titan's domain as intended to collapse it from the inside without Ember's direct help. If it were to collapse into another dungeon, the great plains, it would take plenty of time to collapse that second dungeon as I escape with my teammates. Then again, this is all theory, and risking putting off an explosion like this inside the Dungeon Hub Beneath Vice City would not be very safe either.

As I wrack my brain for more ideas and definitive answers, Bri interjects.

"Absolutely not. Whatever you're thinking of doing, keep it away from the city, much further away. This was already far too reckless for my liking."

When she looks back at me, the corner of her lip is turned up despite her serious expression and tone.

I let out a sigh and agree, but can tell she secretly enjoyed witnessing that blast too.

"I'll keep my next tests to myself, that's fine. I'm glad at least no one got hurt."

Then I shrug and point in the direction of the Dungeon Hub.

"This way, you delivered on your end of the deal, now it's time for me to deliver on mine. I'll get you into the Labyrinth so you can rank up."

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While we walk through the portion of town filled with small shops and street vendors, the tone of commerce is much more scattered, and many hunters and merchants look up to the sky with confused gazes.

There are some whispers that escape from a few mouths as we walk by.

"Did you see that flash of light?"

"What could it be? Lightning?"

"No- That was an explosion! You all heard the rumble. The Association must be doing some testing... They could have at least warned us!"

"Does that mean there's another surge coming?"

The closer we get to the center of the city, nearing the Dungeon Hub, the more intense the chatter becomes, and the sound of yelling guards hits my ears once the escalators to the dungeons come into sight.

"We're having a full lockdown! No hunters are allowed in dungeons until Association Squads can safely search all dungeons to make sure no abnormal breaks are in progress. The evacuation has just

begun, please bear with us. This shouldn't take too long! If there are any breaks present, please be ready to show your Hunter's ID. You must be one Letter Grade above the dungeons that break to qualify for exploration."

The city lights illuminate the entrances to the dungeons, and a few hunters are being escorted out as we stop right behind a crowd of curious onlookers.

It's late in the day, so most hunters would be finishing up their farming sessions for the evening anyway. There aren't many complaints, mostly just confused people and the occasional salty hunter that wanted to spend an hour or two more inside a dungeon to sneak in a little extra profit.

Bri leans in close to my ear and asks a question.

"How are we going to do this? The Labyrinth entrance is surely on much higher security now than it was before."

I point to an empty shadowy spot behind a building devoid of people.

"I have a plan, don't worry."

We walk over as everyone else focuses on the guards yelling the same thing over and over in hopes to get the first pick at rare dungeons that break. In times like these, exclusive and valuable loot can be found that usually wouldn't be available in the City.

Weaker E-Class hunters have to go home, but D and C-Class hunters with the confidence to fight off mutants are looking to make out with a haul.

Unfortunately for them, this whole situation is most likely all a misunderstanding following the stunt I just pulled, but, it doesn't matter to me. The more chaos, the better.

I activate my stealth skill, and Bri does the same with her light magic.

Without anyone batting an eye, we slip out from the darkness and back into the crowds in full stealth mode. Then, move past every guard and hunter down into the E-Class Dungeon station.

The underground transport trains still move on autopilot, and association workers leveled 100-200 stay on guard by the platforms and on the trains themselves. However, Bri and I stand next to them without having to worry at all, making it to the closest E-Grade dungeon less than a minute away.

Once we step out and make our way up another flight of stairs, we hop through the blue spinning portal, and Bri questions me again.

"An E-Class Dungeon? What's this about? How can we-"

I lightly grab her wrist and activate dungeon walker to bring her to the labyrinth in an instant.

"Your Teleport Skill..."

I nod and finish her sentence.

"That's right, I can access any dungeon I've been in before, even labyrinth dungeons."

I see thoughts racing through her mind behind a focused gaze, but she doesn't question it more than necessary and just nods firmly with tightened lips.

"Makes sense."

We both activate our air steps because the only teleport point I have available in this dungeon is from high above the ground when Ember was flying me through these floors to make it up high enough to meet Maria and Abby on our training and farming excursion earlier.

Bri looks down at the lush and colorful jungle region of the 25th floor while I reply.

"We can start on a lower floor if you want, but this is the 25th floor of the Vice City Labyrinth. Every creature down there will be over level 500, some over 550 even. You'll definitely rank up after a few kills."

She looks down at the jungle below with wide eyes filled with more awe than shock, and replies while pulling the two black daggers off her waist, gripping them tight and letting them glow bright white.

"No need to go easy on me, I've been waiting to fight some actual ranked-up monsters for a long time. I think these will be a perfect warm-up."

I nod with approval, curious to see what kind of fighting style she really has in store for me to see. We glide down to the jungle, through some thick trees and into a less dense clearing where I sense a level 549 monster lurking down below.

Once we break the treeline, a humanoid lizard creature standing upright on two feet wielding sharp silver daggers looks straight up at us. It is similar to the monsters that are released on the 6th stage of the arena back in Valor City. This one has a bit darker skin, and much brighter beady eyes, but its movement speed and raw aura of mana control are right on par with those ranked-up monsters that give Ace, Sia, and Max a run for their money every time they fight them.

The moment it spots us, Bri takes a powerful Air step forward and yells out.

"Now it's time for me to have some fun. Let me handle this."

I nod and slow my downward motion, eventually stopping and standing on a large branch that overlooks the clearing.

"All you."

I keep my eyes locked on them as the lizard creature jumps up and Bri charges down. Both of them have mana shielding that grows in power as they point their daggers at each other with killing intent.

As their daggers clash, the metallic twang of shielding colliding fills the jungle and both fighters stand in place on equal footing. The lizard creature activates a speed buff, and Bri pushes herself forward with wind magic while blinding the creature with flashes of light to prepare for a surprise attack.

She flips over the creature using air magic and excess mana to boost her agility in a cartwheel motion, catching the lizard off guard and slicing its throat open with one of her blades while she's completely upsidedown flying through the air effortlessly.

There's a loud screeching sound as the lizard tries to retaliate, but more flashes of blinding light and wind-boosted strikes follow.



Bri combines the walls of light that make her seem almost invisible to her barrage of attacks and the monster becomes very disoriented in a matter of seconds as blades are breaking through its mana shielding at all angles from seemingly random positions.

It can't see what's going on at all, but my eyes are wide as I can see her as clear as day. I'm thoroughly impressed at her agility, speed, and battle IQ.

I always assumed Bri was strong, and some mentions of her fighting in the Underground Black Market Arena in the past have crossed my mind to consolidate this thought, but I had no idea this was her fighting style.

From the moment the battle started, she already knew a perfect plan and had her attack pattern figured out. From the looks of it, Bri even knew if the lizard creature could fully activate its speed buff and utilize it she may be at a disadvantage.

To make sure this didn't happen, from the moment the two of them clashed, she took dominance and controlled the entire battle.

Less than 5 more seconds pass, and another dozen bloody slashes covered up by flashes of light and gusts of wind bring the battle to its end. The mutilated body of the defeated lizardman falls to the jungle floor with a thud.

Bri lets out a satisfied sigh while walking over to its corpse, twirling her blades in her hands while deactivating her light magic.

She hasn't even broken into a sweat.

I can't help smiling and hover down with slow claps to congratulate her.

She looks up at me as the creature dissolves.

"That was a fun one. I gained 3 whole levels from it too. I'll be ranking up pretty quick."

She picks up the large pink stone it leaves behind as loot as I reply and point off deeper into the jungle.

"You're right, this will be quicker than I thought. I sense another one nearby, just 400 meters that way. I'm curious to see what kind of unique buff you'll receive from ranking up."

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Over the next half hour, I point out new monsters in the jungle region on the 25th floor and Bri takes them out in style.

After just four additional mobs, the agile light magic user opens her status over the corpse of a fallen lizardman.

"Level 500... It's finally time."

From above in the trees, I watch the silhouette of her body immediately become enveloped in a bright white light. The blue text box of the system vanishes and pure mana flows through Bri's body at a rapid rate, circulating through all of her mana channels as the glowing light around her gets stronger and brighter.

In a matter of seconds, the flash becomes overwhelmingly bright, but also vanishes to leave us in the silence of the wide-open empty forest just as fast.

Stood in the place where the experienced craftswoman once stood is now an indistinguishable aura.

Her mana control is crisper and more elusive. I can still sense her presence because I'm looking straight at her, but it may be significantly harder if she actually tried to hide.

I can tell she's leagues above her strength just moments ago. The density of mana shielding that forms around her blades as she swings them through the air to test her new strength is so much more refined than in her previous battles. I wouldn't be surprised if the lizardmen in this dungeon couldn't even pierce her shielding now.

She throws a few kicks and even jumps up into the air using wind magic from her boots to come up near me in the treeline.

Her sharp eyes make contact with mine, and a wave of new confidence and certainty is in her gaze.

"Now this feels good... I should have ranked up sooner..."

Bri twirls her blades as I step out from the branch above and we glide down to the jungle floor in the clearing where she got her last kill.

She picks up the mana crystal of the dead lizardman, and by chance, I sense another one coming at us at full speed about 150 meters in the direction we just left.

Before I even mention it, Bri's gaze turns to it and she swings a glowing dagger in its direction. A nearly invisible, thin, and densely packed blade of pure mana comes flying out of the bonded weapon's edge. It flies through the forest in silence, leaving trace amounts of glimmering energy behind while gliding through full trees and boulders to finally land directly on the monster's neck.

Before it takes another step, the lizard creature's head topples off and rolls to the forest floor. I watch using enemy detection in my mind's eye with my arms crossed.

"Not bad... not bad at all..."

She turns back, twirling her daggers a few times before placing them on her waist and replying.

"Can we move up a few floors? I need something a lot more powerful to test out my new buff. I have a feeling I know what it can do, but I'm not certain what its full capabilities are."

My appraisal skill activates on instinct, and the buff's title enters my mind's eye.

[Domain of Total Illusion]

I raise an eyebrow because I also am very curious about what a power like this can do. Then, place a hand on her shoulder while activating Dungeon Walker to bring both of us up to the red-tinted dungeon of the faceless speed-monster creatures.

The story has been illicitly taken; should you find it on Amazon, report the infringement.

"You want a challenge? I can give you that. This is the 28th floor, everything here is well over level 600."

As soon as Bri's black combat boots hit the crimson floor, she takes out her blades and charges them with mana.

I teleported us in close enough to a nearby mob that she could have time to see it coming and assess her options, but still be plunged right into action. Seeing that she's already turned in the direction of

the flash of blue light from the creature's extreme speed skill being activated, I jump backward but pull out my sword and keep it on my side just in case.

This is a huge jump in level and power all at once, so I'll stay on guard until I see Bri take a few out herself.

Once the dual long sword-wielding red-skinned humanoid monster glowing with a bright blue aura comes within 30 meters of Bri, she jumps forward with wind-powered steps and a look of concentration on her face.

The monster senses its opponent is very strong and immediately activates its ranked up speed buff, shifting its aura from blue to red.

Their blades clash fractions of a second later and the eruption of mana shielding breaking on both of their weapons explodes in all directions.

Both Bri and the monster fly backward with equal force.

The dagger-wielding craftswoman at level 500, and the humanoid monster with silver swords at level 633 are on almost equal footing.

The beast doesn't lose a second of battle time to grip the track material-like floor and reactivate its speed buffs, shortening the distance between Bri and it in an instant.

Using the wind from her boots, Bri just barely twists out of the way to dodge its attack, but she doesn't seem worried at all. Her face is calm despite the clear difference in their speed. Her perception, agility, battle IQ, and raw power seem to make up for it, for now.

The monster continues to charge at the craftswoman in erratic patterns, swinging its blade, trying to land a hit with greed and fury. However, Bri continues to track its movements with sharp eyes and dodge over and over.

Occasionally she blocks with her own blades and their shielding cancels out equally in power, forcing both of them to fly backward over and over again.

I can't quite figure out what her game plan is, but it seems she's just trying to get a complete understanding of its movements.

Just when Bri's repetitive motions start to get dull to me; the corner of her lip curves upward, her pupils dilate, and a shimmering white orb of energy expands around her in all directions for about 5 meters in diameter.

As she does this, the red-skinned monster is charging toward her, swinging its blades and plotting its next strike.

It doesn't seem to notice the shimmering orb of mana at all, and plunges headfirst right inside.

The creature doesn't hesitate, flinch, or seem hurt at all once it enters; but something peculiar happens once its blades swing down to meet Bri's.

It loses its footing, and its sword strike misses the mark by over half a meter. Bri counters and lands two deep gashes in the monster's side, bursting through its shielding with ease. It looks as if the monster didn't even see Bri's attack coming.

It almost falls to the ground, but as it continues the momentum and leaves the outer edge of the shimmering orb on the other side, it fully regains its balance and turns around in a blue streaking arc of light with blades poised ready to kill. Blood drips from its wounds and it attacks Bri again with no fear.

It runs headfirst into the glowing orb of mana and the same exact thing happens. The creature loses its balance and completely misses its attack by a long shot. Bri lands another deep blow.

Two more exchanges pass, and it ends with both of Bri's blades slicing the disoriented monster's head off while it swings its swords in the opposite direction helplessly.

She deactivates her buff as it falls to the floor in two parts and begins to dissolve.

I walk over with a look of curiosity on my face. I have my own assumptions of what this ability can do, but want to hear it myself from the source.

Bri speaks up as I get closer.

"12 more levels from that one, nice! It was definitely a strong opponent, without my new buff this would have been a totally different fight."

She shrugs in a nonchalant manner while putting her bloodstained daggers on her waist.

"I probably still would have been able to win, I just wanted to test it out."

I reply.

"Oh yeah? How does it work? I could tell something was happening from the outside, but hard to know exactly. You're messing with your opponent's sight?"

She smiles and replies while activating her buff again, making an orb of shimmering clear light expand around her.

"Good guess, it seems to be that I can change my opponents' perception of reality within a certain domain of concentrated mana. Not only sight, but other senses too. I knew ranked up buffs were unique and usually come to be based on your usual battle style or similar to your regular skill usage but this kind of ability is far greater than I expected."

I'm face to face with the shimmering barrier as I hear her continue.

"Step inside, I'll show you how it works."

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I take a step forward at her request, doing a full analysis of the curved wall of shimmering mana in front of me.

My perception skills and buffs are activated out of instinct at a constant rate just like they were when I was training in the titan's domain for 6 months straight. With this, and my absurdly high level of natural mana control, I'm able to see through the barrier and still make eye contact with Bri standing inside through what looks to be a semi-transparent mirror made of water.

However, my goal here isn't to overpower her new ranked-up buff, I'd like to see what an opponent at similar or lower mana control would experience if they walked into this [Domain of Total Illusion].

So, I deactivate my buffs and limit my mana control to not add any extra power to my senses. Instead, it just acts as a dense defensive layer. My perception of the flowing mana in the dungeon around me drastically drops and to my surprise, even the shimmering sphere of mana around Bri's body disappears too.

I reply to her request for me to step inside.

"Sure, show me what you can do."

Then step forward, plunging headfirst into the space where moments ago I perceived a wall of mana.

The moment my face enters her domain, I feel a cold gust of wind blow my hair to the side. As I take another step closer, the flat ground beneath my feet becomes rocky, then a cold sensation creeps up my shins.

I take in a deep breath of air and look around as frozen air enters my lungs and the view from the peak of an icy mountain materializes all around me.

I look down at my feet, and I'm stood on a small rocky surface with no more than a meter of room on either side to walk. There's a cliff-like dropoff and a huge mountain range covered in light snowy powder in all directions for as far as my eyes can see.

I turn my head back and forth, then bring my hands up in the air to look at them both in front of my face to see how real it all feels...

Then, with no warning at all, reality around me begins to shift. The sky changes from the light blue coloring to a shade of green and leaves and branches start to materialize above me. The mountains down below in the snow-covered valley rise up to make flat ground and morph into dense trees and lush greenery as the snow melts away.

The air becomes hot and humid as the jungle clearing we just left on the 25th floor feels as if it's real and right in front of me.

Birds chirp and insects even buzz as my eyes wander around the lively lush greenery for a few seconds.

Just as I'm getting used to it, the ground beneath my feet disappears and the sensation of falling takes over my senses. My feet hit a hard wooden floor, and Bri's dimly lit 3rd-floor office comes into full view.

The walls have random rare trinkets and items, and even her desk is covered in papers and gems. I hear footsteps approach from in front of me, then out of nowhere, Bri materializes in the middle of the room less than 2 meters away. She smiles and brings a finger up in the air, swiping it like she would on a tablet or screen.

The world around me shifts every time she does, switching from grassland dungeons, to mountainous regions, to soaring high through the sunset clouds, to dry hot deserts, on the edge of a volcano, and even in front of a roaring ocean wave about to crash down on us.

She finally speaks up as she shifts the world again, right before the sea's heavy water crushes us, and we sit back in the image of her office room.

"It's pretty interesting, isn't it?"

I nod with a spark of awe in my eyes.

"Yeah, fascinating... This is quite the ranked-up buff."

The thought of all its possibilities runs through my mind. Not only is it an excellent skill mid-battle to completely confuse an opponent, it could be excellent to use for business too. Bri has really only showed me the nice and sunny side of things here, but it could surely be used as a negotiating tactic or way to interrogate enemies without doing them any real physical harm. It would only be psychological.

I chuckle to myself as I think of a few less productive use cases for this buff too. It could make any place you wanted become a bed or relaxing beach.

Interrupting my train of thought Bri replies again.

"Try to break out of it, I'm curious how strong my illusions really are."

I let out a sigh and nod.

"Sure, I was curious too when It started."

I activate my buffs and skills very slowly, letting my mana control work its way up to full capacity.

The moment they begin to amp up, the office room around me starts to distort. The walls look like they're bending and the floor beneath my feet is getting more textured. I look up at Bri again and my buffs and mana control hit about a third of their total capacity and the shape of a sphere becomes visible around both of us.

I can see the projected image of Bri's study on the curved mana-imbued walls, but can also see the red-tinted dungeon behind it.

By the time I'm back to using half of my control, the illusion I'm standing in looks like no more than a mirage of a see-through hologram. I can tell it's here, and attempting to cover my senses, but it doesn't distort my reality any more than a light breeze would push me back while running in a straight line.

I smile and nod, not seeing any reason to up the ante on my perception abilities any further and step backward right outside the sphere.

Bri sees that her illusion has been cracked and deactivates it. I speak up again.

"Not bad. I did some recent unorthodox mana control training, so it figures I'd be able to get out with ease. However, as you already tested, it could easily trick any normal ranked-up monster. Even up to level 650 or so I'd say you could take them on. I'm not sure what the baseline for mana control above this level is though, I'm only level 645 myself."

Bri replies with a satisfied look.

"Yeah, it takes a lot of MP to keep it active for that long. I burned through almost half of my bar to show you that."

She reaches into a small black item box on her waist behind one of her daggers and drinks an MP potion before continuing.

"I have plenty more mana to work with though, so it shouldn't be a problem."

I reply as she regenerates her MP.

"Might as well take advantage of the labyrinth now while we're still in it to level up more. You're severely underleveled for your strength."

Right on cue, the presence of two speed monsters comes into my radar and both Bri and I turn our heads to face them. She replies, taking out her blades and charging them to full while running toward the two flashes of blue light coming our way in the distance.

"You're right, time to get to work."

In the blink of an eye, Bri takes on two monsters over 100 levels above her at once.

With her domain of illusion surrounding her body every time one of the monsters gets near, they don't even stand a chance at hitting her. I can't help but laugh at some of the movements the creatures make while swinging their longswords in the complete opposite direction of where Bri is standing.

Less than 15 seconds pass before both of the monsters are left bleeding out on the dungeon floor, dissolving at Bri's feet.

I walk over again as she bends down to collect the mana crystals but finds a shimmering red speed fragment fall from one of the monster corpses. While picking it up she examines the gem and activates her crafting skill to get a better idea of what it is and how it could be used.

She looks up to me once I'm close enough.

"So this is where you farmed these gems. There must be all kinds of rare drops here. No one from the Association farms this high in the Labyrinth... Anyone strong enough to farm these is just shipped off to the Apex region anyway..."

"These floors are gold mines..."

She pauses then asks another question.

"Are there any floors that drop element stones nearby?"

I chuckle and nod, as I'm not sure I've ever seen Bri this excited about anything. Especially after mercilessly killing two level 630 opponents in a matter of seconds, the change of tone is amusing.

"One floor below and you'll find ice stones, one floor above and you'll find wind stones. I haven't gone any further up yet, so I'm not too sure if there are any more."

As Bri's eyes open even wider, I see calculations running through her mind on items she wants to craft in the future. Every time I visit her, she's always waiting on the availability of more rare items.

What felt like a normal day-to-day farming drop to me may be a huge step up in her potential of crafts in the future.

I respond.

"That reminds me, I have a few questions about crafting I'd like to ask, and one thing I'd like to show you. I have an interesting ranked up buff too, It may help you craft some unique items every time I'm around."

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"Sure, ask me anything. We're going to be business partners very soon, and if you have a craftsmanship skill of your own, I'm sure I could teach you a few things."

I nod, thinking about what exactly I'm going to ask her, but she responds before I do.

"And your ranked-up buff? It can help me craft better items? Is it some kind of team buffing skill or something?"

I respond.

"Kind of, but not exactly. I guess that's a good place to start."

I concentrate on my Rising Emperor's Domain buff, expecting to see a list of skills available to give Bri pop up above her head, but nothing shows up.

My gaze tightens and I raise an eyebrow as I try to concentrate more intensely. It looks as if I'm staring at Bri's forehead in the silence of the dungeon for no reason at all from an outside perspective.

After a few seconds pass, I stop trying as there's clearly something I'm missing.

"Maybe a hidden condition...?"

I activate my All-Seeing Eye and stare down at the buff's description to think harder.

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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.

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The only two requirements so far that I can see necessary for this buff to take effect are swearing loyalty and joining my party. I've used this buff on Maria, Abby, and Ember.

However, it's not like I have a system status to show they're in my party or a checkbox where they can swear their loyalty...

I think harder, then shrug.

"Maybe you have to say it out loud."

Bri looks at me with an awkward stare.

"Say what out loud? What are you talking about?"

I reply quickly, realizing I've just been thinking and talking to myself this whole time without explaining at all what my buff does.

"One of the conditions to my ranked-up buff seems to be that you have to verbally accept me as your party leader. If you do that, I'll be able to share an upgraded version of your crafting skill."



I've come to this conclusion because Abby and Maria have often called me the team leader in conversation, and Ember refers to me as Master many times over. None of them have explicitly sworn loyalty to me, though, so I think this is a condition that is more action or feeling based rather than verbal.

Bri nods, still with a confused look on her face.

"Sure, we couldn't have gotten here to train today without you. You're the party leader."

The moment the final word leaves her lips, an assortment of blue text hovers over her head and I feel the Invisible Domain around me accept her as an ally instinctually. My gaze tracks down to my Mythic Grade Craftsmanship skill and I equip it on her status.

"Take a look at your skills, what you see is only temporary, but you'll be able to use it freely as long as you're near me."

Bri checks her status, wondering what my words mean until her gaze falls upon the blue glowing text of the new mythic grade skill in her grasp.

Her eyes widen, and she immediately takes miscellaneous items out from her item box.

Flashes of light cover her hands and her eyes dart back and forth across her status screens popping up one after another.

After almost a full minute passes, and half a dozen new high C-Grade and B-Grade items are produced in the blink of an eye, she turns to me.

"It's real... Mythic Grade Skills are real..."

As I nod and begin to explain how my buff works, making sure it's not to be confused with a skill upgrade buff, but a skill-sharing buff, Bri puts the pieces of the puzzle that is my time in the dark continent together very quickly.

"So, that means the Sector 2 Leader is actually dead and this is why he was able to craft such items beyond that of anyone else's capabilities. He must have been insanely lucky to get a Mythic Grade rating from an upgrade crystal... I've never heard of anyone getting anything over a legendary grade..."

She pauses.

"Other than a few element users upgrading their Advanced magic to Extreme. But that's an incredibly rare scenario too... It seems if one is over level 600, the chances of upgrading to that second rank increases drastically."

I look over at Bri again, taking away the mythic grade crafting skill in her possession and granting her access to my All-Seeing Eye ability.

"It's not as luck-based as you may think. Check your skills for yourself. There are hidden point systems within our system, upgrade crystals just act as an override feature. If you haven't stacked up enough Proficiency Points on your own, an upgrade crystal won't work. There's a reason the Association waits until after level 300 to give upgrade crystals to new hunters, and over 400 for those that have elements awakened too. Only 1 PP is awarded per level, so you'll be able to upgrade your skills on your own if you stack up enough."

Bri's eyes light up as she scrolls through her status and comes to see the upgrade options.

"1 per level... huh. It says here I need 1000 more points after my last upgrade to obtain a Mythic Grade Craftsmanship skill myself. So that means...someone would have to reach level 1300 for a skill like this. The Sector 2 Leader was over level 1300 and you killed him?"

Her eyes sharpen and look up from her status, while I remember the Red Hydra Imbued, Demonic Energy Aided, Kamikaze move I pulled to self-destruct and decimate the craftsman back in Solara with my body double.

"I did... It was, an interesting battle to say the least. I caught him off guard, and used some very unique energy attacks. To say the least, I got lucky..."

There's a pause of silence before Bri responds.

"Well, it doesn't matter now. That's the past, and we're working with what we have in the present. What did you want to know about crafting? You may have had some time to play around with a higher grade skill than mine, but I have years of experience that will surely make up for it. Anything in specific you were hoping to learn?"

I nod with a resolute gaze, shifting my shared skill back to craftsmanship from the All-Seeing Eye so she'll be able to test it out more and explain things better.

"Everything. From the basics to expert level, tell me everything. I need a crash course in crafting."

"Very well..."

Over the next hour, we wander through the dungeon to allow Bri to grind up more levels as she explains the basics of crafting to me.

From what I can already see in the crafting interface, most of the things she teaches me are already what I assumed are common knowledge, but apparently [No Grade] and [Special Grade] craftsmen don't get such a fancy interface that shows them which items are available to craft, bond, or upgrade. On top of that, the legendary grade interface is much more basic and rudimentary.

Most of Bri's knowledge comes from books and experiments.

Considering this, and the fact that many new slots, stats, and skill imbuing options are now available that never were before, the basics are all just in front of me explained in simple terms. However, in Bri's explanations, a few things stand out that can't be seen in my interface.

The first is a deeper explanation of cursed items and why they come about.

It's best to craft with materials within a 20-30% variation up or down of one's mana control and level. It's not only best practice to keep improving and making greater items, but it's also dangerous to imbue large amounts of power into lower-grade material.

A B-Grade hunter imbuing their top-ranked skills or mana readings into E-Grade crafting material can only lead to disaster. The lower grade gear will compensate for the higher grade mana inside it and either break before use and release the built-up mana or do harm to the user trying to control it. If an actual curse mark on the item's name within a user's status is made, it will act in irrational and unpredictable ways.

This gives me a better idea of why some of the items I tried to craft earlier gave off such odd readings and abilities. Some even severely downgraded the Mythic Grade Plunderer skill to fit the base material grade.

This means if I want to safely and consistently produce lower grade items for trade with the other regions, I'll have to make sure not to overlevel the craftsman that will be working for Bri.

I always assumed the higher the level the better, but it seems there are uses for people at every rung of the ladder.

Next, Bri explains how to properly make element-bonded weapons. The more blood that is used in the bonding process, the closer the spirit of the element stone will attach to the user. Usually, 8 ounces is more than enough, like my sword and dagger used, but for boots like Bri's she had to use over 20.

When the element in question is not already controlled by the user, more blood is needed to make the bond, and a higher mana control to suppress the spirit of the stone is needed even afterward to keep it in check. Another interesting feature is that the more blood used in the bond, the higher the odds of the item becoming unique and awakening special perks or hidden abilities.

"See, just like this!"

Bri makes her boots glimmer with mana before they turn semi-transparent for a split second.

"It's a small cloaking perk, it's because a portion of my light magic was bonded in through my blood."

I nod and think about this too, as it opens up many options for making unique bonded weapons in the future.

As Bri continues, most of the information she states is common sense, but I still make mental notes of it and even wrote a few tips down in the journal I kept from my time in the Titan's domain.

However, nothing interests me more than our last topic.

Transport crystals and transport platforms. My eyes and ears are laser-focused on her words as she explains.

"There are only two crafting materials for these items, really. One of them is just a large amount of mana crystals. The other is a rare ore called Luminite."

I raise an eyebrow and reply.

"That's it? Only two items are needed to craft these... Mana crystals are the easy part, but Luminite? Is it a rare dungeon drop? Or popular on the open market, or maybe the black market? I've never heard of it before... Where can I get my hands on it?"

I scratch my head, waiting for her response.

"It's not available on the open market, no. And incredibly rare on the black market. It's a highly regulated ore, only the Association has access to it. It is, after all, part of the power source used in transport magic for dungeons themselves."

Bri pauses as she lets me think it over for a moment, then continues.

"Every time you defeat a boss room, you're transported back to the same place in a dungeon. Even when a dungeon fully breaks, all foreign matter is teleported out if it hasn't fully dissolved into the dungeon yet. Luminite is the term the Association gave it because of its bright white glow. If

enough mana is bonded with a large amount of this ore, an experienced craftsman with a high enough mana control base could create a teleport platform and become its owner."

"Its owner?"

"That's right. Just like your blood-bonded weapons, every teleport platform has an owner, and only they can make paired crystals to go with that platform. Making the crystals to go with the platform is an easy task. It really only takes trace amounts of Luminite, the platform is the hard part."

My mind races at this new discovery.

Having teleport platforms in places that I desire could limit my travel time even more and make it so I don't have to walk around in open cities. It'd be like setting dungeon walker points out here in the real world.

"I need to get my hands on some of this Luminite."

Bri laughs a bit.

"Yeah, don't we all. I've only seen it in private auctions 2 times in my whole life, and the price always skyrockets way out of my price range. It's farmed strictly from collapsing dungeons after all, and it's highly volatile. If left out of a special containment case for mere minutes and not crafted with material, it will evaporate into the atmosphere. There's a minuscule chance that small amounts of the Ore will fall from a dungeon portal when it disappears, but even given that chance, the Association has control over more than 90% of the dungeon portals in the world."

She sighs.

"Maybe your friend Lith back in Sector 1 could help you get your hands on some, but even then, It'd be difficult to not have the Association involved if you're looking to buy enough to craft platforms. Trust me, if it were easy, I'd have plenty myself."

I nod slowly, letting the gears shift in my head and acknowledge all of the new information Bri has shared with me.

"Well, I'll keep it on the back burner. Even so, I'm very happy with the information you've shared. It'll help a lot with my future crafts."

Bri nods and turns her head to a deeper region of the dungeon. It's been about an hour since she started sharing, and we've run into a few monsters on the way, but it's been more of a leisurely stroll.

She speaks up.

"How about you let me do some farming alone in here. My mana control and skill far surpass these creatures, I'd like to level up as fast as possible so my level matches my control. In the same vein, I can see that look in your eyes, you have somewhere you need to go to, don't you?"

I nod.

"I have to meet back up with my teammates in a few hours, but there's a few things I need to check on before I do that too... You're right."

She smiles.

"Well then, perfect, maybe I'll even check out the 29th Floor. How about you come back and get me in an hour."

She twirls her blades and points one in the direction of an approaching monster as I respond.

"Sounds good to me. I'll be back soon."

I dungeon walk away in the blink of an eye.

My teleport point brings me high above the clouds of the Great Plains.

In the same moment, I open my item storage and let Ember come out. We are soon both soaring through the sky, but I don't say a word as I'm still thinking.

With the new information about crafting, and the half-success of my cursed windstone test, there are a few new things racing through my mind. The reason I did the test was to see if I could collapse the Titan's domain without Ember present.

It didn't exactly show that it wasn't possible, it just showed that if it is, it would be incredibly dangerous.

While deep in thought, Ember opens our telepathy link and is the first to break the silence of the passing wind high above the clouds.

"Master, the Rift is closing."

Chapter 419

"What do you mean the rift is closing? It's hardly even been a full day. I thought this tear has been closing for weeks, even months. Why is it closing so fast now?"

I do a full scan of the dungeon to locate the excess mana emanating from the rift, then Dungeon Walk us from the sky to directly in front of it.

The massive tear in space is now hardly over 10 meters in height.

Its black endless void is as ominous as ever, but just this morning when I looked at it, it was almost twice the size.

Ember responds.

"It could be for a number of reasons. The first being pure chance, the Void Creeper Lord could just be routinely closing the rift after it absorbed its fair share of mana in this dungeon."

My gaze tightens as Ember nods slowly to continue.

"But I also believe this isn't a coincidence. The overfarming must have made this dungeon inefficient. They're losing more mana than they're gaining, and there's no point in staying. On top of that, it's pretty easy to tell where the source of the problem is. Your mere presence is enough to drive these creatures off now. They may enjoy absorbing mana, but only from the weak."

I cross my arms.

"My presence? You mean my intimidation skill's passive perk? I have shielding up to cover that at all times now, lower-level mobs can't even sense my presence."

Ember nods.

"True, but high-level beings can. The fact that you're using such dense mana instinctively to shield a simple passive buff is more than enough of a tell that you're an extremely strong ranked-up hunter."

I raise an eyebrow as Ember keeps explaining.

"On top of that, any ranked-up monster or hunter with basic levels of mana senses can tell you're no ordinary being. The mana radiating off your body at all times is incredibly immense. The only time it's truly covered up is when your legendary stealth skill is activated."

"That seems to be a problem... I knew other strong hunters could sense my presence when I'm not actively hiding it, but is it really that accurate? You're saying any hunter with high mana perception can tell how strong I am just from being nearby even if I don't have any buffs or skills activated?"

Ember nods slowly.

"Not entirely, of course. If you're not in full battle mode, they cannot sense your full power. However, most hunters don't have countless skills to buff their mana output above their average control. The refined eye of a strong hunter can make a fairly good estimate of your base level mana control even when no mana is being actively used. When you look at other hunters, or even monsters, you can get a sense of their mana control even before the battle begins, right?"

I think back to some of the recent monsters I've faced off against. Their mana control levels are so far below mine, and the fact that I've had a trump card of Qi, Demonic Energy, or my Red Hydra's buff for so long, I haven't paid close attention to the mana bases of my opponents until they strike or put up shielding of their own. However, the faint white glow that emanates around hunters about level 400 or so and above does come to mind.

Stolen story; please report.

It's a passive perception ability I've had ever since absorbing that Blue Ogre's Essence in Solara. No special skill on my status or anything, just the fact that my baseline mana control got high enough to see the world in a different light.

Even without my All-Seeing Eye, it is possible to sense mana on individuals that have high amounts of it.

I respond to Ember's question after thinking deeply on the matter.

"Yes, you're right. I can. So what you're saying is that my natural aura is scaring away the Titans?"

"I'm not certain, but it could be a major factor. Especially after the last training session you had, your natural mana control base raised by over 2.5 times. I can sense the difference like night and day. It could be why the rift started closing faster since you revealed your new control level in the dungeon this morning."

Ember's expression shifts to a more serious one.

"That means enemies are able to sense you much easier as well."

I think about this for a moment too, picturing a fabricated image in my mind of a massive pillar of invisible white energy shooting into the sky in the middle of Valor City as I walk around casually through the walls using only my concealment skill, and my stomach churns.

"So the only time my presence is truly concealed is when using stealth, and even then, someone with high mana control could still see through my ability... I've been walking around with a massive target on my back all this time?"

Ember nods again.

"There's really no helping it. All strong lifeforms can sense the presence of other strong lifeforms. However, now that you're a Qi user, I could teach you how to use a technique called Mana Suppression if you wish. If your goal is to blend in and seem weaker than you really are, or control your mana output at will, this would be the way to do it."

My eyes widen as I've heard Ember speak of this Mana Suppression technique in the past, but he also mentioned I was far too inexperienced back then to learn it.

Everything Ember is saying is true. I can sense beings that have awakened a high enough mana control, so there's no reason for others not to be able to do it too. The only upside of the matter is that it's not like someone can identify a person based on their mana signature. Especially mine, it's constantly rising and drastically changing.

The part that doesn't make this okay in my eyes is that I haven't been as stealthy as I thought. When disguised in Valor City as a simple merchant or businessman, higher ranked guards can surely tell I'm a formidable opponent in hiding.

Especially after my recent training session, I raised dramatically in power in a single day and decided not to attend the fight ring event tonight. If the Dark One wasn't already watching me closely before, it is now.

I turn to Ember and respond.

"Yes, I need to learn this Mana Suppression Technique. I would like you to teach me."

At the thought of it, I extend my enemy detection skill to see if there are any titans left in this Dungeon.

The radar reading that comes back is not what I was hoping to see at all...

A single blotch of dense energy is about 2km away moving at a very slow pace. It may reach our current position in front of the rift in about 25 minutes.

I turn my head back to the black rift behind us and can't tell if it's my imagination or if the edges have started to close in slightly faster than just moments ago when my conversation with Ember started.

My eyes widen and I airstep onto Ember's back.

"This may be our last chance to make use of these Titans."

It would have been nice to stock up on more materials for a long session, but there's no time. I have some extra unused clothes, leftover blankets, miscellaneous items, and months' worth of food and water still left over from last time. The fact that my high mana control reduces the amount of food and water I need to consume is a major plus. It's more than enough; it just won't be as comfortable as my last session.

I activate Dungeon Walker to spawn up about 500 meters in the air, right outside the energy blotch on my enemy detection radar. The last titan, with long swaying limbs and slow, steady moving footsteps, is silently making its way toward the closing rift.

Ember responds as he divebombs downward at the huge mass of black energy.

"Yes, it looks like we made the final one panic. We'll have to use it wisely, and make sure we get out before it leaves through the rift with us inside."

"Very good point."

I create two body doubles right before we plunge into the dark Void.

The copies airstep away from the danger while weightlessness takes over my body, and I fall back into the Titan's Domain.

Chapter 420

Ember's voice enters my mind using telepathy once I've situated myself within the Titan's domain.

"The technique I call Mana Suppression is really just an advanced form of manipulating visual Qi. You've already shown signs of mastering the beginning stages of this, so by raising your natural capacity and Qi control, Mana Suppression should be very simple."

I sit on a small blanket in a comfortable position, getting ready to start my training, listening to what Ember has to say.

Diving right back into the Titan's Domain wasn't exactly what I was planning for, but the fact that this is most likely the last chance I'll get to use a time dilation chamber of this magnitude, I don't want to waste it.

According to my rough calculations, there's less than 25 minutes in the outside world until this Titan reaches the rift. Considering my last 6-month stay took 30 minutes, I should have roughly 5 months to train in here, and 15 times the Qi to use up...

To be safe, I've put 2 body doubles in the outside world to notify me of any changes or odd outcomes. However, the possibility that they could transfer information into this isolated domain to me is only a theory. To be safe, if I don't get any signals, I'll begin collapsing the space in 4 months.

Ember continues the lesson once I shake myself out of my thoughts.

"Let me show you what I mean in a practical sense. Allow your Qi to flow out of your body just like you do when you swing a sword attack."

I do as Ember says, calming my eyes and allowing waves of Qi to flow from my core into my fists.

I'm unable to release large amounts of visual Qi, but in highly dense areas, particles of energy do flow out, especially in the heat of intense battle.

Both of my fists glow white hot with energy, and tiny particles begin to make a mist around them the longer I hold them in the same place.

"Very good. This is a perfect starting point. The energy being released around your hands will act as a veil to suppress your natural mana output. It is in a very weak form right now because your capacity and control are lacking. However, imagine if you allowed your entire body to be covered in a blanket of energy like this."



I picture Ember's words in my mind's eye, contemplating how much extra energy I would need to be constantly putting out to keep a wave of Qi continuously flowing around my entire body...

Then, I pull out the silver case that Monk gave me and open it with a click.

Inside, a sea of bright white Qi pills looks back at me, and I speak up.

"There's 150 pills. That's 15 times more than my previous training session. However, it's possible I have less time. You know better than me, I'd like a strict outline and training plan on how to hit my goals before our time runs out."

Ember shows a toothy grin and nods.

"Only time will tell. We'll do training in 3 different segments, that is after your initial segment of flooding the entire room with Qi. Considering your current base and mana control, you're still not strong enough to handle this amount of energy. So, the first order of business once the room is ready and actual training begins will be 48 hours of Qi gathering and mana control training. Similar to your previous time in the domain, you will just circulate Qi through your body while all of your buffs are on the highest capacity possible while not building up fatigue. Small water breaks will be permitted, but no other distractions like food or entertainment."

I nod as this sounds reasonable and very productive.

"Next, you'll spend 24 hours on focusing visual Qi to your extremities. Your fists and feet will be first, but the goal is to be constantly expanding the range of coverage. Creating a thin layer of Qi around your arms and legs will be next, then eventually your torso and head to cover your entire body. This will be paired with physical body training. Sprints, pushups, squats, pullups, and weights using your earth summoning magic to make heavy enough gear to push your limits."

I nod again, as this seems pretty simple too.

"Then lastly, you get 8 hours of leisure time before we start the cycle again. You may eat small amounts of food, journal your thoughts, and sleep if you'd like. But, intense focus is necessary to succeed in this training."

My eyes widen at his last point.

This content has been misappropriated from Royal Road; report any instances of this story if found elsewhere.

"Only 8 hours of rest? After 3 days of continuous training? For 4 to 5 months straight?"

Ember chuckles to himself.

"We'll shorten the rest times as the session goes further, and make the training times longer as well. As I'm sure you can already tell, the higher your mana control raises, the less reliant you are on food, water, and sleep for energy."

"Yes, I'm aware... I just didn't know it would get this drastic."

"Of course. Your mortal lifespan increases as well, slowing your aging and keeping you in your prime years for far longer. At your current control, you've already increased your life expectancy by quite a bit; possibly decades. The progression is not linear based on pure mana intake, but it will continue to raise the more you control."

I think over this food for thought in the back of my mind as Ember covers some of the more advanced and technical topics too.

"Once you've managed to get the most basic level of visual Qi around every square centimeter of your body, the focus will shift to concentrating more on the density of the flow. Just like mana shields and mana blades, the density of the Qi being used is very important when focused on a technique like this. At first, we'll work on making the Qi as dense as possible, but that will naturally come in the gathering and channeling portion of training. Once it can fully cover your body, I want you to make incremental densities to get used to switching between them. Like low, medium, high, and extremely high."

"Why's that? Wouldn't it just be best to refine my skills in the highest density possible? What's the point of having different ones?"

"It's very simple actually. Once you've coated your body in a layer of Qi of extremely high density, little to no mana can escape through the microscopic holes no matter how hard they try to put out. Non-Qi users are unable to sense Qi energy at all, so to their mana senses, only the amount of mana you let out is your perceived true control."

The corner of my lip turns up as I realize exactly where Ember is headed with this explanation.

He continues.

"So, if you were to walk by an elite hunter with an extremely high Qi barrier, they may just think you're an unawakened hunter with little to no Qi in your body. However, maybe you'd like them to think you're at their same level? Just using a high or medium grade barrier will be thinner and allow more of your natural mana control to seep through. Training multiple barrier densities once you've progressed this far will not only help with your overall Qi control but give you built-in skills and predetermined natural settings to conceal your true power."

At this final point, everything makes sense, and I have a clear goal in mind ahead of me.

I rehash the details of my training a few more times in excruciating detail with Ember, noting certain points and extra tidbits in my journal before letting Ember fly back into my item storage to wait for my updates.

We agree that letting him stay out in the open may drain away precious Qi in the atmosphere that could be put toward my training, so I'll let him out after the end of every training cycle to give me tips and oversee my progress.

"See you soon."

"Best of luck, Master."

Considering the Qi in the room didn't dissipate until I absorbed most of it in my last session, the odds are it will be exactly the same this time as well.

One after another, I begin taking the Qi pills and oversaturating my body with energy every time enough Qi leaves my body to handle another.

Meanwhile, I sit in the lotus position, gathering the Qi that is building up in the atmosphere and keeping all of my buffs at a cool and controlled rate while constantly self-regenerating my fatigue.

This goes on for a few days before 145 pills are used up to fill the entire room with a dense cloud of Qi so energy-packed every breath feels as if it's rejuvenating my core. The rate of absorption far surpasses what it was before. The density of Qi in this room is almost 15 times what it was the last time I trained, and almost 50 times that of what it feels like inside the training rooms back at the monastery.

The Qi in the air in the outside world is immeasurably low compared to the prime environment I'm training in right now.

I place the remaining 5 pills back into my storage as an emergency energy bank and get to work.

Nine full training cycles pass, meaning about a month in Domain time, and the progress moves exactly as Ember outlined for me.

In just a month, my Qi capacity has raised just over 50%, and my mana control is steadily rising at the same rate as my previous session; About 400 million MP absorbed in just over a month. Both are incredibly immense increases. But the Qi capacity is the most impressive part; this is the most noticeable change.

I've added more pure Qi to my capacity in 1 month than I did in a full 6 months of training during my last Titan's Domain session.

Every time I finish a cycle, Ember checks my progress, and the white glow I manage to cover my hands has slowly expanded to my extremities and just barely covers my head and torso. The progress is very motivating.

Ember's words resonate in my mind as he increased each training period by 1 full day and taking 2 hours away from my rest time. Making it 3 days gathering, 2 days working on my Qi barrier, and 6 hours of sleep and leisure time.

This intense training continues for 2 more months.

My Qi base adds an additional 90%, making a 140% increase since the start of this entire session, and my mana control raises by another 1 Billion MP.

At this point, some of the Qi in the room is beginning to thin out just like the last time I trained here. Some seeps through the walls, but most of it is being gathered by me and used up in my training to flow back into the atmosphere.

I've gotten to the point where I can actually control the flow of Qi on the outside of my body. It feels as if it's a thin layer of malleable and flowing skin attached to me as an extension of myself rather than just particles that are floating away.

It is difficult to maintain it for long periods of time, but holding its form is what my training mostly consists of now. 3 days gathering, 3 days controlling my Qi veil, and 5.5 hours of downtime.

I've gotten into a very productive rhythm, but the clock is still ticking away. I want to master this before my time runs out.

Everything seems to be going according to plan until one day mid-gathering session, the memories of one of my now deceased body doubles come rushing back to me.